

Special Council – 25 September 2025

Special Cabinet – 26 September 2025

Local Government Reorganisation – Final proposal

Purpose	For Review and Decision
Classification	Public
Executive Summary	<p>This report seeks Cabinet approval for the submission of New Forest District Council's (NFDC) proposal for local government reorganisation (LGR) in Hampshire and the Solent. The proposal is grounded in collaboration with 11 other councils in the region, extensive engagement, technical analysis, and statutory alignment, and reflects NFDC's commitment to protecting the integrity of the New Forest District.</p> <p>The report recommends the submission of Option 1 – a mainland four-unitary model that retains the New Forest District in its entirety within a new Forest Mid Hampshire unitary authority. This option can be delivered within the full case for change developed collaboratively by 12 councils across Hampshire and the Solent, and is further strengthened by NFDC's own evidence base, including the case to keep the forest whole.</p>
Recommendations	<p>That Council advise the Cabinet on the following recommendations:-</p> <p>That Cabinet:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approve Option 1 contained within Appendix 4 as its single local government reorganisation proposal, for submission to government by the 26 September 2025 deadline.

	<p>2. Delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to make any final amendments to the full proposal in advance of submission to the Government.</p> <p>3. Endorse the Council’s LGR Engagement work undertaken, summarised at Appendix 5, noting that the outcome of this engagement is strongly in favour of Option 1.</p> <p>4. Endorse the case to ‘Keep the Forest Whole’, at Appendix 6, for continued dialogue with MHCLG as local government reorganisation progresses.</p>
Reasons for recommendations	<p>To comply with the Government’s request for remaining two tier areas of local government to submit proposals for local government reorganisation.</p> <p>The case for change and proposal aligns with all six of the Government’s criteria for LGR, including community identity, effective governance, and support for devolution.</p> <p>Extensive engagement has demonstrated very strong support for Option 1. It has also demonstrated overwhelming support for keeping the Forest whole, particularly in the Waterside area, which would retain the New Forest District as a coherent geography, avoiding boundary change, fragmentation and urban alignment.</p> <p>The submission reflects NFDC’s statutory duties under the Environment Act 1995 and the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, particularly in relation to the New Forest National Park.</p>
Wards	All
Portfolio Holder	Councillor Jill Cleary – Leader

Strategic Director	Kate Ryan – Chief Executive
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Introduction and background

1. On the 16th December 2024 the government published its English Devolution White Paper setting out its plans for both devolution and reorganising local government.
2. Following this the Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government at the time, Angela Rayner, exercised her powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, which allow the Secretary of State to invite any principal authority in the county of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government.
3. The Leader and Chief Executive received a letter on the 5th of February 2025 to this effect, inviting the Council to submit proposals for local government reorganisation. The letter includes six criteria the government will consider proposals against and a range of guidance. A copy of the letter can be found at Appendix 1. This letter commenced the process of local government reorganisation under the legislation.

Devolution

4. Devolution is the transfer of powers and funding from national to local government. Through the government's White Paper, it has set out a strong preference to see new 'strategic authorities' created in all regions across England. These authorities, led by an elected Mayor and covering an area of at least 1.5 million population, would be responsible for setting the key strategic vision for a region as well as having powers and responsibilities for areas such as transport, economic development and skills and employment support. These are predominantly policy making authorities rather than service providers. This model has already been implemented in other regions across the country such as Greater London and Greater Manchester.
5. Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council and the Isle of Wight Council submitted an expression of

interest in January 2025 to be part of the government's Devolution Priority Programme.

6. On Wednesday 5th February, the Secretary of State announced that Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (referred to by the government as Hampshire and the Solent) has been accepted onto the priority programme. Statutory instruments, which is the legal process, will be laid in parliament in the autumn with a strategic authority established in spring 2026 in advance of the first mayoral election in May 2026.
7. The process for devolution must, at present, be led by the current upper tier local authorities in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, namely Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council, Isle of Wight Council and Hampshire County Council. However, once local government has been reorganised, the unitary councils that replace all the current upper tier and lower tier councils will automatically be constituent members of the new strategic authority.

Local Government Reorganisation

8. In the White Paper, the government also set out its vision for local government reorganisation. Local government reorganisation is the process in which the structure and responsibilities of local authorities are reconfigured. This will mean Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Southampton City Council and all the district and borough councils, including New Forest District Council, being replaced with unitary councils of population sizes of approximately 500,000. The government has set out that this is just a guideline figure, and not a target. Lower and higher numbers can be submitted.
9. The Council's Leader and Chief Executive received a letter on the 5th of February 2025, inviting us to submit proposals for local government reorganisation. A copy of the letter can be found at Appendix 1.
10. The letter set out six criteria the government will assess proposals against. They are:
 - A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
 - Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.

- Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.
 - Proposals should show how Councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
 - New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
 - New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment. The letter also set out a range of guidance for councils to consider in developing proposals.
11. This highlights that councils work together to ideally reach consensus on a proposal for new unitary councils for each county area rather than submit competing proposals where possible.
 12. Since the English Devolution White Paper was first published, the Council has taken part in several workshops for Council Leaders and Chief Executives across Hampshire to consider how we can work together and the possible ways forward.
 13. Work was commissioned on behalf of all the 15 councils in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight with KPMG, to assess the options for unitary councils against the six criteria set out in the letter from the Minister and to support the development of an interim plan to submit to government by the 21st of March deadline and then a full proposal.
 14. The Council worked collaboratively with all the other councils in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight to try to reach consensus on an interim plan to submit to government supported by KPMG. This work was coordinated through a weekly Chief Executive Group and regular Council Leaders' Group meetings and workshops. In the short time available it was not possible to reach consensus amongst all the 15 existing councils in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight on an option(s) of unitary councils to submit in an interim plan to replace the current structure of local government.
 15. As such, this work led to the creation of an interim plan based on a sensible set of guiding principles and a process for continuing to all work together, where possible, towards a full proposal. The interim plan (Appendix 2) was approved by all 15 councils and submitted to government on 21 March 2025. As well as approving the interim plan, this Council also agreed at Cabinet and Council in March to consider key points of importance in the development of a final proposal that reflects the unique geography, history, economy and

communities of the New Forest. This included the total opposition to any proposal that would split the New Forest community through boundary changes, and the coherent rural identity of the district and its incompatibility with urban geographies.

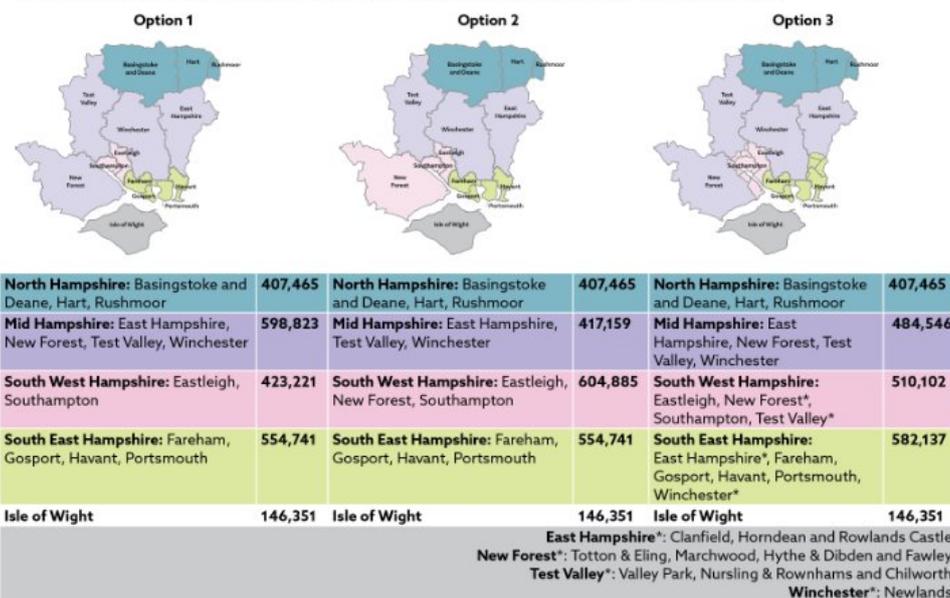
16. The government provided feedback on the interim plan which is included in Appendix 3. This feedback has been used to inform the work carried out since including the development of the full proposal to government.
17. Since the interim plan submission in March, the Council worked with the other 14 Councils and KPMG to carry out a detailed appraisal of the options for unitary councils against the government criteria and the agreed guiding principles through an evidence driven process involving 44 metrics utilising a large amount of economic, community, service and financial data. This process appraised 8 options in depth for between 2 and 5 unitary councils to replace the existing councils. The analysis focused on identifying balanced, resilient and financially sustainable unitary models that would deliver improved outcomes for residents, reflect local identities and best meet the government criteria. That process was completed in May 2025 and the assessment showed that 4 new unitary Councils for mainland Hampshire with the Isle of Wight remaining an independent island authority would best meet the government criteria and the guiding principles agreed by all 15 councils in the interim plan. The appraisal process is set out in detail in the full proposal to government at Appendix 4 and its supporting appendices.
18. Following this appraisal process, Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council withdrew from the joint process to pursue an alternative proposal. We now expect them to submit to government a competing proposal for 3 unitary councils for mainland Hampshire with the Isle of Wight remaining separate as an island unitary. Gosport Borough Council also left the joint process.
19. The remaining 12 councils, encompassing the 3 existing unitary councils and 9 district and borough councils, have turned this data led process into a full proposal for government. The 12 councils are:
 - Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council
 - Eastleigh Borough Council
 - Fareham Borough Council
 - Hart District Council

- Havant Borough Council
- Isle of Wight Council
- New Forest District Council
- Portsmouth City Council
- Rushmoor Borough Council
- Southampton City Council
- Test Valley Borough Council
- Winchester City Council

20. To take this work forward, the 12 Councils continued to work collaboratively (all 15 councils agreed to continue to share data), to develop this full proposal with three variations of four-new mainland unitary councils, with the Isle of Wight remaining independent.

21. The base case and Options 1 and 2 are based on the existing building blocks of the current district/borough and unitary council footprints. A third variation in the form of a modification request ("Option 1A", previously Option 3), introduces the concept of boundary changes. It is anticipated that all references to "Option 3" in the main proposal document will be updated to "Option 1A" prior to submission to government. The three variations are shown in the diagram below:

Outline of the three option variations of the four new mainland and Isle of Wight unitary model



22. Despite some differing views for elements of the two variations, and the boundary change modifications, principally around where the New Forest should be part of in the future new unitary configurations, the 12 councils have consistently worked collaboratively through an inclusive, respectful and equitable approach to develop a robust full proposal to government. The proposal has been informed by extensive engagement with communities and partners which is included in the full proposal and summarised later in this report.
23. Once final proposals are submitted on 26 September, the government will then consult on proposals received that meet their established criteria. We expect this consultation to happen during Autumn/Winter 2025 with the government then deciding on which proposals to implement in early 2026. Structural Change Orders, which is the legal process, will then need to go through parliament, which is likely to happen in Autumn 2026. There would then be elections to the shadow authorities for the new unitary Councils in May 2027. Those shadow authorities will oversee the implementation of the new unitary councils, with them replacing the existing councils on the 1 April 2028.

The Case for Change

24. The full proposal sets out that four new unitary councils on the mainland would best meet the government's criteria and best serve our communities into the future by:
 - driving economic growth and housing delivery
 - delivering high quality and sustainable public services with a focus on innovation and transformation to improve outcomes for communities
 - achieving significant savings while being large enough to be financially sustainable
 - unlocking and maximising devolution arrangements, working effectively alongside the Isle of Wight Council and the new elected Mayor for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, as constituent members of the strategic authority
 - effectively engaging, empowering and serving their local communities by providing opportunities for residents to shape local decisions.
25. The four new unitary councils on the mainland, with a population range of between 407,465 and 604,885, provide significant scale in

service delivery and will reduce costs accordingly, while still being connected to the communities they serve. Importantly they will ensure services are tailored to respond to local needs and improve outcomes for residents.

26. The full proposal also sets out that the Isle of Wight meets the criteria of exceptional circumstances to remain as existing island unitary authority due to its unique local identity and geography and the fact most services and infrastructure would just need to be duplicated on the Island, were they to be run from a unitary council on the mainland, due to the barriers provided by access only by boat. However, the full proposal also ensures that any genuine opportunities for collaboration with the four new unitary councils on the mainland are maximised. This will include an enhanced partnership whereby the Isle of Wight Council works closely alongside the four new mainland unitary councils to explore each opportunity they progress for transformation and innovation, as they move forward through implementation of the full proposal and beyond, to see how they could be applied to the Island either on a shared basis or individually.
27. In section 4 of the full proposal (Appendix 4) it sets out how the proposal for four new mainland unitary councils, and, the variations being put forward, deliver strongly on each of the government criteria. It also sets out in detail in section 5 why the Isle of Wight Council should continue to remain independent aligned to the government criteria as requested in the feedback from government on the interim plan. However, the summary below provides an overview of the key strengths in line with the criteria, highlighting why the four-new mainland and Isle of Wight unitary proposal is the best option for the future of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Local government reorganisation criteria	The four-new mainland and Isle of Wight unitary proposal
Criteria 1: <i>A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced configuration: Ensures equitable distribution of resources by avoiding disparities in tax base, population, and GVA among new unitary councils. • Tailored governance and leadership: Strong local leadership with strategies customised to the unique geographies of each unitary area to drive economic

	<p>growth, high quality service delivery and improved outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic development and innovation: Creates a focused environment for business innovation and economic growth by leveraging strengths and fostering partnerships tailored to the needs of the different economic areas. • Infrastructure and housing: Prioritises shaping infrastructure and addressing housing needs with tailored approaches to support delivery and meet local requirements. • Community and skills development: Invests in people to build an inclusive workforce, addressing skills gaps and raising living standards to support growth ambitions. • Rural and local engagement: Addresses unique rural challenges and enhances local engagement by aligning governance with community identities.
<p>Criteria 2: <i>Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial sustainability: Addresses current financial challenges by reducing duplicated functions in the two-tier system, centralising back-office support, and empowering each authority to manage its budget based on local needs through place focused transformation and innovation, thereby improving financial resilience. • Efficiency and improving capacity: Brings together capital and revenue planning and enhances transformation teams, the proposal achieves savings through transformation and service redesign tailored to local needs, improving overall service delivery. Recognising that Portsmouth and Southampton have already made many of these efficiencies. • Economic growth and local focus: Enables enhanced economic growth by forming unitary structures around distinct economic areas, ensuring opportunities are realised and challenges

	<p>addressed to maximise economic potential.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Population balance: Creates balanced new unitary structures that reflect economic areas and local identities.
<p>Criteria 3: <i>Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local connections and community focus: Effectiveness of services, particularly in areas such as adult social care, is driven by local connections and understanding community needs. The proposal includes co-producing services with local partners through a total place approach and maintaining local relationships which even larger unitaries cannot replicate. • Place-based governance: Captures local intelligence and prioritises prevention. The proposal aligns services with the lived realities of communities, ensuring they are delivered responsively. • Service design and transformation: The proposal is based on creating genuinely new unitaries through a comprehensive approach to service design, focusing on high-quality and sustainable services. The proposal has prioritised collaboration and transformation opportunities, ensuring services are tailored to local needs. The Isle of Wight Council, whilst remaining independent, will have a transformation partnership with the new unitaries to ensure opportunities are maximised for the Island where appropriate. • Adult social care: Our model focusses on localised neighbourhood service delivery, budgetary savings, and data-driven decision-making. It aligns with the NHS 10-year plan, focusing on prevention and community resilience. • Children and young people: Promotes localised governance and collaboration, addressing educational challenges and supporting children with complex needs. Our proposal emphasises prevention, early intervention, and community-centred approaches.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Growth and Strategic Planning: Aligning services with local economic and social geographies, fostering collaboration and co-investment in infrastructure. • Public sector reform: Aligns with the wider public sector reform agenda, focusing on place-based prevention and tailored collaborative service delivery to meet community needs effectively in each of our areas
<p>Criteria 4: <i>Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative working: Extensive collaboration among 12 Councils over six months, involving key stakeholder groups and regular meetings with leaders, chief executives, Section 151 officers, monitoring officers, directors and heads of service. This collaborative approach ensures that the proposal is robust, evidence-based, and informed by a wide range of perspectives. • Informed by local views: The proposal is shaped by joint local government efforts and engagement with local people and partners. A joint survey was conducted to gather views from residents, businesses, and community groups, ensuring that the proposal reflects public sentiment and priorities. A series of workshops, including face-to-face in local communities, have been held with businesses and partners, and with the public, voluntary and community sector and town and parish councils. Discussions have also been held with local members of parliament. The Councils are grateful to all of our communities and partners for helping to shape the proposal. This approach prioritises community identity and future-proofs local government to effectively respond to local needs. • Local identity: Recognising and preserving the unique character and contributions of the North, Mid, South East, and South West areas and the Isle of Wight. Each area has distinct

	<p>geographic, historical, economic and cultural identities, which are actively preserved and empowered through the proposal.</p>
<p>Criteria 5: <i>New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic planning and local delivery: A Combined/Strategic Authority with five well-balanced unitaries (four new unitaries on the mainland and the Isle of Wight Council) as constituent authorities. This structure enables strategic planning and coordination for nearly 2.2 million people, while the unitary councils focus on local delivery. • Effective decision-making: With five constituent members, our model provides a strong foundation for decision-making. It aims to avoid the pitfalls of smaller Combined Authorities, which may operate as rivals rather than cohesive governance bodies. Our approach draws on the success of Greater Manchester. • Balanced new unitary authorities: Populations between 400,000 and 600,000 of the new unitaries, ensuring balanced representation and avoiding democratic deficits. The proposal also includes the Isle of Wight, emphasising balanced representation and collaboration with non-constituent members like NHS bodies and National Parks.
<p>Criteria 6: <i>New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced local representation: Localised unitary authorities, which would allow for governance that is more tailored and representative. This structure would enable local leaders to better understand and address the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas. • Improved service delivery: Aligning governance structures with local needs and engaging local stakeholders in decision making, means our proposal will deliver services more effectively and efficiently. This will allow for the customisation of services to better fit the

	<p>specific requirements of each community, leading to improved outcomes in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed councillor ratios: Future indicative councillor ratios are designed to support the individual demands of the four-new mainland unitary configurations and the communities they serve. The proposed configurations aim to optimise the number of councillors to ensure effective representation and governance with an enhanced ward councillor role. The Isle of Wight would continue with its existing councillor numbers. • Enhanced neighbourhood working and governance: A localised place-based approach will see enhanced neighbourhood engagement and delivery models. The new Councils will co-design with communities and local partners neighbourhood governance arrangements that best meet local requirements for each area. This will deliver decision making at the lowest effective level to speed up delivery, tailored to each community's needs.
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Council support for an option

28. Since March, NFDC has intensified its efforts to ensure that the district's priorities are reflected in the emerging models. The Council has consistently advocated for a financially sustainable, rural-focused unitary authority that preserves the historic integrity of the New Forest and avoids boundary changes that would fragment its communities. Whilst two options and a boundary change modification have been progressed to full case development, NFDC has supported the particular development of Option 1 - a model that aligns with the district's identity and service needs. The Council has opposed Options 2 and the boundary change modification "Option 1A", which propose splitting the New Forest and/or merging it with the urban centre of Southampton, a move that has raised significant concerns among residents, stakeholders, and local leaders.
29. Option 1 proposes the creation of a Mid Hampshire unitary authority comprising the current areas of New Forest District Council, Test Valley Borough Council, Winchester City Council, and East Hampshire

District Council. This configuration is supported by two of the four councils and reflects a coherent geography, shared service models, and a strong sense of local identity. It also avoids disruptive boundary changes, offering a deliverable and community-backed solution.

30. This option provides a balanced and strategically aligned partner for the proposed Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). With a population of approximately 600,000 and a GVA of £18.2 billion, Mid Hampshire offers economic strength, environmental stewardship, and national infrastructure connectivity. It links the Solent Freeport's coastal economy with the Midlands' industrial base, supported by the M3, A34, A303, and M27 corridors, and fast rail access to London.
31. Option 1, ensures rural and market town voices are represented in regional decision-making, complementing urban-led authorities and supporting the full potential of devolution. Its rural and market town geography includes two National Parks, nationally significant defence assets, and a thriving visitor economy, making it a vital contributor to regional growth and resilience.
32. Option 1 builds on a proven track record of place-based innovation and preventative service delivery. Councils in Mid Hampshire have already developed integrated models in adult social care, housing, and health - such as the Andover Health Hub and New Forest's integration of homelessness and Mental Health Services, as well as its Independence Matters programme. These services are designed around community needs and delivered in partnership with the NHS, voluntary sector, and local stakeholders.
33. The proposed unitary would scale these approaches, enabling joined-up planning, co-commissioning, and investment in neighbourhood-based services. It supports the government's ambitions for public service reform, offering a credible platform for transformation rooted in local relationships and community empowerment.
34. Mid Hampshire councils demonstrate strong financial governance, with high reserves, balanced budgets, and low debt exposure. Their shared delivery models and aligned priorities provide a stable foundation for integration, avoiding the disruption and cost of boundary change. The configuration supports efficient service delivery, strategic investment, and long-term resilience.
35. The geography also enables sustainable housing growth, with sensitive planning in protected landscapes, innovative solutions to environmental constraints, and strong partnerships with Homes England and local developers. The proposed unitary would act as a

corporate landlord to around 10,000 households, continuing its commitment to affordable housing and carbon reduction.

36. Public engagement across the region shows clear support for this configuration. Residents value the preservation of local identity, the integrity of the New Forest, and the alignment of governance with how people live. Option 1 reflects these preferences, retaining whole districts and empowering communities through neighbourhood governance and local decision-making.
37. Town and parish councils, market towns, and rural communities are central to this model. It strengthens local democracy, supports inclusive growth, and ensures that services remain responsive to the distinct needs of Mid Hampshire's diverse communities.

Corporate plan priorities

38. The proposal for local government reorganisation is closely aligned with NFDC's corporate priorities. It provides a clear opportunity to protect and enhance the New Forest's unique environment, its communities, economy and heritage by maintaining the district's integrity within a coherent Mid Hampshire geography. This approach ensures that governance, planning, and service delivery remain rooted in the Forest's ecological, cultural and community context, supporting statutory duties and enabling landscape-led stewardship.
39. The proposal strengthens NFDC's commitment to supporting strong and sustainable communities. By retaining the district as a whole, it preserves the social and civic fabric of the New Forest, ensuring that communities - particularly those in the Waterside, continue to be served by governance structures that understand their identity, values, and needs. This model enables neighbourhood-level decision-making and maintains the close connection between residents and their representatives.
40. Finally, the proposal enhances NFDC's ability to deliver high-quality, place-based services. It builds on existing operational strengths and partnerships, ensuring that services such as housing, waste, planning, and community safety are delivered efficiently and responsively across a unified geography, integrating them with those services delivered by the County Council. The preferred option supports transformation, resilience, and long-term sustainability in service delivery.

Options appraisal

41. The Council could decide to not be part of the proposal submitted to government. However, this would mean it would have no say in the

future local government arrangements that serve the communities of the New Forest district. This option is therefore not recommended.

42. Option 1 retains the New Forest District in full within a new Mid Hampshire unitary authority, avoiding boundary change and fragmentation. It reflects community identity, supports coherent service delivery, and aligns with all six of the Government's statutory criteria for local government reorganisation.
43. Option 2 aligns the New Forest District in its entirety, with Southampton and Eastleigh. Extensive engagement tells us that this fundamentally misunderstands the needs of residents and businesses, who have consistently favoured the development of an option that can deliver on the delicate balance of conservation, community and a planning approach that understands the pressures, sensitivities, and duties of stewardship that come with managing land in and around a nationally protected landscape.
44. The boundary change modification "Option 1A" proposes splitting the New Forest District by transferring the Waterside area into a new authority alongside Southampton and Eastleigh. This would sever long-standing cultural, environmental, and operational ties, and risks undermining statutory duties related to the National Park. It also poses a significant risk to service delivery, community identity, and statutory obligations, and potentially fails to meet the government's own criteria for boundary change. A full appraisal of the risks associated with boundary change is presented at Appendix 6, which is also overwhelmingly supported by the engagement outcomes, summarised in the consultation section below and detailed in Appendix 5.
45. Following detailed technical appraisal and engagement, Option 1 is presented as a financially sustainable, publicly supported and deliverable configuration. It is also considered as the most balanced for devolution, allowing for the voice of rural and market towns to be represented at the regional level.

Consultation undertaken

46. The development of NFDC's proposal has been informed by extensive engagement across Hampshire and the Solent, and specifically within the New Forest. A summary of the engagement undertaken is presented at Appendix 5, which includes a link to a number of accompanying background reports published by the Council.
47. A county-wide survey commissioned by the 12 councils working together gathered views on reorganisation options, with net overall support for retaining the New Forest District as a whole, and for

Option 1, with overwhelming support from respondents within the New Forest district. Indeed, the New Forest district was the highest local authority area for responses, with 3,141 received, representing 1.79% of the population and with every ward represented.

48. To ensure that the Council's final proposals for local government reorganisation were grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of local communities, NFDC commissioned a deliberative engagement programme with residents across the district. The programme involved 59 residents, from a range of backgrounds, taking part in a mix of online workshops and in-person focus groups, designed to explore how local government can best work with and for communities in the future.
49. The engagement revealed a deep and consistent connection between residents and the New Forest as a place. The Forest itself was seen not only as a physical landscape but as a defining element of local identity, culture, and community. Residents expressed strong concerns about overdevelopment, the erosion of traditional ways of life - particularly among Commoners, and the risk of losing local representation in any future governance model. There was a clear preference for decision-making that remains rooted in place, with local knowledge and accountability at its core.
50. Participants articulated a vision for "good" local government that is efficient, accessible, communicative, and cost-effective. They emphasised the importance of councillors being visible and active in their communities, and of services being designed around the needs of residents - not imposed from distant urban centres. There was particular concern about the risks of merging with urban authorities such as Southampton, which residents felt would not reflect the distinct character, or needs of the New Forest.
51. The workshops concluded with a set of guiding principles that residents felt should underpin any future unitary council. These included:
 - being rooted in place and tradition;
 - empowering local voices;
 - ensuring accessibility for all;
 - maintaining accountability and transparency; and
 - delivering services efficiently and effectively.

These principles reflect a strong desire for local government that is responsive, representative, and protective of the unique qualities of the New Forest.

52. A Waterside Engagement Project captured powerful narratives of place, belonging, and civic pride. These insights were further reinforced through ongoing dialogue with elected members, town and parish councils, public sector partners, and community organisations.
53. A number of stakeholders were directly engaged throughout the case development, including MPs, the New Forest National Park Authority, the Official Verderer, Town and Parish Councils, community organisations and businesses. Early Town and Parish Council engagement identified that 85% of respondents supported the development of a Forest Mid Hampshire option, and the priority to keep the New Forest District whole. A business survey revealed that 98% of respondents support a rural council for mid-Hampshire that includes the whole New Forest District.
54. The engagement process has consistently demonstrated a clear public mandate for keeping the Forest whole, rejecting proposals that would fragment its governance, or align it with urban governance.
55. The Leader of the Council has engaged regularly with Group Leaders in the development of the case for change.
56. It is anticipated that the Government will undertake a statutory consultation on the options in the Autumn.

Financial and resource implications

57. The cost of developing the full proposal has been shared with the other 11 councils. New Forest District Council's share of this is £13,416.
58. The government allocated funding across England for the cost of developing local government reorganisation proposals. The Council's share of the funding in Hampshire and the Solent, is £26,540.
59. The specific work for developing the Option 1 appendix was shared with Test Valley. The Council has committed £16,247 on this work. Approximately £80,000 has been spent or relates to outstanding commitments on programme, communications and public engagement activity, both collectively with partners across Hampshire, and on New Forest specific activity.
60. The Council has an established £150,000 ongoing revenue budget for Devolution and LGR, alongside a separate £500,000 reserve for one-

off costs associated with this activity. The costs above are drawn from the reserve, as one-off expenditure.

61. Through the work led by KPMG and supported by the Section 151 Officer group across the 12 authorities, option 1 is projected to deliver significant financial and operational benefits. The financial sustainability analysis shows that the proposed reorganisation will generate recurring annual savings of between £63.8 million and £91.8 million across the region. Implementation costs are estimated at £128–160 million, with a payback period of between 2.2 and 3.1 years. The proposal also unlocks the potential for additional revenue of £458 million over ten years through council tax harmonisation.
62. By avoiding the costs and risks associated with boundary change, service disaggregation, and electoral disruption, Option 1 supports long-term financial sustainability and enables investment in transformation, digital infrastructure, and service innovation.

Legal implications

63. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in exercise of their powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 ('the 2007 Act'), can invite any principal authority in the area of the county of Hampshire, to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government. This may be one of the following types of proposal as set out in the 2007 Act:
 - Type A – a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned
 - Type B – a single tier of local authority covering an area that is currently a district, or two or more districts
 - Type C – a single tier of local authority covering the whole of the county concerned, or one or more districts in the county; and one or more relevant adjoining areas
 - Combined proposal – a proposal that consists of two or more Type B proposals, two or more Type C proposals, or one or more Type B proposals and one or more Type C proposals.
64. The invitation issued on 5 February 2025 specified that any councils responding must have regard to the guidance appended to the invitation. If the Council does support Option 1, it can be satisfied that this is entirely in accordance with the legislation and the invitation issued.

65. The submission of the proposal does not give rise to direct legal implications for the Council. At the point at which the government has consulted on proposals and made a final decision on local government reorganisation, the Structural Change Order that follows will give rise to significant legal implications for the Council.

Risk assessment

66. The principal risk connected with this decision would arise if the Council does not agree to submit the full proposal. In that case the Council would lose the ability to influence the process.
67. There is also the risk that the Government decides to implement a competing proposal that is not supported by the Council. This risk is not fully controllable, but the best mitigation is the evidence led process the Council working with the other 11 councils has been through to develop a robust full proposal in line with the government criteria.
68. There are risks associated with Options 2 and the boundary change modification "Option 1A". A separate and specific case has been developed regarding the strategic risks of the boundary change modifications. This is outlined in full at Appendix 6.

Environmental / Climate and nature implications

69. Option 1 supports integrated environmental governance and stewardship. By retaining unified oversight of the New Forest National Park, it enables coordinated planning, biodiversity management, and climate resilience. It avoids fragmentation of ecological corridors and disruption to landscape-led service models, and aligns with national policy on protected landscapes, net zero, and nature recovery.

Equalities implications

70. A full equality impact assessment is included with the full proposal in Appendix 4 (Appendix 7 therein).

Crime and disorder implications

71. A key aspect of service design for new unitary councils will be how bringing together current county, district and partnership functions can effectively deliver community safety responsibilities.

Data protection / Information governance / ICT implications

72. A key consideration through the implementation of local government reorganisation will be the approach to appropriate data protection,

information governance and the alignment of ICT infrastructure for the safe delivery of new councils and the ongoing provision of services.

New Forest National Park / Cranborne Chase National Landscape implications

73. Option 1 presents the strongest alignment with the New Forest National Park Authority's statutory purposes and strategic priorities, undertaken in a recent assessment by the NPA. By retaining the integrity of the New Forest as a whole and combining it with other predominantly rural authorities - Test Valley, Winchester, and East Hampshire, the option safeguards vital landscape, ecological, and cultural heritage links. It supports collaborative delivery of national objectives such as nature recovery, climate resilience, and the 30x30 targets, while recognising the socio-economic value of the New Forest's natural capital. Crucially, it avoids fragmentation of the Waterside area, preserving the commoning system essential to the Park's management and identity. It also provides for alignment of duties with the South Downs National Park, which is covered geographically by Winchester and East Hampshire.

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Letter from the Secretary of State – February 2025
Appendix 2 – Interim Plan approved by all 15 councils
Appendix 3 – Interim Plan feedback
[Appendix 4 – Full proposal to government](#)
Appendix 5 – Summary of Engagement
Appendix 6 – Keep the Forest Whole – the case against boundary change

Background Papers:

[Cabinet agenda, report and minutes – 21 March 2025](#)
[Resources and Transformation O&S Panel agenda, report and minutes – 26 June 2025](#)
Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007