

**Devolution for Hampshire – Government Consultation – NFDC working response**

[Hampshire and the Solent devolution consultation - GOV.UK](#)

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

***New Forest District Council (NFDC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the government's consultation on the proposed establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) for Hampshire, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight, and Southampton. We support the overarching principles of devolution, which aim to foster growth, enhance infrastructure, and drive public sector reform. This initiative presents a significant opportunity to attract much needed investment to our region.***

***Whilst we are optimistic about the potential for devolution to bring investment, we note that the current model proposes allocation through financial settlements rather than upfront commitments. For effective planning and to maximise the benefits of Devolution, clarity on the scale and timing of these investments is essential. We urge the government to provide detailed information on the financial framework accompanying the Devolution deal.***

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined County Authority?

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

**Disagree**

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

***Recognising that the formation of new unitary councils is projected for 2028, it is imperative to define the role of existing district and borough councils during the transitional period ahead. With district and borough statutory planning functions, and as drivers and the delivery arm of economic growth and housing, effective district and borough council representation within the governance model is essential. It would be helpful for the government's guidance to ensure district/borough councils are to be given non constituent member status during transition.***

***NFDC emphasises the necessity for these councils to have a formal and active role within the MCCA to maintain continuity and make the very best of local expertise and representation.***

***Looking beyond the period of local government reorganisation, careful consideration will need to be given to a governance model that supports balanced representation within the MCCA, given Hampshire's population distribution.***

***It is crucial for the government to integrate various aspects of the proposed changes and provide clarity on their implications for a unique area like the New Forest, with the district council's statutory functions and those of partners such as the New Forest National Park Authority. Clear guidance on governance arrangements and the interplay between local and regional planning authorities is essential to ensure effective planning outcomes.***

***NFDC recognises the significant economic opportunities presented by the Solent Freeport, including job creation, business growth, and investment across the defined areas of benefit. As a partner***

***committed to the Full Business Case (FBC), we emphasise the importance of ensuring that any change to the governance structures within the new MCCA will ensure that the business-rate raising councils continue to have board level representation. Also that the commitments outlined and approved in the FBC remain intact in any future MCCA. The current arrangements ensure that councils play an active role in decision-making, safeguarding the delivery of outcomes within the defined areas of benefit, with the security of the current legal framework. NFDC seeks formal assurance from the government that this will continue to be the case.***

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the economy of the area?

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

***The creation of an MCCA with a newly defined geographical area is expected to generate significant positive economic outcomes, though it also presents risks that require careful management.***

***The economy of Hampshire and the Solent is diverse, and is symptomatic of the scale of the geography involved. For example, the relationships between the coastal cities of Southampton and Portsmouth, the rural town and village economies of the Forest and mid-Hampshire, and the economies of north Hampshire, are limited. With that in mind, localised decision-making for infrastructure funding, skills and innovation investment, housing, health and regeneration investment, is positive and the MCCA should be well placed to deliver benefits in that regard. The MCCA geography aligns with established transport corridors like the M27, M3, and A31, connecting Hampshire and the Solent. This allows for improved coordination of infrastructure and public transport. Coastal connections to the Isle of Wight are also***

***crucial, and the MCCA can ensure these links are maintained and enhanced.***

***The decentralisation of decision-making within an MCCA can promote responsive policies tailored to local needs, boosting economic growth and addressing social inequality. For example, devolution can help maximise the benefits of projects like the Solent Freeport and renewable energy production for businesses and residents. Integrated policies across transport, housing, health, skills, and economic development will foster inclusive growth, with a coordinated transport strategy ensuring better connectivity and more efficient resource movement across Hampshire. There is also the potential to more effectively promote Hampshire as a visitor destination in its own right, recognising the diverse mix of attractions across the rural and urban landscapes including national parks, coast, heritage and leisure parks.***

***Devolution provides the opportunity to attract both UK and foreign direct investment, with increased commercial land availability, a broader education and skills offering, and a larger resource pool. For instance, the recent invitations to submit expressions of interest for the AI Growth Zone proposal highlights the potential for investment through multi-site propositions across various local government areas. Devolution through an MCCA can support such initiatives by offering a coherent economic policy and a coordinated investment strategy.***

***An MCCA's size can also deliver economies of scale, enhancing value for money. Larger-scale service commissioning, such as for network maintenance and health care, can yield significant savings that can be reinvested in economic development initiatives, driving growth.***

***However, the devolution process is complex and resource-intensive. It can temporarily divert local government staff from service delivery, potentially impacting economic development. To mitigate this, external consultancy support or agency staff is likely to be needed during the process. Devolution also introduces administrative complexity and bureaucracy, which can slow decision-making and affect the timely delivery of externally funded initiatives. Streamlined governance procedures will be essential to overcome these challenges.***

***Furthermore, the expanded MCCA area may create tensions over resource allocation, with some regions feeling underfunded. This***

***could delay economic interventions and hinder inclusive growth. Devolution offers the potential for additional funding to be secured, but it is crucial to develop integrated, evidence-based economic policies early on to ensure equitable distribution of resources and investments, particularly in areas of social deprivation.***

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve social outcomes in the area?

Strongly agree

***Agree***

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

***The MCCA offers significant potential to deliver positive social outcomes for communities across the region. These benefits include more integrated decision-making, targeted investment, and a unified approach to addressing regional social challenges. To succeed, the MCCA must work closely with new unitary councils that are responsive to the diverse needs of the region, including areas of rural deprivation such as the New Forest. Prioritising these communities is crucial to prevent them from being left behind.***

***The MCCA provides the opportunity to better align skills provision with local employment needs, ensuring communities have access to training and education that leads to skilled jobs. Through devolved funding and partnerships with training providers, including colleges, the MCCA can oversee coordinated investment in education and skills initiatives, particularly in rural areas. However, clear mechanisms must be in place to ensure that the specific needs of different communities are addressed effectively. Previous initiatives in areas like NEETs and digital inclusion have not always met local needs, highlighting the importance of tailored strategies.***

***The creation of a 30-year Investment Fund for the MCCA offers potential to regenerate cities, towns, and villages across the region through new powers and partnerships with government, businesses, and universities. However, the success of the Fund will depend on balancing the various demands and ensuring that rural areas, like the New Forest, have equitable access to funding alongside larger cities and towns.***

***While the MCCA has the potential to improve social outcomes, negative outcomes can also arise. The decentralisation of decision-making allows local governments to address issues like housing, health, employment, and transport more effectively. By targeting resources to areas of deprivation, the MCCA can promote skills attainment, access to higher-value jobs, and improved health and wellbeing, benefiting both urban and rural communities.***

***Additionally, the MCCA's integrated approach to service delivery can improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and allow for more flexible resources. This approach can increase customer satisfaction by linking services such as health, education, and social care. A collaborative and responsive approach to strategic planning can also address regional challenges like housing shortages, transportation, and climate change, supporting inclusive growth.***

***However, resource allocation can create tensions, especially between smaller communities and larger urban areas, leading to concerns over the equitable distribution of resources. To mitigate this, MCCA policies must be evidence-based and focus on local needs. A fair governance system is essential to ensure efficient decision making and address these concerns.***

***The creation of an MCCA may introduce additional bureaucracy, which can delay service delivery and reduce efficiency. This complexity can hinder residents' access to services, potentially exacerbating social inequality. It is critical that customer pathways are clearly defined and tested during the MCCA's development to minimise these negative impacts and ensure services are accessible to all.***

***In summary, the MCCA has the potential to bring about positive social changes, but careful planning, equitable resource allocation, and streamlined governance will be essential to mitigate negative outcomes and ensure inclusive growth.***

Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve local government services in the area?

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

***The MCCA allows for strategic local government to take place at a scale that reflects the population and geography of the region, while ensuring decisions remain locally informed through current council structures.***

***It will be integral to the success of English Devolution, that new unitary authorities are established that are reflective of local needs and priorities, so that when they become constituent members of the Strategic Authority (SA), the governance of the SA is positioned to reflect the diverse communities across the region and in turn support the objectives of the MCCA.***

***True Devolution is about shifting control over key policies, funding, and public services from Westminster to local leaders who have a deep understanding of their region's needs. It should not mean the centralisation of local authority functions into a larger, more remote MCCA. Local government, especially in the New Forest with a strong district council and active town and parish councils, plays a crucial role in delivering services that are tailored to community needs. Removing these responsibilities from councils risks weakening the connection between residents and decision-makers and we seek assurance that Devolution will focus on securing new powers over transport, skills, infrastructure, and economic growth that enable the region to shape its own future, rather than redistributing existing local government functions.***

Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority

will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?

Strongly agree

**Agree**

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

***Hampshire and the Solent include significant rural and environmental assets, including the New Forest National Park. A combined authority can ensure a balanced approach to growth and sustainability, protecting natural landscapes whilst promoting sustainable economic growth in those areas that are not constrained.***

***Authorities within the Hampshire and Solent MCCA area have declared Climate and Nature Emergencies, with many setting highly ambitious targets around carbon reduction, climate adaptation and nature recovery. The geography of the proposed MCCA would support strategic delivery of the environment and climate change functions, as proposed in the Devolution Framework, enabling more efficient and effective programmes to be developed. The focus on large scale, high impact initiatives to deliver heat decarbonisation, renewable energy, green skills and jobs, and healthy natural environments would be of benefit to the area's residents, businesses, communities and visitors, especially if the new structure would facilitate economies of scale through procurement of green goods and services and increased renewable energy production proportionate to development demand.***

***One aspect of climate and environment that is not directly considered in the devolution consultation paper is adaptation to the impacts extreme weather and climate change. Parts of the New Forest District and wider Hampshire and Solent area are subject to significant impacts such as flooding, coastal erosion, heatwaves and poor air quality, with government climate change***

**projections indicating that these impacts are likely to worsen over time. Acknowledgement of these risks and strategic responsibility for climate adaptation measures aligned to the MCCA would improve the resilience of the Hampshire and Solent area, protecting long-term economic, social and environmental assets and interests.**

**Hampshire is one of the most plant and animal species-rich environments in Britain with a huge variety of ancient woods, chalk grassland, streams and wetlands, neutral and acid meadows, and heathlands, many in former royal forests including in the New Forest. The last twenty years has seen increasingly significant collaboration between authorities to deliver programmes recognise the significant natural capital available across Hampshire and the need to mitigate development's impact on this often fragile environment. Ensuring that the collaboration and partnership secured through this work continues within the MCCA will be vital to the effective management of much of these natural environments. A particular key tool for an MCCA to enable the improvement of the natural environment is in strategic planning where there is potential to direct growth towards areas of the county most capable of accommodating it, whilst protecting those areas of the county's environment most vulnerable to change.**

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?

Strongly agree

Agree

**Neither agree nor disagree**

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Please explain your answer.

**The New Forest is unlike any other part of Hampshire. It is a nationally significant landscape with a rich heritage, shaped by**

**centuries of careful stewardship and strong community ties. The district's identity is deeply rooted in the following:**

- **A network of vibrant towns and villages - communities such as Lymington, Ringwood, New Milton, Totton and Fordingbridge, alongside smaller villages, each have distinct identities, histories, and economic drivers.**
- **Rural and forest communities – the heart of the New Forest is home to commoning traditions, unique governance structures (such as the Verderers of the New Forest), and a landscape that requires sensitive management to balance environmental conservation with community needs. The distinct needs of rural, forest, and waterside communities will need to be carried into the MCCA, rather than being overly focused on the urban areas in Hampshire and the Solent.**
- **The Waterside's historic and economic links to the Forest – Areas such as Hythe, Fawley, and Marchwood are closely connected to the New Forest's character. This relationship between land and sea is fundamental to our local identity and must be reflected through the MCCA.**
- **A strong partnership of town and parish councils – Local democracy in the New Forest is enhanced by an active network of town and parish councils, ensuring decisions are made close to the communities they affect. Their role must be respected and enhanced through the MCCA model.**

**Moving through local government reorganisation, by ensuring the MCCA is supported by unitary councils that reflect the region's geography and communities, and in the New Forest's case, a rural focused authority through mid Hampshire, the MCCA can achieve balanced representation, preventing dominance by urban centres that would not fully represent the range of economies and local communities.**