

Cllr Liz Leffman
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Dear Liz,

I am writing to outline my position on the potential geography of a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). I am urging you to move swiftly to do the same. As you indicated in your email of 19 December to Leaders and Chief Executives across the Thames Valley, plus Swindon, I believe this needs to be done in advance of the meeting on 31 January and in the interest of transparency and I am therefore writing to you now.

I was pleased to see the public support from a wide number of Oxfordshire MPs who expressed their support to move forward at pace in their letter to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution. I note their specific paragraph below: *“We understand that there are many moving and connected parts to local government reform. There is a pressing need for Berkshire authorities to arrive at a shared understanding both for their future form as well as other discussions on devolution geography, and potentially working with Buckinghamshire. Within all of this, we are assured that the County Council is committed to moving forward and understand that there is a meeting with several Thames Valley partners on 31 January.”*

I fully support the views expressed above relating to the Berkshire authorities, as well as the reference to Buckinghamshire and I believe that the meeting on 31 January will be best served by Oxfordshire County Council confirming its own views on a preferred MSA geography now. This is so that I – and the other Oxfordshire Council Leaders – are aware in advance of your views as Leader of the ‘upper tier’ Council across Oxfordshire.

This would enable further discussion within each Council prior to 31 January and allow more definitive positions to develop - I am mindful that at the previous lunch where we heard the views of Swindon, several Leaders present said that they could only offer personal perspectives and could not indicate a position on behalf of their Councils. I would like you to help us avoid this happening again as it could undermine

the desire for pace and momentum that I believe all Oxfordshire Leaders share. Otherwise, on the 31st we could see a situation where no decisions can actually be taken, particularly as it is not a constituted meeting, but rather a further informal discussion.

From my perspective as Leader of the Vale of White Horse, I would like to see rapid discussion being held with the Berkshire Councils, and ideally with Buckinghamshire as well as I believe there are strong factors that would make either Oxfordshire and the Berkshires, or Oxfordshire, the Berkshires and Buckinghamshire, an effective MSA geography.

I would not support the inclusion of Swindon within such an MSA, because I do not believe that they are economically or demographically linked to the BOB or the wider Thames Valley area in the same way the Berkshires or Buckinghamshire are. I was disappointed to see the Leader of Swindon say in a piece he wrote that was published in the Swindon Advertiser on 16 January that "Swindon should consider devolution with Oxford, not Wiltshire". Of course, the MSAs described in the White Paper would not support a model where Swindon accesses devolution with Oxford, as it is clear on the fact that MSAs will be based on County and Unitary areas, not that of the district councils.

In his article, Cllr Robbins said: "We have to work with areas that we are geographically linked with, so we have a choice of looking in two different directions as we determine where our future is. We can look South-West and join a partnership of Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire that they have called the Heart of Wessex or look east and be part of an alliance between Oxfordshire and Berkshire, working with similarly ambitious towns and cities along the M4 corridor."

In the same article, Cllr Robbins goes onto say "I think that the growth agenda and the opportunity for us to build our economy and attract the best jobs to Swindon means that looking east is the best option. I'm yet to be convinced that the large rural counties of Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire have much in common with the much more productive and dynamic Swindon economy, and many businesses seem to agree but we will be looking to hear from residents to understand their views."

In the article Cllr Robbins is clear in his position, which is to his credit. He states that he believes "...that the growth agenda and the opportunity for us to build our economy and attract the best jobs to Swindon means that looking east is the best option."

I would ask that you are now as clear as Cllr Robbins on your view as to what would be the best MSA geography for Oxfordshire, recognising that in doing so you are not attempting to make a decision on behalf of the Berkshire Councils or Buckinghamshire, but are indicating a view as to what Oxfordshire County Council would wish to see as the MSA geography. In doing so you would no doubt wish to make a firm, public commitment to proactively engage and discuss this matter with those Councils. I am merely asking that, on behalf of Oxfordshire you are as forthright, and as transparent on your position as Cllr Robbins has been, no more than that. Oxfordshire residents surely deserve no less.

I am asking this as the Leader of the District Council that is immediately to the east of Swindon and therefore directly in Cllr Robbins' sight; previously when I have sought your advice you have reinforced that our duty as Leaders was to represent our respective councils. When doing so, you advised me that it is the Leaders' duty to act decisively. I am therefore asking you to do the same now.

For information, I attach both the letter from the MPs that I refer to, and a link to Councillor Robbins piece.

<https://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/politics/24859660.swindon-consider-devolution-oxford-not-wiltshire/>

Yours sincerely



Councillor Bethia Thomas
Leader of the Council