



**Committee and Date**

11<sup>th</sup> March 2026, Cabinet

**Item**

Strategic Partnerships and Spatial Development Strategies

Public



# Strategic Partnerships and Spatial Development Strategies

<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	Tanya Miles	
email:	<a href="mailto:tanya.miles@shropshire.gov.uk">tanya.miles@shropshire.gov.uk</a>	
<b>Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holders):</b>	Cllr David Walker and Cllr Rob Wilson	

## 1. Synopsis

This report outlines new duties on the Council to work collaboratively at a sub-regional level to produce a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) and sets out a recommended response to a government consultation on the preferred geographies for completing an SDS.

## 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The English Devolution White Paper 2024 and the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 set out the Government’s plans for strategic planning at a sub-regional level.
- 2.2. To meet the Government’s aims of ‘Getting Britain Building Again’ and delivering 1.5 million homes during this parliament, there is an acknowledgement of the need to plan on a larger than local scale, to complement Local Plans prepared by individual Local Planning Authorities. Through the Planning and Infrastructure Act (2025), the Government has introduced Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) in England to achieve this.
- 2.3. The December 2025 consultation draft of the Government’s revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides further policy direction on Spatial Development Strategies. It makes clear that they are of strategic importance, setting out a positive vision for future growth and change at a sub-regional scale

for at least 20 years. They are intended to provide a clear spatial framework for investment and growth, including new housing, commercial development and infrastructure and enable the long term alignment of labour markets and workforce capacity to support delivery. Development of an SDS provides opportunity to work collaboratively on development and the use of land, working across borders to set out an investment framework that will give certainty and confidence to public and private sector investors.

- 2.4. Whilst formally part of the Development Plan for Shropshire, the SDS is expected to be succinct and not get into locally specific detail. It will highlight broad locations for growth, but the detailed allocation of land and associated policies will continue to be the role and purpose of Shropshire's Local Plan. However, there is a requirement that the Local Plan will need to be in conformity with the SDS.
- 2.5. With a clear desire to move at pace and achieve national coverage of SDS in a reasonable time, the Government has released a consultation on 'Areas for producing spatial development strategies'. Shropshire Council has been categorised within a group of authorities where the Government would like to hear proposals for an appropriate SDS geography. The Council therefore needs to provide a response within the consultation deadline of 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026.

### 3. Recommendations

Cabinet agree to:

- 3.1. Delegate to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader and Portfolio Holders for both Planning and Transport and Economic Growth, responsibility to respond to the Government consultation on SDS geographies by 26<sup>th</sup> March with a preferred proposal for Shropshire.
- 3.2. Delegate to the Chief Executive, and, once appointed, the Executive Director for Communities, Growth & Partnerships, responsibility for undertaking proactive strategic partnership engagement with neighbouring local authorities within England to understand SDS proposals.
- 3.3. Delegate to the Chief Executive, and, once appointed, the Executive Director for Communities, Growth & Partnerships, responsibility to undertake proactive strategic partnership engagement with infrastructure providers via formation of a Strategic Infrastructure Forum.
- 3.4. Delegate to the Chief Executive, and, once appointed, the Executive Director for Communities, Growth & Partnerships, in consultation with the Leader and Portfolio Holders for Planning and Transport and Economic Growth, responsibility for taking forward work on the preparation of an SDS, including but not limited to building a strategic planning team to lead the SDS and work alongside the team preparing Shropshire's Local Plan, in accordance with government requirements and regulations.

# Report

## 4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. The Government consultation on preferred geographies for preparing an SDS launched on 12<sup>th</sup> February and requires the Council to provide an immediate response on which other English local authority areas Shropshire will work with to prepare an SDS. The consultation deadline is the 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026. Whilst initial conversations with neighbouring local authorities are ongoing, these have been awaiting further steer from government on the scale and scope of the SDS requirements in order to help formalise proposals. There is therefore a risk that the Council needs to make a recommendation on a preferred direction for Shropshire before fully understanding the ambitions and opportunities for collaboration with neighbouring local authority areas.
- 4.2. The Council needs to carefully consider its response to the consultation alongside resourcing an acceleration of strategic partnership working to engage with other local authorities and infrastructure providers. Whilst the Council's recent declaration of a financial emergency necessitates a favouring of short-term decision making, there is a critical need to resource strategically and meet duties under new SDS regulatory requirements.
- 4.3. Whilst it is a statutory requirement under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, the setting of a direction for sustainable growth will enable the Council to convene the right people to support delivery and showcase the potential of Shropshire to unlock investment. This work is critical to the Council's transformation under the recently adopted Improvement Plan. It is one of the main mechanisms through which inward investment and economic growth can be achieved and will help to set a long-term vision for a new sustainable direction.
- 4.4. Without a strategic focus, the Council will miss out on regional economic growth alongside the Government investment that is intended to stimulate growth. This will impact the Council's longer term financial sustainability and delivery of core statutory duties, including the development of a deliverable and sustainable Development Plan.
- 4.5. Whilst there are costs associated with this strategic planning role, MHCLG has identified a funding package up to 2028/29 to support new duties requiring the preparation of an SDS. Full funding allocations will not be awarded until geographies for producing an SDS are confirmed. It is therefore important that Shropshire Council is proactive in responding to the current government consultation and in engaging strategically with neighbouring local authorities and infrastructure providers. This work can utilise existing expertise across the strategic partnerships, planning and economic growth functions albeit there is an important need to twin track with the preparation of Shropshire's Local Plan. Resourcing the work on the SDS should not risk Local Plan work but is complementary strategic planning and partnership activity that requires its own additional resourcing.
- 4.6. In tandem with the development of Shropshire's Local Plan, work on an SDS will provide clarity on the growth and infrastructure delivery focus for the Council. It will

ensure that limited staff and funding resources are deployed in the most effective and efficient manner to maximise benefits to Shropshire businesses and communities, aligned to the Council's Improvement Plan and People Plan.

- 4.7. A proactive and targeted approach to strategic place making provides opportunity for the Council to identify the strategic priorities and growth opportunities that matter most to Shropshire. It will drive collaboration that supports delivery and ensure that there is a move away from a focus on project specific funding opportunities. This work will ensure alignment of resources on the strategic direction and priorities for the council and county as a whole.

## 5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Shropshire Council continues to manage unprecedented financial demands, and a financial emergency was declared by Cabinet on 10 September 2025. The overall financial position of the Council is set out in the monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. Significant management action has been instigated at all levels of the Council reducing spend to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all reports to Members provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers and/or Portfolio Holders review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. All non-essential spend will be stopped and all essential spend challenged. These actions may involve (this is not exhaustive):
  - scaling down initiatives,
  - changing the scope of activities,
  - delaying implementation of agreed plans, or
  - extending delivery timescales.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. The SDS provides a strategic and integrated approach to future planning for the sub region. This includes a specific requirement to consider the needs of the natural environment and address strategic challenges such as climate change.
- 6.2. As a key document within the Development Plan for Shropshire, it will work alongside Shropshire's Local Plan to provide the policy framework for future growth including the use of land and infrastructure. It is therefore a key mechanism for addressing climate adaptation and resilience.

## 7. Background

- 7.1. To meet the Government's manifesto commitment of 'Getting Britain Building Again' there is a national focus on planning for growth on a larger scale. To address this, the government believes it is necessary to introduce new mechanisms for cross boundary strategic planning.
- 7.2. The English Devolution White Paper (Dec 2024) established the intention to introduce mandatory strategic planning through the preparation of Spatial Development Strategies (SDS). The Planning and Infrastructure Act (Dec 2025) added further detail and placed new responsibilities on combined authorities, combined county authorities, upper tier councils and unitary authorities to prepare

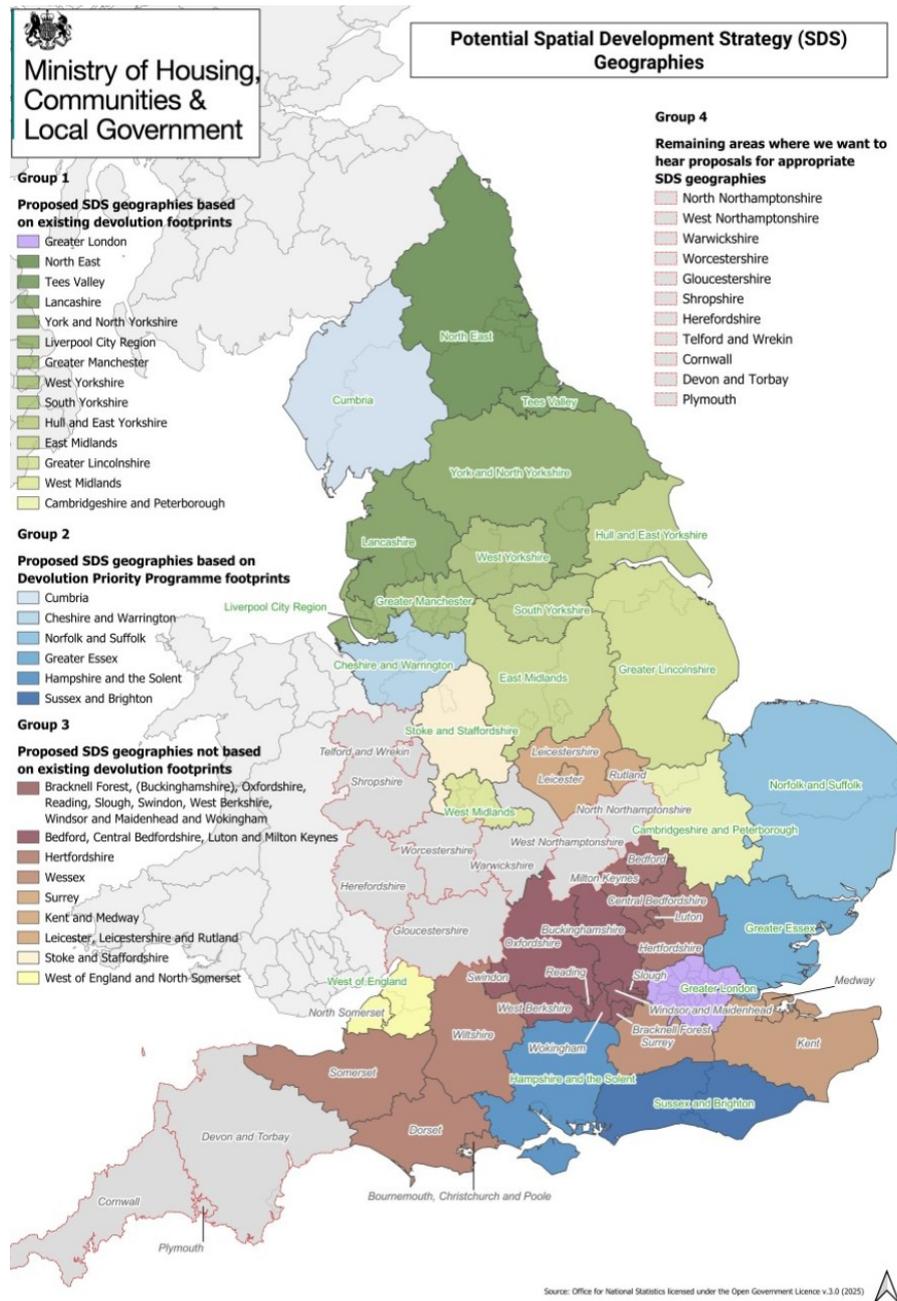
an SDS, The Government's ambition is to have full SDS coverage within this Parliament.

- 7.3. As a unitary authority for an area that does not form part of a combined authority, Shropshire Council has a new statutory responsibility to prepare an SDS either for the county of Shropshire or with others.
- 7.4. An SDS plays a key role in the government's central mission of supporting economic growth, by setting a positive vision for future growth and change at a sub-regional scale and providing a clear spatial framework for investment and growth, including new housing. It will play an important role in achieving the Government's objective of delivering 1.5million homes across this Parliament.
- 7.5. The draft National Planning Policy Framework provides an outline scope for the content of an SDS, indicating that the content should be strategic in nature by:
  - Setting a sustainable pattern of growth covering at least 20 years.
  - Identifying broad locations for strategic development (but not site allocations).
  - Supporting economic growth by providing a cross boundary spatial framework for strategic investment, including alignment with employment, skills and labour market priorities, and giving spatial expression to Local Growth Plans.

## **8. Identifying areas of potential change to Green Belt boundaries to inform Local Plans.**

- Identifying broad locations for nature conservation, habitat enhancement, restoration and creation.
  - Setting the type, extent and broad location of strategic infrastructure needed to enable development – transport, social and waste, utilities, flood risk, minerals.
- 8.1. The recent consultation government document makes clear that an SDS should not be viewed as a big Local Plan but does form part of the Development Plan. It must therefore be monitored and kept up to date as well as be consulted on in a similar manner to local plans and be publicly examined and approved by the Secretary of State.
  - 8.2. The initial step of producing an SDS involves establishing appropriate geographies. Under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, combined, combined county upper tier and unitary authorities (not within a combined authority) are considered 'principal authorities' and as such are strategic planning authorities. They can join together to form a Strategic Planning Board (SPB) forming multiple authorities in a joint committee to work together to prepare an SDS.
  - 8.3. The Secretary of State has the power to intervene to form a Strategic Planning Board, where they consider it is needed, including where they deem insufficient progress is being made on establishing an appropriate geographical basis for preparing an SDS. However, the government consultation launched on the 12<sup>th</sup> February asks local authorities to provide a response on their preferred geography for completing an SDS.

8.4. For a number of English authorities further ahead with government conversations and priority programmes for English devolution, the consultation document sets out the suggested geography for their SDS coverage. The below map illustrates these government groupings.



8.5. In Shropshire’s case, government has not provided a steer but categorised the county within a grouping of ‘remaining areas where government wants to hear proposals for an appropriate SDS geography’. The Council has until the 26<sup>th</sup> March to provide a response to government, setting out a preferred approach and reasoning for this suggested geographical area.

8.6. In considering suitable geographies, Government has acknowledged the preparation of an SDS is likely to be precursor for a potential future devolution structure, with the intention to see progress towards national coverage of mayoral combined authorities. This is why the criteria we are now being asked to consider aligns with those in the English Devolution White paper (Dec 2024):

- have combined populations of over 1.5million, wherever possible;
  - support alignment of public service boundaries such as Integrated Health Boards, Police and Crime Commissioners and Fire and Rescue Authorities;
  - ensure that areas are not left as 'islands' whereby they are too small to go it alone or don't have a natural partner.
- 8.7. Considering the groupings provided by MHCLG in the consultation document, it is evident that Shropshire has limited options available for consideration.
- 8.8. As a unitary authority, the Council could consider taking forward the SDS requirements alone and using the county boundary as a suitable geography. However, this would not meet the government intention for an SDS to be high level and focused on genuinely strategic, cross boundary issues. It would also not achieve public service alignment. It risks leaving Telford and Wrekin authority as a potential 'island' and offers little benefit to the Council since the work on an SDS would likely replicate much of the more localised considerations that should be contained within Shropshire's Local Plan. With a population of 323,600 (2021 Census), the Shropshire Council area has well under the 1.5 million population proposed by government for Strategic Authority areas. As a consequence, there is a strong risk the Government would reject a proposal for Shropshire to produce an SDS alone.
- 8.9. An alternative option is for Shropshire to seek collaboration with Telford and Wrekin Council. Given travel to work patterns and local labour markets, alongside the alignment of employment and skills systems, there are clear interdependencies between these areas. The collaboration would also support delivery of key functions given the two authorities already collaborate on wider statutory requirements such as the Local Nature Recovery Strategy; a key strategy that a future SDS must take account of and the Local Visitor Economy Partnership. The partnering would ensure a proposed geography that is contiguous and does not create a devolution 'island'. However, feedback would need to be sought in terms of whether this geography meets the ambition of strategic scale, given the combined population would be c500,000 rather than the 1.5million proposed by government.
- 8.10. A third option for Shropshire would be to seek collaboration with both Telford and Wrekin Council and Herefordshire Council. There is an historic partnering across the geography through the former Marches Local Enterprise Partnership and therefore an identity that local residents and partners are familiar with. However, the combined population would remain at c700,000 and therefore still below the strategic scale sought by government. Strategic engagement is also required with Herefordshire Council to understand their partnering preferences, particularly given that their other neighbouring areas such as Worcestershire and Gloucestershire have also been identified under the government's group 4 categorisation of 'remaining areas where government wants to hear proposals for an appropriate SDS geography'.
- 8.11. To meet the Government's ambition of scale, the final option for Shropshire would be to seek a larger collaboration across Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire. This area has a combined population of c1.2million and therefore nearer the 1.5million scale sought by government. There is also some logic in terms of the identity for this regional

geography, with all authorities being rurally based and following the River Severn and Wye river basin, as evidenced through the strategic partnership work already underway through the River Severn Partnership. However, there is potentially less alignment with existing public service boundaries such as health.

- 8.12. Given the lack of maturity in the existing conversations with neighbouring areas over their SDS plans (particularly following the launch of the recent government consultation) there is critical need for Shropshire to undertake strategic partnership working across all options. However, this will be ongoing work whilst there is an immediate need to meet the government consultation deadline of 26<sup>th</sup> March.
- 8.13. On this basis, the recommended approach for the Council is to provide a response to meet the consultation deadline but test the government's view on strategic scale. This should focus on understanding whether a partnering at a smaller scale, such as Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin would be supported. This response should then be twin tracked with proactive engagement across all strategic partnership options with neighbouring local authorities to understand areas of shared interest and preferred options for future SDS geographies.
- 8.14. Subject to agreement on this paper and the Council's subsequent response to the government consultation, the feedback on preferred approaches will be used to identify prospective strategic planning authorities with responsibility for producing an SDS. This will allow collaboration as a strategic planning board and enable preparatory work on an SDS. However, SDS areas will not be formally agreed until after the draft secondary legislation has been laid in Parliament which is expected in summer 2026.
- 8.15. It is also important that the Council continues to proactively shape its strategic planning and partnership approach in readiness for an SDS. The consultation document sets out further steps local authorities should be taking to prepare, including engaging with infrastructure providers and potentially establishing a strategic infrastructure board or forum.
- 8.16. Shropshire Council previously convened a Strategic Infrastructure Forum for Shropshire in which localised intelligence was shared with key partners using forward looking projections to 2050. The aim of the forum was to provide a coordinated basis for joint infrastructure and investment planning. It was very well received by partners as a framework for alignment across investment plans and as a means to focus more strategically on future needs and opportunities. Whilst resource constraints have meant this work hasn't been prioritised over recent years, the approach does provide an established model for engaging with infrastructure providers as part of the SDS. It could also provide additional value to the Council in terms of helping to shape a robust investment pipeline and associated delivery plan.

## 9. Conclusions

- 9.1. Preparation of an SDS is a new statutory requirement set out within the Planning and Infrastructure Act (2025). Whilst secondary legislation is planned for summer 2026 to formalise the arrangements for SDS development, a current government consultation is seeking an urgent steer on preferred geographies for this strategic planning requirement.

- 9.2. Whilst it is important the Council undertakes strategic partnership working with neighbouring local authorities to understand shared ambitions and opportunity for collaboration on an SDS, there is an urgent need to submit a response to government on the current consultation.
- 9.3. Most of the options for Shropshire only meet some of the criteria from government on suitable geographies for completing an SDS. In all cases, the scale of the proposed geographical option falls below a suggested scale of 1.5million population. This reflects the rural nature of Shropshire and neighbouring local authority areas.
- 9.4. On this basis, the recommended approach for the Council is to respond to meet the consultation deadline but test the government's view on strategic scale. This should focus on understanding whether a partnering at a smaller scale, such as Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin would be supported.
- 9.5. This response should be twin tracked with proactive strategic partnership engagement with neighbouring local authorities and infrastructure providers to provide a more considered approach to future strategic planning for the sub-region. It must ensure the necessary frameworks and resourcing is in place to take forward the Council's strategic planning duties.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

None.

**Local Member:** All members

**Appendices** [Please list the titles of Appendices]

None.