

Special Cabinet – 26 September 2025

Local Government Reorganisation – Final proposal

At the Special Council meeting of 25 September 2025, Council passed the following resolution:-

That in recognising the overwhelming support from residents, businesses, local organisations and stakeholders, who have clearly expressed a desire to;-

- *Prioritise a rural identity and governance model that reflects the unique character and needs of the New Forest and Mid Hampshire; and*
- *Keep the Forest whole, avoiding any boundary changes that would divide the New Forest, the National Park and our historic communities.*

The Council endorses the Cabinet recommendations to submit Option 1 for local government reorganisation, which proposes the creation of a new rural unitary council for Mid Hampshire, encompassing the New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire.

The Leader, in introducing the report, expressed her thanks to all those involved in the work undertaken get to the submission of the final proposals. She highlighted that devolution or local government reorganisation was not sought, but that there has been extensive work do what was felt to be the best for the new forest residents. Keeping the forest whole had been the task, and she thanked all the Group Leaders for their united support, recognising the importance of having one voice.

Reference was made to the residents having one voice, wanting to keep the forest rural and whole. They did not want to join a city-based council and whilst they may shop or use services across the wider Hampshire region, this did not mean they should be subsumed into an urban structure that does not reflect their local needs. It was highlighted that residents had told the council that life orientates into the forest, using the local businesses and facilities within the district.

Business and partners had been equally clear, wanting to keep the forest rural, and whole. They valued dealing with a rural authority that listens and understands the complexity of the area. There were concerns over the potential loss of identity and localness.

The Leader felt that Option 1 was the only option to support. In her view, it was the strongest option when assessed against the government's criteria. She spoke about the rigorous, collaborative process with 12 councils working together, supported by expert analysis and extensive engagement.

She considered Option 1 to:

- Be a sustainable model that is the most balanced and locally responsive.
- Create four new unitary councils, and crucially, for the New Forest and Mid Hampshire
- Give a voice in the new Strategic Authority to the county's rural and market towns and their communities.
- Keep the forest whole, avoiding boundary changes that would split district communities.
- Deliver financial sustainability, with a payback period of just three years and annual savings of £63 million, backed by robust financial modelling and a clear implementation plan.
- Best support public service reform.
- Enable place-based working, neighbourhood empowerment, and local decision-making.
- Allow the design of services around communities, not forcing communities to fit around services.
- In summing up, the Leader felt that Option 1 was the only option that truly reflects how people live and identify with their place. It was considered the only option that protected the rural character, the local voice, and the ability to lead for communities.

Summary of key points arising during Council debate:-

- It was suggested that local government reorganisation was not what the council would wish to be doing. Members spoke with pride of the council, its services, staff and how the organisation was continually striving to learn and improve.
- There was scepticism of local government reorganisation and the growing cost of demand led services including adults and children's, in the context of a broader public sector funding challenge. A further concern related to larger authorities, democratic representation, and the benefits that district councils currently bring in being close to communities.
- Concerns were raised regarding the risks associated with local government reorganisation, due to short term financial pressures and any debts from other authorities. It was also recognised there was much uncertainty and that the expected savings might fail to materialise.
- It was acknowledged that government would make the final decision, not local authorities. Some Members felt that the district council should have a greater influence on the future decisions that would govern service delivery to its communities.
- Despite the points above, Members recognised the benefits in being involved in developing proposals, ensuring that local needs were taken into account. Thanks were expressed to the work of the Leader, councillors on a cross party basis, and officers in bringing forward an option that is sustainable and deliverable that reflects the needs of the New Forest.
- The overwhelming response of residents, stakeholders, businesses and communities to the council's engagement was in support of Option 1, with a number of Members highlighting the duty of councillors to represent these views.
- The fully parished nature of the New Forest District, Test Valley, East Hampshire and the vast majority of Winchester was noted, bringing a model of local government together that understood this community governance and representation. The alignment with

areas such as Southampton and Eastleigh, with few or no parishes, concerned Members.

- The stewardship of National Parks and protected landscapes across Option 1 was promoted. There were concerns that any model that saw the alignment of these environmentally sensitive areas with urban centres, and in some cases, the split of National Parks, would undermine the council's duty in this area.
- Members spoke of the rural alignment of the New Forest District and the need to ensure future governance structures did not place the district in an urban model.
- Regarding the prospect of boundary changes, Members highlighted that the government guidance invited proposals aligned to district building blocks and this should be respected.
- The impact on housing tenants in relation to boundary changes, was noted. 2,108 council tenants, in properties representing 40% of the district's housing stock would be lost through the boundary change modifications. Members heard of the impact of revising operational arrangements, data, income loss and policies and how the alignment with an urban model would create real challenges in addressing the housing needs of the New Forest.
- Waterside councillors spoke of how Southampton Water divided the district from the city, with huge cultural and economic differences. The New Forest District was thriving, including a community of small businesses and freelancers. Culturally, waterside residents felt an intrinsic link to the wider New Forest district. As a collection of parishes, Option 1 provided the scope for this model to work on a larger geography. A city model presented great challenges to this community governance.
- A number of Members reflected on the findings of the Waterside Engagement Report, expressing deep appreciation for the voices and insights shared by residents across Totton, Marchwood, Hythe, Holbury, Fawley, Dibden Purlieu and Calshot. One councillor emphasised that the report is not merely a consultation summary, but a textured narrative of place, identity and belonging. It captures the lived experience of communities who feel emotionally and

culturally aligned with the New Forest, rather than the urban centres to the east.

- Members reaffirmed their commitment of total opposition to any proposal which split the New Forest community through boundary changes.
- Members were united in support of Option 1, with the resolution above passing unanimously.