

NAVCA and ACRE have produced this resource as part of a project supporting the VCFSE sector and forming unitary and strategic authorities to work together through devolution and local government reorganisation.

Introduction

The government is launching a new wave of devolution and a consultation on spatial development strategies. You can read the consultation and supporting information [here](#).

The eight areas proposed are intended specifically for strategic planning purposes, although these are intended to align with new areas for devolution. Areas without an existing devolution agreement are invited to express an interest in being part of the next phase of devolution by creating Foundation Strategic Authorities.

Preparation of spatial development strategies

The Planning and Infrastructure Act, which came into law in December 2025, contains provisions that place a duty on combined authorities, combined county authorities, upper-tier councils and unitary authorities to prepare a Spatial Development Strategy [SDS] for their area. This will (re)introduce mandatory strategic planning across sub-regional areas, aimed partly at delivering new housing. The Bill also enables the government to establish strategic planning boards to prepare SDSs on behalf of specified groupings of these authorities.

SDSs are high-level spatial plans looking ahead at least 20 years. They will set the framework for local plans, which will have to be in general conformity with the relevant SDS. SDSs will ensure that sub-regional areas can effectively plan to:

- meet their housing needs
- coordinate the provision of strategic infrastructure
- grow their economies
- improve the environment and climate resilience

They will set a spatial framework for their area, identifying the appropriate scale of growth and development, and they may also identify the need for regeneration, protection or improvement of the built or natural environment.

Strategic Planning Boards

Where there are existing devolution agreements or ones shortly to come into legal force [the devolution priority areas], these bodies will be the strategic planning board. Elsewhere, the top tier local authority will be the responsible body. Some of these areas have been grouped into proposed geographies where there is understood to be general agreement about working together [group 3 below]. The remaining areas are invited to propose sensible SDS geographies [group 4 below] by 20 March 2026.

Group 1: areas with existing devolution agreements including Mayoral and non-Mayoral Combined / Combined County Authorities [excluding the West of England].

Group 2: areas following the Devolution Priority Programme footprints.

Groups 1 and 2 do not need to establish separate strategic planning boards.

Group 3: Proposed SDS geographies not based on existing devolution footprints.

Spatial Development Strategy Area	Strategic Planning Authorities	Strategic Planning Board required?
Bracknell Forest, (Buckinghamshire), Oxfordshire, Reading, Slough, Swindon, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead and Wokingham	Bracknell Forest Council Buckinghamshire Council Oxfordshire County Council Reading Borough Council Slough Borough Council Swindon Borough Council West Berkshire Council Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Wokingham Borough Council	Yes

Spatial Development Strategy Area	Strategic Planning Authorities	Strategic Planning Board required?
Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes	Bedford Borough Council Central Bedfordshire Council Luton Borough Council Milton Keynes City Council	Yes
Hertfordshire	Hertfordshire County Council	Not initially, yes after local government reorganisation (LGR)
Wessex	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council Dorset Council Somerset Council Wiltshire Council	Yes
Surrey	Surrey County Council	Not initially, yes after LGR
Kent and Medway	Kent County Council Medway Council	Yes
Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland	Leicestershire County Council Leicester City Council Rutland County Council	Yes

Spatial Development Strategy Area	Strategic Planning Authorities	Strategic Planning Board required?
Stoke and Staffordshire	Staffordshire County Council Stoke on Trent City Council	Yes
West of England and North Somerset*	West of England Combined Authority North Somerset Council	Yes

*Note: North Somerset Council is in the process of joining the West of England Combined Authority.

Constituent local authorities in Group 3 can apply to make amendments to these proposed areas.

Group 4: Remaining areas where MHCLG wants to hear proposals for appropriate SDS geographies.

- North Northamptonshire Council
- West Northamptonshire Council
- Warwickshire County Council
- Worcestershire County Council
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Shropshire Council
- Herefordshire Council
- Telford & Wrekin Council
- Cornwall Council
- Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority
- Plymouth City Council

A map of these areas is available [here](#).

Implications of local government reorganisation (LGR)

For areas undergoing local government reorganisation [LGR] which do not have a devolution agreement, the duty to prepare an SDS will shift from the current county councils and unitary authorities to the new unitary authorities. A new strategic planning board will therefore need to be established for April 2028 (or April 2027 in the case of Surrey). In practical terms, the strategic planning authorities should work with the shadow unitary authorities to ensure a smooth handover of the SDS.

In areas where local government reorganisation is happening, but a strategic authority already exists, the SDS responsibility will remain with the strategic authority, so there would be no outward change. However, the internal make up of constituent members of that strategic authority will change and this will need to be managed by the strategic authority for the SDS, as it will for the authority's other functions.

Consultation

The consultation on spatial development strategy areas runs for six weeks until 26 March 2026. The consultation questions are:

1. Which SDS area(s) are you interested in?
2. Do you agree with the proposed SDS area (where one is provided)? If so, please explain the strengths of the proposal as you see them.
3. If you do not agree with the proposed SDS area, please explain the issues/challenges that it/they would present.
4. If you do not agree with the proposed SDS area, please suggest and explain one or more alternatives that you believe would work better.
5. If there is no proposed SDS area for your area of interest, we would welcome your preferred SDS area with an explanation of your reasoning.

[Complete the consultation here.](#) The closing date for responses is **26 March 2026.**

Implications for devolution

At the same time as the consultation on SDS has been launched, government has invited the remainder of the areas in England that do not have devolution agreements to submit proposals by 20 March 2026. These would be for Foundation Strategic Authorities to build local capacity and partnerships as a stepping stone towards mayoral devolution in the future.

Foundation Strategic Authorities will have devolved powers over transport and infrastructure, skills and employment support, housing and strategic planning, economic development and regeneration, environment and net zero, health, wellbeing and public service reform, and public safety. They will also receive devolved funding in areas such as local transport and skills.