

# Two-way devolution carve-up is indefensible, says county leader

## Public urged to have their say on local government

BY BEN CRAIG

THE public should have their say over “indefensible” devolution plans that could split Hampshire in half, the leader of the county council has declared.

Coun. Roy Perry spoke out strongly at the authority’s AGM in Winchester to caution local political leaders against emerging proposals to divide the county into two separate groupings of areas, each under an elected mayor.

The two mayoral regions would be Heart of Hampshire, made up of mostly rural patches like the New Forest; and Solent, comprising urban coastal councils and the Isle of Wight. Supporters say it would boost the local economy and improve cooperation.

The issue of how Hampshire should be governed has caused months of acrimonious high-level argument – mostly behind the scenes – since a push was



Coun. Roy Perry and Coun. Barry Rickman

launched last year for the county to get greater powers and funding from Whitehall.

A rival camp, led by Coun. Perry, favours relaunching Hampshire as a single unitary authority responsible for all public services – a move which would devolve some power to parish and town councils but kill off district councils, like the New Forest’s.

He has announced a public consultation to find out what residents think, declaring: “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.”

He attacked plans for a split Hampshire, saying: “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.”

He held up an £89,000 county council-commissioned study by auditors Deloitte, which he said showed that a united Hampshire could cut council tax for most households and deliver £40m of annual savings, compared to £30m reportedly offered by the government to a Solent combined authority.

Coun. Perry’s position was backed by the leader of New Forest District Council, Coun. Barry Rickman. But he said he wanted to keep options open for NFDC – including possibly turning its back on Hampshire devolution to work instead with neighbouring authorities in Dorset.

Coun. Rickman said: “I believe in my heart that staying as we are is not an option, which is why it’s in the interests of the New Forest

to talk to all our neighbours. We have more in common with our neighbours on the south coast than with Basingstoke, for instance.

“We will have spent public money on something that’s not broken, because of pressure from government. I think it’s being forced on us for the wrong reasons.”

The next step in the process, according to Coun. Perry, will be to hold a special meeting of the county council’s ruling Conservative cabinet to launch a “full public debate” over the choice of devolution proposals.

He said: “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.”

The Solent combined authority would comprise Southampton, Portsmouth, Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant and East Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight. Heart of Hampshire would be Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester, Test Valley and the New Forest.

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