

21 MARCH 2025

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held on Friday, 21 March 2025

* Cllr Jill Cleary (Chairman)
Cllr Steve Davies (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

* Geoffrey Blunden
* Jeremy Heron

Councillors:

* Dan Poole
* Derek Tipp

*Present

In attendance:

Councillors:

John Adams
Peter Armstrong
Steve Clarke
Philip Dowd
Barry Dunning
Alan O'Sullivan

Councillors:

Steve Rippon-Swaine
Neil Tungate
Malcolm Wade
Christine Ward
Richard Young
Alan Alvey

Officers Attending:

Kate Ryan, Alan Bethune, Tanya Coulter, Matt Wisdom and Joe Tyler

Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr S Davies.

65 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a dispensation that had been granted to all members of the Cabinet. It was explained that all members of Cabinet had a dispensation to take part and vote in item 4, notwithstanding their interests in the matter arising from their receiving a member allowance and the item potentially affecting that position as it related to the reorganisation of local councils including NFDC.

66 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

67 DEVOLUTION UPDATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION INTERIM PLAN

RESOLVED:

That Cabinet:

- (a) Approved the joint submission to Government of the Interim Local Government Reorganisation Plan for Hampshire and the Solent, at Appendix 1;
- (b) Agreed to delegate authority to the Leader of the Council to approve the final interim submission on behalf of the Council, in the event that minor amendments are agreed by the 15 councils;
- (c) Considered the key points of importance in the development of a final proposal that reflects the unique geography, history, economy and communities of the New Forest;
- (d) Agreed to set in place a programme of engagement with town and parish councils to explore local service delivery and potential transfer of assets, and to bring back to Cabinet a policy for community asset transfer; and
- (e) Delegated authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to access and spend funds from the Council's Devolution and LGR reserve.

KEY DECISION:

No

PORTFOLIO:

Leader

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED/REJECTED:

As set out in the report.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

The Monitoring Officer confirmed that a dispensation that had been granted to all members of the Cabinet. It was explained that all members of Cabinet had dispensation to take part and vote in item 4, notwithstanding their interests in the matter arising from their receiving a member allowance and the item potentially affecting that position as it related to the reorganisation of local councils including NFDC.

DISCUSSION:

The Leader explained that following the Special Council meeting on the 20 March 2025, it was the Council's view that recommendation 2c of the report should be amended as follows:

“Cabinet considers key points of importance in the development of a final proposal that reflects the unique geography, history, economy and communities of the New Forest.”

The Leader introduced the Devolution Update and Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan report.

The report outlined that the Council had been instructed by Government to work with other councils on devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The Leader explained that this was not the Council's priority and that the Council did not consider LGR the right thing for the New Forest.

The Leader had been working as instructed with Leaders across the area and a draft of guiding principles had been submitted. It was confirmed that there was no consensus at this stage on options going forward and some councils were in favour of reorganisation for very large councils or for completely new makeups, which was not the view of NFDC.

Cabinet heard that it was the Council's belief that the best model of reorganisation for the New Forest was a rural-focused unitary authority, bringing together the New Forest area with Mid-Hampshire. This model of Council would be financially sustainable and would respect the heritage, support the economy and protect the unique environment of the New Forest.

The Leader stated that the debate heard at the Special Council meeting on 20 March 2025 was filled with heartfelt contributions and reiterated that NFDC would continue to prioritise the residents of the New Forest.

The Leader thanked all Councillors for their collective support to this stage.

The Chief Executive provided some further, technical information to the report. Cabinet was reminded of the contextual background of the LGR programme. It was explained that the Government required Hampshire councils' interim plan by 21 March 2025 which was featured as Appendix 1 to the report.

The interim plan was the result of discussions between leaders across Hampshire and the Solent and NFDC made strong representations during this process to ensure that key concerns were included. This submission was being considered by all councils across Hampshire and the Solent this week.

It was clarified that there was not a unified view across the fifteen councils and work would continue to develop one or more proposals before the final submission date of 26 September 2025. Cabinet heard that the proposed submission requests that the Government extend this timeline to November.

The Chief Executive explained that work on LGR was taking a significant amount of capacity from the Council's Senior Leadership Team and corporate services. It was expected, from experience, that the demand on capacity would grow and therefore Council had made the decision to allocate £150,000 budget to set up and resource their LGR Programme. It was explained that the report asked Cabinet to delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to access and spend funds from the allocated reserve as necessary.

A key element of the programme would be the engagement of Town and Parish Councils to support them in exploring their role within Local Government going

forward. Cabinet heard that NFDC were jointly holding an LGR event with the New Forest Association for Local Government for all of the District's Town and Parish Councils on 28 April 2025.

The Leader stated the published supplement to the report following the resolution passed by Council at their Special meeting on 20 March 2025. The resolution was to amend recommendation 2c within the report and included key points from the debate at the meeting. The new recommendation was as follows: *"Cabinet considers key points of importance in the development of a final proposal that reflects the unique geography, history, economy and communities of the New Forest."*

Members of the Cabinet were invited to make comments on the item. The main points were as follows:

- It was noted that debate at the Special Council meeting was thorough, and that consensus was evident that NFDC's view on LGR was in the right direction.
- Cabinet acknowledged that there was a frustration and resentment insofar as the decision for LGR not being one of their own makings. Despite this, Cabinet agreed that achieving the best outcome for the residents of the New Forest was the Council's priority.
- It was noted that NFDC had a strong evidence base, following the corporate peer challenge and residents survey, to demonstrate that the District would be an asset to any future authority it formed a part of.
- The District's economic and community strength as well as its unique natural offering made it an extremely desirable area for other authorities to reorganise with. The Waterside was acknowledged as a particularly important element of the District and was referred to as the New Forest's engine room.
- There was a consensus in not wanting to be merged within a city, due to the differences between the New Forest and the highly urban areas of Hampshire.
- Cabinet acknowledged that NFDC was widely recognised as one of the best councils for delivering services and that the Council's vision going forward would prioritise the principles of financial value and sustainability.
- It was stated that larger councils would see a further removal of decision-making and services from the residents of the New Forest and that this would run contrary to the Council's principle of strengthening localism and bringing decision making closer to the people of the New Forest.
- Comments were made on contingency plans and how the Council would need to be pragmatic throughout the process. A Cabinet member was reassured in the initial stages of their submission that NFDC were prepared despite the process being outside of their control.
- It was recognised that the LGR process was still within its early stages and that there would be lots of work undertaken on building a case that supports

NFDC's desired outcome. A Cabinet member remarked that there appeared to be a democratic deficit in the process to this stage as the consultation did not provide much opportunity for respondents to express disagreement with the policy of devolution. It was also acknowledged that no consultation with residents or employees within the District had taken place on reorganisation.

- A non-Executive member expressed that the biggest driver behind the Council's work on LGR must be to achieve the best result for residents. It was stated that there were some faults within the interim plan submission but that there were several benefits. Maximising the Council's strengths would be imperative throughout the process. It was stated that NFDC must promote their economic base in discussions and negotiations going forward so that the reorganisation to a rural, unitary authority could be achieved.
- The District's many communities were acknowledged as being a fundamental aspect of the New Forest. Strong and positive engagement would be essential and a continued constructive response to all engagement with NFDC communities should be the aim.
- A non-Executive member expressed great disappointment and despondency at the entire process, stating that there had been no democratic mandate for local government reorganisation.

CHAIRMAN