

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
The Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

By email

**The Leader's Office
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
New Road
Oxford
Oxfordshire
OX1 1ND**

Councillor Tim Bearder
Leader of the Council

23 July 2026

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing as Leader of Oxfordshire County Council to congratulate you on your appointment as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Your longstanding commitment to strong local government gives us confidence that we can build a constructive relationship with you and your Cabinet, and we were encouraged by your comments about strengthening devolution and supporting good growth across the country.

I would like to invite you to visit Oxfordshire as part of your summer programme. We would welcome the opportunity to show you how the county is delivering innovative work that aligns closely with your priorities, and to discuss how Oxfordshire can play its full part in meaningful devolution for the Thames Valley.

Oxfordshire is an ideal place to visit because it brings together many of the opportunities and challenges facing the country: world-leading science and innovation, major growth pressures, rural and urban communities, stark inequalities, and nationally significant work on public health, prevention and social care. Through our Oxfordshire Way approach, we are working to help people live well and independently for longer, while also strengthening local services and reducing demand on the system.

We also want to be clear that we remain deeply disappointed by the decision announced on 16 July to proceed with a three-unitary model for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. The publication of the consultation analysis has heightened rather than eased our concerns. The selected model does not appear to command clear local consensus and would fragment crucial countywide services, including social care. It also risks creating financial vulnerability and weakening Oxfordshire's ability to speak with one coherent voice.

That matters not only for local government reorganisation, but for devolution. We want to work constructively with Government to deliver meaningful mayoral devolution for the Thames Valley. However, we do not believe that ambition can be delivered effectively if Oxfordshire is divided into three separate authorities at the same time as the region is

seeking to build scale, strategic capacity, clear accountability and strong regional leadership.

The Thames Valley is one of Europe's leading centres for science, technology, innovation and advanced manufacturing, yet it remains without the strategic powers available to many other parts of England. The recent decision not to proceed with the proposed Foundation Strategic Authority was not a rejection of devolution. It reflected our view that the proposal lacked the powers, funding and coherent geography needed to make a meaningful difference.

We are keen to work with you and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to explore a stronger settlement, including the devolution of powers to a regionally elected Mayor. A coherent Oxfordshire voice will be essential to making that work, both for our communities and for the wider Thames Valley.

We are particularly interested in building on the great work Irene Tracey and Oxford University have done to create an emerging partnership between Oxfordshire and the Liverpool City Region. Our Memorandum of Understanding reflects the same spirit of collaboration - including our globally respected Universities - that has helped Greater Manchester become a national leader in devolution. A Thames Valley Mayor would be well placed to lead that collaboration and unlock the strategic capacity our area needs.

I hope you will accept our invitation to visit Oxfordshire and see this work firsthand. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how Government can help us protect service resilience, maintain a coherent geography for devolution, and ensure Oxfordshire is able to play its full part in a future Thames Valley mayoral settlement. If you don't have the capacity to come to Oxfordshire, in what must be a demanding schedule, I would happily come and visit you in Westminster or Manchester to discuss these important matters.

We look forward to hearing from your office.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Bearder', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Tim Bearder
Leader, Oxfordshire County Council