

Portfolio holder decision – Leader – 9 January 2026

Response to government consultation on local government reorganisation (Hampshire and the Solent)

Purpose	For Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>The Leader, on behalf of the Council, has prepared a full response to the government's consultation on local government reorganisation.</p> <p>The response reiterates support for Option 1 – a four-unitary mainland model that keeps the New Forest whole within a Mid Hampshire unitary (with Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire). This approach, having been unanimously endorsed by the Full Council, is considered to be a community-backed, financially resilient and lower risk option to implement at pace. It avoids disruption associated with boundary change and aligns with Government criteria for reform. The response also deals with each of the alternative options.</p> <p>In particular, the boundary-change variant (Option 1A), which in the Council's view, introduces significant service and financial risks, is contrary to local views and needs and would not meet the Government's "strong justification" threshold on either public service or financial grounds.</p> <p>The response also outlines that there are various legal difficulties associated with Option 1A, including the scope of the powers available to the Secretary of State in this local government reorganisation. These relate to changing the boundary of any current district council, and the risk of predetermination by the Secretary of State in relation to any future boundary change review process.</p>
Recommendations	1. That the Leader approves the New Forest District Council consultation response for Hampshire and the Solent

	<p>local government reorganisation (Appendix 1)</p> <p>2. That the Leader delegates authority to the Chief Executive to make any minor drafting, formatting or corrections to the response prior to submission to MHCLG.</p> <p>3. That the Leader delegates authority to the Chief Executive to further submit the response via the government's online portal.</p>
Reasons for recommendations	<p>The recommendations enable the Council to submit a clear, evidence-based response that best represents the Council's position, informed by stakeholders, businesses and residents' interests as part of local government reorganisation.</p> <p>Option 1 aligns governance with coherent geographies and community identity, evidenced by significant engagement.</p> <p>The Council's view is that it can be implemented with lower risk and at greater pace than other options.</p>
Wards	All
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Jill Cleary – Leader of the Council
Strategic Director	Kate Ryan – Chief Executive
Officer Contact	<p>Matt Wisdom Assistant Director, Strategy and Engagement (Monitoring Officer) 023 8028 5072 Matt.wisdom@nfdc.gov.uk</p>

Introduction and background

1. The government is consulting on local government reorganisation in Hampshire and the Solent. The details of the consultation and the proposals being consulted upon can be found at <https://consult.communities.gov.uk/local-government-reorganisation/hampshire-isle-of-wight-portsmouth-southampton/>

2. The deadline for consultation responses is 11 January 2026 and this report appends a response for approval by the Leader of the Council.

Consultation response

3. Following cross-council work and local evidence gathering, the Council has prepared a formal response which proposes the confirmation of support for Option 1 – four new mainland unitary councils with the New Forest within a Mid Hampshire unitary alongside Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire.
4. Option 1 has emerged as being community-backed, financially resilient and capable of being implemented at pace. It is supported by three principal councils in the region and by both New Forest MPs. The configuration reflects sensible geographies and economic areas, aligns with statutory environmental responsibilities, and meets the Government's criteria for reorganisation. It meets with the Government's indicative population size and delivers system-wide financial benefits, while avoiding the disruption and cost of lower tier boundary disaggregation.
5. The consultation response details opposition to the alternative proposals being consulted upon, in line with the Council's agreed position.
6. The Council does not support placing the New Forest in a "West" authority alongside Test Valley, Southampton and Eastleigh. This configuration fuses a large, city-centred economy with predominantly rural communities. Its scale materially exceeds the Government's guidelines, introducing the risk of additional local delivery tiers (and cost), and potential need for further reorganisation. The savings case advanced for this proposal is weaker than the evidenced £63.9m recurring delivered by the four-unitary Option 1 model.
7. Nor does the Council support placing the New Forest within an authority with Southampton/Eastleigh (Option 2). This configuration presents similar risks to that in paragraph 6, mixing a large, city-centred economy with predominantly rural communities, risking city-led commissioning and weakening the fit to place for housing, coastal protection, neighbourhood and statutory services such as for vulnerable adults and children. There are particular challenges of combining fully parished areas with an unparished city for equitable, effective neighbourhood governance. Engagement indicates strong local opposition (56% opposition region-wide; 87% in the New Forest).
8. Significant concerns are noted regarding Option 1A, which would modify district boundaries and split the coherent geography of the New Forest. On service and financial grounds, it is the Council's view

that this option does not meet the Government's threshold of "strong justification." It risks fragmentation of well-functioning, integrated arrangements across housing (including HRA communities and homelessness routes), waste and operations, elections, coastal management, and key multidisciplinary locality partnerships (health, social care, public health, policing, early help, highways). It would also introduce delay, bureaucracy and transition costs that compromise delivery at pace. Engagement indicates this option to be "universally disliked" and particularly by those impacted parishes (86% opposition).

9. Further, the consultation response outlines that there are various legal difficulties associated with Option 1A, including the scope of the powers available to the Secretary of State in this local government reorganisation. These relate to changing the boundary of any current district council and the risk of predetermination by the Secretary of State in relation to any future boundary change review process.

Corporate plan priorities

10. The recommendations support all corporate plan priorities by ensuring their representation as part of shaping a final government decision on the future of local government within the New Forest district.

Options appraisal

11. The Council could choose not to submit a response, but this would mean the loss of a vital opportunity to influence the government's decision on these future local government arrangements.

Consultation undertaken

12. The Council has undertaken significant engagement including a district-wide residents' survey, deliberative workshops, business and parish engagement, and focused work with Waterside communities.
13. This evidence informed the Council's submission to government, and also informs this consultation response. The engagement undertaken indicates strong support for keeping the Forest whole and for Option 1.
14. The draft response has undergone consultation with the Council's, Cabinet Members and Group Leaders.

Financial and resource implications

15. There are none arising from the report and submission of a consultation response.

Legal implications

16. The Leader has the power to respond to this government consultation. The consultation response references the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE)s statutory criteria and indicates where boundary-change variants would, in the Council's view, be unlikely to satisfy those tests.
17. Having taken external legal advice from a specialist public law barrister, the Council has outlined legal difficulties associated with boundary changes in the consultation response, relating to Option 1A. The response on this matter is based on the outcome of that advice.
18. No legal commitments arise from this report and consultation response; any implementation decisions would be subject to future governance and, where required, further consultation and orders by Government and the LGBCE.

Risk assessment

19. A formal risk assessment has not been undertaken. The risk of not responding to the consultation is set out at paragraph 11.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

20. There are no direct environmental impacts from this decision to submit a response. However, the substance of the response highlights the importance of coherent governance for protected landscapes and coastal-to-Forest environmental connectivity.

Equalities implications

21. No adverse equalities impacts arise from the decision to submit a response. Engagement activity sought views from a broad cross-section of the community including hard to reach groups and those with protected characteristics.

Crime and disorder implications

22. None directly arising from this decision.

Data protection/ Information governance/ ICT implications

23. None directly arising from this decision.

New Forest National Park/ Cranborne Chase National Landscape implications

24. Whilst no direct implications arise from this decision, the varying LGR options present different challenges for furthering the interests of protected landscapes including the New Forest National Park. The consultation response reflects the opportunities presented by Option 1, bringing together areas that have protected landscapes, whilst flagging the risks that arise within alternative options. This is particularly the case with Option 1A, which would split the National Park between two councils at several points along the Waterside.
25. New Forest National Park Authority has assessed Option 1 as the strongest to further the purposes of the New Forest National Park, creating a new unitary that would be well placed to work with the two national park authorities to deliver the Government's agenda for National Parks. Concerns are raised on the alternative options, particularly Option 1A, which risks jeopardising important links between the Waterside and the rest of the New Forest. The importance of the Waterside to the commoning system that plays such a key role in managing the landscape and designated sites of the National Park is noted.
26. Cranborne Chase National Landscape has summarised its views in assessing Option 1 as being placed to manage continuity of issues and solutions. Concerns are raised in respect of Options 2 and 1A, which include competitive tensions, including the risk of placing unnecessary pressure on the New Forest National Park and the South Downs National Park.

Conclusion

27. Approving and submitting the Council's response - provides clear, evidence-based advocacy for Option 1 and ensures the Council's position is fully and promptly represented in the consultation.

Portfolio holder endorsement

28. I have agreed to the recommendations of this report.

Signed: Cllr Jill Cleary

Dated: 9 January 2026

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Consultation
response

Background Papers:

Cabinet – 26 September 2025
LGR Engagement

Date on which notice given of this decision – 9 January 2026

This decision is not for call-in. This is because, in the opinion of the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer, it should be implemented urgently, having regard to the government's consultation deadline, the Council's previous support for the position represented by the recommendations and the consultation undertaken with Group Leaders.