

County Council Leader sets out new vision for local government in Hampshire

Friday, 13 May 2016

The Leader of Hampshire County Council, Councillor Roy Perry has announced to the County Council at the AGM meeting today (13 May) that before there are any changes in local government structure across Hampshire, whether it be for combined authorities, an elected Mayor or a unitary council, there must be a full and genuine public consultation.

He said he had met very few people who wanted a 'Solent City' established and still fewer who wanted a 'Metro Mayor' anywhere in the area. He felt before councils give in to external pressure it was the people of Hampshire who should have their say.

The County Council has been encouraged to support a bid by Portsmouth and Southampton and some of the Hampshire districts to create a Solent combined authority based on: Southampton, Portsmouth, Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant and East Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight, whilst other Districts are proposing a Heart of Hampshire combined authority to cover: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester, Test Valley and the New Forest. Both of those proposals are based on an elected Mayor with all the expense of elections, and a new layer of administration that would entail. These proposals set a path towards the creation of separate unitary councils. Furthermore, the geography pays little regard to the Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries, to economic needs, the NHS geography, and the fact that a Fire and Rescue Service exists, together with a Police and Crime Commissioner for all of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

In the face of these moves to split Hampshire, the County Council has recently commissioned an independent study by Deloitte, to provide an initial analysis of how services could be better provided across the whole county, at lower cost.

Their report, which explores a number of options in detail, has indicated the creation of a new unitary structure for local government in Hampshire could cut council tax for the majority of Hampshire households (by the County Council's analysis, around 90 per cent), streamline services and deliver tens of millions of pounds of savings each year. Their estimates suggest this would be at least a third more than the £30 million, apparently offered by the Government to a Solent combined authority.

Councillor Perry said: "One of the options under consideration is the creation of a new unitary 'Hampshire Council' which would replace both the County Council and Hampshire's 11 district councils - delivering lower council tax, more efficient services and clearer democratic accountability to Hampshire residents."

A unitary authority would be like those for Southampton and Portsmouth. As a single local authority it would carry out the full range of local government services for its area, encompassing all the duties and functions that are carried out in 'two-tier'; areas with both district and county councils like Hampshire. For example, a unitary council would combine the collection and disposal of household waste, whereas in a two-tier area these functions are split between the district council (waste collection) and the county council (waste disposal).

Councillor Perry said: "I have worked hard to make the two-tier structure work but the Districts and Cities have now come up with their separate proposals that will begin to divide the county immediately. We are convinced that this would lead ultimately to unitary councils based on a perverse geography which will do little to enhance the economy of the area. Interestingly, the independent analysis shows that two such unitaries based on the Solent and Heart of Hampshire proposals would be the most disruptive and least efficient model out of all of the options open to Hampshire. It is simply indefensible that we should be taken down that path with so little information or attempt to establish if there is public consent."

This latest suggestion for a 'Hampshire Council' follows the failed negotiations on securing greater devolution to the whole Hampshire and the Isle of Wight area, which Ministers had suddenly insisted could only happen if there was an elected Mayor. The Solent proposal was due to be announced in the Chancellor's budget in March but was postponed when the County Council said it could not sign up until there was evidence to show this was what people wanted.


Councillor Perry added: "Our priority has been, and always will be, serving the best interests of all Hampshire residents. We have thought long and hard about the devolution negotiations with Government - and the two current combined authority proposals covering the Hampshire and Isle of Wight area: Solent and Heart of Hampshire. Unfortunately, these proposals devolve very few powers down from central government but would transfer, and therefore split, some of the county's key services such as highways and transport. They don't bring greater clarity or efficiencies. They add a new layer of local government and additional costs and will inevitably disrupt high quality countywide services. The County Council has painstakingly built over many years a range of services, especially in the protection of vulnerable adults and children that are the envy of the country. I cannot accept that these should be broken up in this way, for these reasons. I would far rather lose the County Council as we know it, and establish a new 'Hampshire Council' than threaten those services.

"As such, we reluctantly concluded that the County Council had been left with no choice but to explore other options for the future of local government in Hampshire, including reorganisation. The concept of a new unitary 'Hampshire Council' has been identified as a way that provides residents with the greatest level of continuity in services, the highest savings and the lowest cost of implementation. The anticipated savings far outweigh what would have been gained from the Government in a devolution deal. We would very much like to study other examples of unitary councils. This option would also give much more influence and power to local Town and Parish Councils, thereby strengthening local democracy. This proposal is not about protecting historical arrangements, or matters of individual sovereignty, but about securing a sustainable future for Hampshire residents with high quality and efficient services and a buoyant economy.

"However such a fundamental decision about the future of Hampshire can only happen if residents want it, and are given a proper opportunity to voice their views. This is why the County Council will shortly be going out to a full public consultation on this issue.

"We will also be liaising with our MPs and other key stakeholders - and all our Town and Parish Councils to enter a debate about how we can create a radical shift in real localism. If Southampton and Portsmouth want to proceed with their Solent City idea, then that is up to them. The financial evidence we have indicates a county unitary could save well over £40 million per annum - every year, not just the 30 years promised in the Solent deal so it should be good news for the Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as local taxpayers.

"In conclusion, I will not be endorsing the current Solent and Heart of Hampshire proposals unless and until the people of Hampshire tell me that is what they want. And we will set before the public real alternatives which have a strong evidence base and will deliver what I think people want: more efficient local government with fewer layers of bureaucracy and consistently high quality services - at scale and locally. The next stage, in a proper democratic process, will be a special meeting of the Cabinet at which these proposals will be considered and taken forward in a full public debate."

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