

**25 SEPTEMBER 2025**

**NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Minutes of a Special meeting of the New Forest District Council held on Thursday, 25 September 2025

\* Cllr John Sleep (Chairman)

\* Cllr Dave Penny (Vice-Chairman)

**Councillors:**

\* John Adams  
\* Alan Alvey  
\* Peter Armstrong  
\* Geoffrey Blunden  
Hilary Brand  
\* Mark Clark  
\* Steve Clarke  
\* Jill Cleary  
\* Kate Crisell  
\* Sean Cullen  
\* Jack Davies  
\* Steve Davies  
\* Philip Dowd  
\* Barry Dunning  
\* Jacqui England  
\* Richard Frampton  
\* Allan Glass  
\* David Harrison  
\* Matthew Hartmann  
\* David Hawkins  
\* John Haywood  
\* Jeremy Heron  
Nigel Linford

**Councillors:**

\* Patrick Mballa  
\* Colm McCarthy  
\* David Millar  
Ian Murray  
Stephanie Osborne  
Alan O'Sullivan  
Adam Parker  
\* Neville Penman  
\* Dan Poole  
\* Caroline Rackham  
\* Alvin Reid  
\* Joe Reilly  
\* Janet Richards  
\* Barry Rickman  
Steve Rippon-Swaine  
\* Michael Thierry  
\* Derek Tipp  
\* Neil Tungate  
\* Alex Wade  
\* Malcolm Wade  
\* Christine Ward  
\* Phil Woods  
\* Richard Young

\*Present

**Officers Attending:**

Kate Ryan, Richard Knott, Daniel Reynafarje, Karen Wardle and Matt Wisdom

**Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Brand, Linford, Murray, Osborne, O'Sullivan, Parker and Rippon-Swaine.

**35 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

The Monitoring Officer referred to the advice which had been circulated to all members and confirmed that a dispensation had been granted, to enable all members to speak and vote on any recommendations, at minute 36 below, in respect of local government reorganisation. This was because it could be argued that Members may have a disclosable pecuniary interest in potential local

government reorganisation, by virtue of their receipt of a Members' allowance as a Member of New Forest District Council.

The Monitoring Officer also specifically referred to those members who were also Hampshire County councillors, and clarified that they had a standing dispensation to enable them to participate at NFDC meetings, having regard to the allowance they received from HCC.

Finally, the Monitoring officer confirmed that his advice given did not extend to any other interests that might preclude Members from participating in the business of the meeting.

There were no other declarations of any disclosable pecuniary interests by Members.

### **36 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION - FINAL PROPOSAL**

The Leader introduced the report and expressed her thanks to all those who had been involved in the work undertaken get to the submission of the final proposals. She highlighted that devolution or local government reorganisation was not sought by NFDC, but that there had been extensive work to do what was felt to be the best for 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 around 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.

Cllr S Clarke proposed the following motion:

*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.*

Cllr S Clarke addressed the motion and expressed his thanks to the Leader for her strong and determined leadership and rebuttal to the recent criticism in the press from other council leaders. The proposal to submit option 1 had been developed having listened to local residents and that the majority of residents he had spoken to were in support of option 1. He felt it was important to listen to the local community and that the consultation had been a tool to seek their views. The views of local businesses had also been considered, and there had been due regard to the culture and history of the district. He felt that option 1 was the right option to support and that this option understood the traditions of the national park and its unique management. He requested that members endorse the motion.

Cllr Young seconded the motion.

During the debate, the following key points were made:-

- 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, 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, borrowing, income loss and reviewing policies, and how the alignment with an urban model would create real challenges in addressing the housing needs of the New Forest. There would also be detrimental impact on those on the current NFDC housing register with the boundary change option.
- 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 below passing unanimously.

**RESOLVED:**

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.

That the Council endorsed 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.

**37 QUESTIONS**

The Chairman confirmed that a supplementary agenda had been published the day before with seven questions to be asked at the meeting. These had been reviewed by the Chief Executive, and those considered to be relevant to the business on the summons had been included in the supplement.

The Chairman reported that, after taking advice, he considered that there were special circumstances to allow questions to be asked, as a matter of urgency under section 100B(4) of the 1972 Act in that they related to Local Government Reorganisation, the reason behind the calling of the special meeting.

Members were invited to put their questions under Standing Order 22, as follows:-

Cllrs Harrison, Rackham, McCarthy and M Clark withdrew their submitted questions at the meeting, in light of the debate on the previous item. This was in relation to questions, 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7. This left two remaining questions.

- From Cllr Osborne to the Leader, Cllr Jill Cleary, regarding discussions with Hampshire County Council.
- From Cllr A Wade to the Leader, Cllr Jill Cleary, regarding Options 2 and 3 and what they could mean for residents.

Note: A copy of the full questions and replies are attached to these minutes.

CHAIRMAN

## Special Council – 25 September 2025

### Questions Under Standing Order 22

#### **First Questions**

##### **Question 1**

**From Cllr David Harrison to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

How can you present a united case for reorganisation when your own councillors can't agree which side they're on?

*Note: Cllr Harrison withdrew his question in light of the debate on the previous agenda item.*

##### **Question 2**

**From Cllr Caroline Rackham to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

If adult social care isn't fragmented and unstable, why does your own evidence say it is?

*Note: Cllr Rackham withdrew her question in light of the debate on the previous agenda item.*

##### **Question 3**

**From Cllr Colm McCarthy to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

How can you defend a case the NHS itself has branded 'damaging' and 'unprofessional'?

*Note: Cllr McCarthy withdrew his question in light of the debate on the previous agenda item.*

#### **Question 4**

##### **From Cllr Stephanie Osborne to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

Page 120 says the County was 'unwilling to discuss' district concerns — who is telling the truth, you or Cllr Adams-King?

*Reply*

*A meeting was held on 9th July with Hampshire County Council, East Hampshire, and Gosport to present the three options under consideration and to invite feedback. During that session, we posed a series of questions about the options, including their strengths, challenges, and any concerns or suggestions. However, the County Council did not provide any views in the meeting and instead directed us to their own report, which was due to be published later that day, for any formal response.*

*This is a matter of public record and reflects the County's chosen approach to engagement at that stage. It's not about assigning blame - it's about acknowledging that meaningful dialogue didn't take place at that point, despite efforts to create space for it.*

*What's important now is that we focus on the future. Option 1 presents a real opportunity to move beyond fragmented structures and build a truly place-based model of local government - one that is responsive, integrated, and shaped by the voices of all partners and communities. We remain committed to working constructively with all councils to achieve the best outcome for residents.*

Note – this question was dealt with in writing in the absence of Cllr Osborne.

#### **Question 5**

##### **From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

Two of your own Tory councillors, Michael Thierry and Barry Dunning, voted with Hampshire County Council and against New Forest District's submission. If even your side can't back the case you signed, why should residents believe it's credible?

*Note: Cllr M Clark withdrew his question in light of the debate on the previous agenda item.*

## **Question 6**

### **From Cllr Alex Wade to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

What effort will be made by NFDC to present what Options 2 and 3 could mean for our Residents and provide a clear view of the likelihood of either proposals not favoured by NFDC being the final outcome?

*Reply*

*Let me begin by saying that while none of us have a crystal ball to predict the final decision of Government, what we do have is a strong, evidence-based case for Option 1 - a case that puts our residents first, protects local services, and strengthens local democracy.*

*That said, we recognise the importance of our residents' engagement in whatever the outcome might be. As the programme progresses, we will ensure that residents are kept informed. We are committed to presenting what this could mean for our communities in a clear and accessible way.*

*Ultimately, our focus remains on securing the best possible outcome for the New Forest and its people. And we will continue to advocate for that with integrity and transparency.*

In response to a supplementary question regarding clear messaging to residents recognising that the District Council would be a consultee, and not the decision maker in relation to any new unitary authority, it was confirmed that there would be clear communication to local residents to convey that the final decision would be taken by the government and not the district council.

## **Second Questions**

### **Question 7**

#### **From Cllr Mark Clark to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Jill Cleary**

Do you accept that Thierry and Dunning voting against their own district's position shows party loyalty mattered more to them than representing New Forest residents?

*Note: Cllr M Clark withdrew his question in light of the debate on the previous agenda item.*

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