

# Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

Summary of engagement by



# 1. Background and summary of methodology

New Forest District Council (NFDC) worked with 11 other councils in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (all except the county council and East Hampshire) to agree three potentially acceptable options for local government reorganisation (LGR) in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

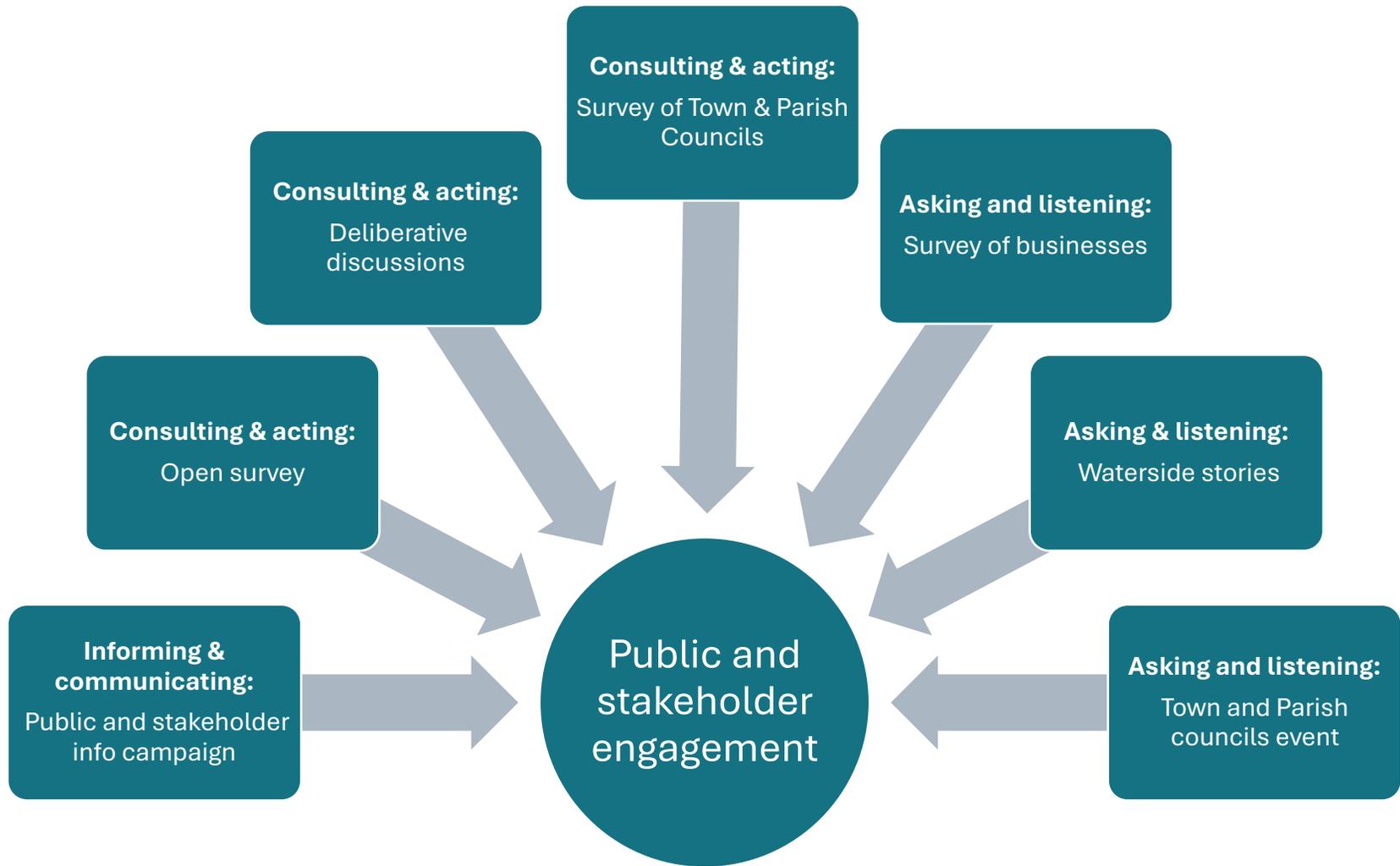
The LGA’s LGR engagement toolkit recommends consideration is given to each of the following levels of involvement when planning engagement:



NFDC undertook a robust approach to engagement, consistent with three of the LGA’s suggested levels:

- **Asking and listening:** to inform our approach and seek broad views early on and throughout
- **Consulting and acting:** to seek opinions on specific options under consideration in Hampshire, and so influence our final proposal
- **Communicating and informing:** to explain options in detail and encourage participation in the consultation

Specific activities are shown visually as follows:



## 2. Summary of outcomes and key themes

### The outcomes of this extensive engagement are:

- **Robust representation of voice from local people:** 3,141 responses to the survey from New Forest district residents (1.79% of the district's population). Every single ward was represented. Online boosting achieved 4,124 click throughs resulting in 1,175 survey submissions.
- **The ability to reflect stakeholder views in NFDC's final proposal to government:** we are confident that we have captured local priorities, concerns and aspirations well, broadly and deeply, providing a strong evidence base of public opinion to inform our final submission.
- **Clear messages and themes across all stakeholder groups:** the key themes for New Forest District Council residents and stakeholders, across all or the majority of engagement findings are:



To supplement the comprehensive appendices (Residents’ Survey findings, deliberative discussion findings, Waterside narrative work, town and parish councils meetings and survey, and business engagement), this engagement summary provides an aggregated set of headline findings, that are consistent across all groups. Evidence is presented using these identifying icons.



Residents’ survey



Deliberative workshops



Waterside engagement



Business survey



Town, Parish councils and community correspondence



Commoners’ views

### 3. Key themes

The following section sets out the key consistent themes of the combined 'consulting and acting' and 'asking and listening' phase of engagement activity. A short narrative is accompanied by supporting quotes and references from each engagement source where the theme features.

#### a) Identity & Place: *The New Forest is who we are*

There is a strong, almost palpable, connection to the rural environment. People overwhelmingly see the New Forest as central to their identity, and are deeply concerned about any potential dilution of that. They are protective and proud of the forest and its environs, and genuinely fearful of overdevelopment pressures and the impact these could have on precious landscapes. The combination of forest, estuary and coast is inherent within people's sense of who they are and where they belong.



**b) Service design and democratic representation: *We want services designed for and with us, and decisions made by people who understand us, our heritage and our place***

People report relatively high satisfaction with local services (with the exception of transport / transport infrastructure). They express a desire for efficient, place-based, embedded services, that understand the requirements of stewardship and are designed around the needs of rural communities.

There is a strong appetite for truly local voices to be genuinely influential in local decision-making. Residents are concerned that any governance including areas that do not share similar characteristics, risks a reduction in care for the Forest and a lessening of consideration for their own service provision and access needs, as well as being and feeling remote and disconnected.



c) **Overdevelopment is a significant concern: *Our place is not overspill for city housing needs and the issues that brings***

People are concerned about overdevelopment, in particular in relation to housing and the impacts that that, and associated other infrastructure needs, would have on the natural environment and community identity. They acknowledge housing and transport pressures exist already in the NFDC area, and see these as a reason to restrict any new boundaries to similar areas, with rural communities, to preserve the integrity of decision-making around development siting and local need.

There is a deep worry that too much housing occupied by those without longstanding connection to the area dilutes community identity and cohesion, and worries about potential impact on the national park area remain prevalent for many, Commoners especially.

**Panel 1:** Icon of a checklist. Text: "Issues around both high house prices, with properties unaffordable for locals, and excessive development and encroachment on rural areas, impacting infrastructure."

**Panel 2:** Icon of three people at a table. Text: *"If we merged into this super authority maybe the local planning would change. The New Forest might get whacked with a target of having 20,000 houses or something, then that might all just appear in our neighbourhood."*

**Panel 3:** Icon of a presentation board with trees and a cross. Text: *"We desperately need more affordable family housing. But keep it for local people. Don't let the city swallow up the list."*

**Panel 4:** Icon of a family group. Text: "Maintain and protect rural areas with appropriate planning and guidance. Avoid transferring houses to housing associations to keep them within council control."

**Panel 5:** Icon of a horse. Text: *"The open forest is really important to Commoners – unfenced, open forest, so the animals can roam free. As a whole, that's a really important asset."*

**Bottom Arrow:** OUR PLACE IS NOT OVERSPILL FOR CITY HOUSING NEEDS AND THE ISSUES THAT BRINGS

#### d) Support for Option 1: *Align us with similar, rural communities*

For reasons of community culture, heritage and identity, service design & delivery, local voice and governance, residents consistently support option 1 – a new rural council for mid-Hampshire.

People feel an affinity with other rural communities and that retaining this would help to maintain identity and traditions. There is consistent belief that this approach would lend itself to place-based service design and decision-making, and continue to protect the identity of the New Forest and the way of life if its communities.



**e) Opposition to Options 2 and 3: *We are not Southampton***

Respondents have significant concerns about the New Forest being merged with Southampton. Reasons include lack of cultural identity with the city, fear of being overshadowed, concern over Southampton’s financial issues, and desire to preserve the area’s distinct rural and forest character. This emerges as the most consistent negative red line across responses.

**87% oppose Option 2**  
*"The New Forest's interests would come second place every time to Southampton and we would lose our voice."*  
*"They are lumping a city (that's on the verge of bankruptcy) with a rural community, no shared interests or similar ways of lives/living, different challenges. No thank you."*

**80% oppose Option 3**  
*"Whilst it may seem like Totton and the Waterside are close to Southampton, they are distinctly different from the urban sprawl"*

The prospect of merging into unitary authorities based around cities, such as Southampton, were worrying for most residents. They felt that the needs, priorities and identity of such places would be extremely different from those of New Forest communities

*"The city-based councils don't get what makes us tick. They don't live here so they can't possibly understand the Forest culture."*  
*"You take Waterside out of the Forest and you're removing a whole identity"*

92% agree it is important that the New Forest remains whole and is not split across different council areas

Several respondents highlighted anxieties about being merged with urban areas or larger authorities that do not share their rural character or priorities.

The commoning community had specific concerns that their needs will not be heard within a larger form of local government. As a smaller group, they expressed fears that their traditional way of life would continue to be eroded, as they would not be considered a priority.

**WE ARE NOT SOUTHAMPTON**

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### a) Consulting and acting

Along with the other 12 councils committed to working together, NFDC collaborated to procure and develop robust and meaningful, primarily quantitative, engagement with residents in the form of a survey.

In addition, NFDC commissioned dedicated additional, independently-run qualitative engagement with their own residents to gain deeper understanding of their views, hopes and concerns.

This work involved:

#### The quantitative survey

- ensuring NFDC's interests were fully represented when contributing to survey content, subject matter and design of the quantitative survey, and extensively promoting completion via the communications activities above.
- Fieldwork for the survey took place from 30th June to 27<sup>th</sup> July, primarily online with option for paper or telephone completion. Since the survey sampling was self-selecting, it is reasonable to assume that those who took the time to complete it feel significantly strongly to opt in to responding.
- The survey asked residents about council priorities, local connection, and the three options agreed by all 13 participating councils.
- NFDC achieved the highest number of responses across all of Hampshire – 3,141 responses, 1.79% of the population. Every single ward was represented. Online boosting achieved 4,124 click throughs resulting in 1,175 survey submissions.



### Deliberative sessions



- Independently designed and facilitated, involving 59 residents from across all wards. Two sessions took place online and two were in person. Residents were recruited to largely be reflective of the local population in terms of demographics (age, gender, ethnicity), with over-sampling of key groups who tend not to participate in other forms of engagement (e.g. young people).
- This research also included the voices of Commoners in the New Forest, as well as certain groups, including social renters, those with long term health conditions, and the financially vulnerable).

### Business survey

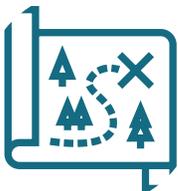


- Internally delivered by the economic development team
- Five closed response (yes/no) questions
- Fieldwork period from 13.08.2025 until midnight on 05.09.2025
- 51 responses received
- Promotion via digital platforms and local media

### **b) Asking and listening:**

Extensive listening informed NFDC's position from early on and throughout, as residents and stakeholders expressed their opinions, clearly articulating worries and concerns about any potential option that would see the Forest district's unique and special identity compromised.

### Waterside narrative



- The research was designed to capture and articulate the identity, character and personality of the Waterside communities, including Totton, Marchwood, Dibden Purlieu, Hythe, Holbury, Fawley and Calshot.
- This involved field-based and desk-based research to capture the visual and spatial identity of the area, and a series of qualitative conversations with individuals and representative groups from across the Waterside, where local people described their experiences.

## Town and Parish council event and direct correspondence from residents



- An event for Town and Parish councils was held in April 2025, as well as a short survey to capture views. Town and Parish councils from across the NFDC area shared their resolutions directly with us.
- 22 emails were received from members of the public, one from a charity, as well as a copy of a letter from Lord Montagu of Beaulieu.

### **c) Communicating and informing**

This work was informed by direct contact and feedback from stakeholders and residents, and involved:

- Creation of an appropriate and appealing look & feel and narrative ('keep the Forest whole') and call to action ('support a new rural council for mid-Hampshire').
- Production of an implementation plan and accompanying comprehensive set of assets including Leader's promise postcards, community posters, detailed web and Q&A content, Members' briefing pack, graphics & messaging for social media and email marketing, and establishing a dedicated LGR email inbox.
- Regular email content from Cllr Jill Cleary to over 250 stakeholders, sharing information, encouraging participation and providing updates.



- Targeted online boosting in three phases, linked to live response levels across the district (phase 1, 16-21 July: 18–45 year olds in Forest & Solent, Hardley, Holbury & North Blackfield, Hythe South, Sway and Totton Central wards; phase 2, 21 – 23 July: 18–25 year olds in the above wards plus also Ashurst, Bramshaw, Copythorne & Netley Marsh, Dibden & Dibden Purlieu, Fawley, Blackfield, Calshot & Langley, Hythe Central, Marchwood & Eling, Totton North, Totton South; phase 3, 23 – 27 July: all residents, all age groups).

A copy of this report and accompanying background papers can be found at <https://www.newforest.gov.uk/LGRengagement>