



26th March 2026

Matthew Pennycook MP and Miatta Fahnbulleh MP

Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government

2 Marsham Street

London SW1P 4DF

Dear Ministers,

### **Gloucestershire's position on devolution and spatial planning**

Thank you for your letter of 12 February. We write on behalf of six of Gloucestershire's seven councils to set out our shared position on the devolution footprint and spatial development strategy for our county. This position carries the support of six councils and would equally apply to all the available options for local government reorganisation that may be adopted in Gloucestershire. The seventh council, Tewkesbury Borough Council, will take a position at its meeting next month.

Our priority is to see devolution delivered for Gloucestershire at the earliest opportunity, and we share the Government's commitment to ensuring that all areas can access the powers, funding and strategic capacity they need to deliver for their residents. We also understand that for Gloucestershire the creation of a foundation strategic authority is a necessary step on the path to a full mayoral strategic authority, and we are keen to work with the Government to ensure that this process moves at pace so that Gloucestershire's communities can access the benefits of devolution at the earliest opportunity whilst also helping Government to deliver on its key priorities.

Our view is that a foundation strategic authority for Gloucestershire should be operational from May 2027, aligning with the election of new unitary council/s. Given the 'devolution deficit' that Gloucestershire's residents already face, we are ready to work with Government at pace to deliver an FSA arrangement appropriate to our county's many strengths.

### **Our position is that Gloucestershire's devolution journey should lead to membership of the West of England Combined Authority.**

The formation of a foundation strategic authority for Gloucestershire would be a pre-cursor to our ambitions to join the West of England Combined Authority. The evidence we have gathered over the course of the last year points consistently to the south: our high-growth sectors align closely with those of the WECA economy, our external commuting and labour



market flows run predominantly southward. In addition, Gloucestershire already sits within South-West regional structures for health, policing, and both further and higher education. We have the long running Western Gateway sub-national transport body, focusing to the south, and a robust, extensive functional economic market area (FEMA) evidence base included us in the Western Gateway with partners to the south and east. We believe Gloucestershire would complement the existing WECA partnership, bringing distinctive strengths in areas such as secure technologies and digital, agri-tech and natural capital stewardship. We recognise that WECA membership is a longer-term objective, and that a well-evidenced single-county foundation strategic authority is the necessary first step, and one that would position Gloucestershire to enter any future combined authority partnership as a coherent and contributing member.

We note that the Planning and Infrastructure Act places the spatial development strategy under the County authority in the first instance, with the duty passing to the relevant body as local government reorganisation progresses. For an SDS to function effectively, the strategic authority footprint and the spatial planning area must be coterminous.

Given our unique circumstance as set out above, we consider that we should progress a Spatial Development Strategy for Gloucestershire that can in due course align with our strategic authority partners.

The seven Councils have worked together to produce a Local Growth Plan and Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Gloucestershire and have made significant progress in their preparations to produce a spatial development strategy, within the Gloucestershire geography. To date the Councils, have:

- established governance arrangements for the SDS process, utilising the established City Region Board to provide a collaborative framework that brings together all the county's councils on strategic planning matters operating as a 'strategic planning board' for Gloucestershire
- has in place a Gloucestershire Statement of Common Ground for joint working on strategic matters
- has begun work to bring together evidence and identify gaps in information
- has agreed the broad scope and project plan with a draft timeframe to produce its SDS,
- understands the timetables for the legacy and new local plan production, recognising the complexity of their relationship with SDS during this transitional time of planning (with two parallel planning systems) and focussing on delivery of these plans
- Is opening informal conversations with neighbours and key stakeholders with a view to establishing key cross boundary and joint working matters to be addressed in the SDS

We would also note that Gloucestershire's City Region Board already provides a collaborative framework that brings together all the county's councils on strategic planning



matters. There is strong consensus across Gloucestershire for the SDS, recognising the value of having this and other key strategic documents in place to influence conversations as the area progresses on its devolution journey and ensuring that the expertise currently held in our district councils is carried forward into the new arrangements without interruption.

**Our position is that Gloucestershire should form a single foundation strategic authority as a pre-cursor to joining the West of England Combined Authority.**

This view is put forward with full respect for our neighbouring counties and is supported by a strong evidence base that illustrates Gloucestershire's distinctive geographic and economic position. Of our working age residents, 83.1% work within the county, comfortably exceeding the ONS threshold of 75% that defines a self-contained economic geography.

This economic geography hosts recognised clusters spanning several priority sectors of the Industrial Strategy. These include secure technologies and digital centred on Cheltenham and GCHQ; green energy and nuclear science at Berkeley and Oldbury; aerospace and advanced manufacturing across the Gloucester, Brockworth and Tewkesbury corridor; agri-tech; and natural capital stewardship, reflecting the county's distinctive landscape assets from the Cotswolds to the Forest of Dean. Together, these clusters form a holistic resilience-led innovation economy which could even serve as a test bed for broader national resilience, and one whose coherence would be better maintained within a single-county strategic authority.

We would note that a strong case for a single-county foundation strategic authority can rest on more than geographic isolation. In Gloucestershire's case, our self-containment has developed at a genuine economic crossroads, where proximity to multiple major labour markets has driven internal integration rather than dependence on any one of them. The result is a notably resilient and diversified local economy, with much to offer the wider country.

Gloucestershire sits at a regional crossroads, with complex connections in several directions. However, many of our regional partnerships increasingly point south, where the high-growth sectors prioritised by the Industrial Strategy find their strongest natural alignment with neighbouring economies. This sectoral alignment is reinforced by infrastructure agreements, particularly in transport, and by shared strategic corridors. We believe this organic economic geography provides a strong foundation for the devolution settlement, and one that would serve residents well.

We are aware that alternative footprint configurations have been proposed that would encompass Gloucestershire within a wider grouping of counties. We recognise the good faith in which those proposals have been made and retain full respect for our neighbours. However, the evidence of Gloucestershire's economic self-containment, its distinctive sectoral profile and the coherence of its existing partnerships all point towards a single-county foundation strategic authority as the arrangement most likely to deliver effective devolution and a credible spatial development strategy.



We look forward to illustrating our case more fully in our forthcoming Expression of Interest. We are confident that the strength of our evidence base will demonstrate that Gloucestershire meets the criteria for a foundation strategic authority.

We recognise that getting devolution footprints right is essential for the communities we all serve, and we are confident that our position is grounded in evidence that supports effective delivery. We would very much welcome an early conversation with you about how Gloucestershire can move forward, so that together we can ensure our residents benefit from a devolution settlement that reflects the place they live and work in.

Gloucestershire's identity is shaped by far more than economic metrics. For millennia, the county has sat within the cultural sphere of the South West, sharing long-standing historic, social, and economic ties with Bristol and River Severn Estuary communities. These connections, rooted in trade, shared industries, migration, and a shared culture, continue to shape how residents live, work, and relate to the region today. Gloucestershire's natural orientation toward the South West is therefore not new; it is deeply embedded in our history and lived experience. Gloucestershire is, always has been, and wishes to remain a part of the South West of England.

Yours sincerely,

**Cllr Lisa Spivey**  
Leader, Gloucestershire County Council

**Cllr Rowena Hay**  
Leader, Cheltenham Borough Council

**Cllr Mike Evemy**  
Leader, Cotswold District Council

**Cllr Adrian Birch**  
Leader, Forest of Dean District Council

**Cllr Jeremy Hilton**  
Leader, Gloucester City Council

**Cllr Chloe Turner**  
Leader, Stroud District Council