**Southampton City Council leader criticises Government handling of Solent devolution deal**



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A HISTORIC devolution deal for Solent could be announced by George Osborne in Wednesday's Budget - but one civic chief has labelled the Government's handling of the plans as an "absolute shambles".

[Southampton](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Southampton&topic_id=7090) City Council leader Simon Letts has hit out at the Government for asking councils to put together bids, and then overruling their proposals.

Hampshire's original bid had not contained plans for a directly-elected Boris Johnson-style "mayor" after opposition from some leaders, including county council chief Roy Perry.

Now ministers have decided to negotiate with the leaders of councils in the Solent instead, who are more open-minded about the role.

It would mean the area covered by the new combined authority, which would have powers over millions in funding for transport and skills, would cover Southampton, Portsmouth, [Fareham](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/fareham/), [Gosport](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Gosport&topic_id=1066), Havant, [Eastleigh](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/eastleigh/), East Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Cllr Letts criticised the Government's handling of the devolution bids, saying: "It's been an absolute shambles.

"First of all we were asked whether we wanted an elected mayor and they wanted our ideas, but then three weeks ago they said we must have a directly-elected mayor.

"What's the point in asking us for our ideas if they then tell us what it should be?

"At one level we are lucky that it looks like we are getting something when other areas of the country aren't.

"But it's been frustrating, it's poor Government. You're supposed to treat people with respect.

It is still uncertain whether the county council will be involved, with council leader Roy Perry saying it would not be involved within the timeframe set out by the Government.

If announced in the Budget, the new mayor would be in charge of a new combined authority that would sit on top of existing councils and have control over infrastructure, transport, [business](http://dailyecho.co.uk/business) support, skills and other areas, which Government currently hands out funding for.

It could also mean councils would have control over business rates raised in their areas, before the move comes into effect elsewhere in the country.

Elections for a new "metro mayor" could take place next year.

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