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County could split into two council regions

Local government shake-up on cards after EU referendum

BY BEN CRAIG

A LOCAL government shake-up that would spell the end of Hampshire County Council is set to kick off after the EU referendum, a top official has warned.

In a report to its ruling cabinet, the authority's chief executive John Coughlan says that the government may move after June 23rd to back plans that could ultimately divide the county into two areas led by directly-elected mayors.

On Monday a crunch meeting of HCC's top Conservative councillors will decide whether to back a rival plan, from leader Coun. Roy Perry, for a unitary Hampshire Council to run all services and sweep away the county's layer of district and borough councils - including in the New Forest.

That is the option recommended by an £89,000 report by consultants Deloitte, commissioned by Coun. Perry. It said it would save taxpayers £40m a year and advised excluding Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight.

Wrangles over how Hampshire should be run have become increasingly fraught. Coun. Perry's unitary plan is competing with a proposal to split Hampshire into two areas: Heart of Hampshire and Solent, both under directly-elected mayors.

Last month the leaders of the councils who want to form the Solent area - East Hampshire, Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth and Southampton - issued a joint statement which condemned Coun. Perry's unitary Hampshire as "localism in reverse".

They said: "It exceeds the government's own standards for scale and manageability and would further distance our populations from the services they and their communities rely on.

"Rather than creating a large and unwieldy council for the whole county area we would prefer to look at bringing existing councils together to work closely to improve outcomes for local people and bring extra powers and resources for the area."

On Monday HCC's cabinet will not only decide whether to push for a unitary Hampshire, but also whether to approve spending £150,000 on consultation to ask local people what they think.

The cabinet report by Mr Coughlan said a more loosely-combined Hampshire authority had been on the cards until February, when the government suddenly demanded it be led by a directly-elected mayor.

The split-Hampshire plans emerged after that, which prompted the county council to

respond last month with its unitary Hampshire proposal, scrapping district authorities but preserving town and parish councils with stronger powers.

The clock may be ticking, however, as Mr Coughlan warned that after the EU referendum the government may intend to announce a Solent deal worth an extra £30m a year - with or without the county council's blessing.

He said: "This Solent devolution deal was subsequently not announced in the 2016 Budget, as originally expected, but it is understood that the Treasury has set aside an allocation of £30m per year for, apparently, 30 years, and that ministers intend to announce a Solent deal some time following the EU referendum, with or without the support of the county council."

Only the three unitary authorities, Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, could launch the new set-up, the report explained. But HCC would be powerless to stop district and borough councils joining later.

It said HCC could move to block the Heart of Hampshire proposal, however, which would bring together the non-unitary district and borough councils of the New Forest, Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor, Winches

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Local government shake-up

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ter and Test Valley. The report recommends HCC's cabinet back the unitary plan as "the option that clearly offers the best combination of financial benefits for the public purse, service quality and continuity, prospects for sustainable economic growth and potential for devolution to community level".

It is one of seven options including a super-council merging the whole of Hampshire with the Isle of Wight, and formally divid-

ing Hampshire into two large unitary authorities, plus the Isle of Wight.

Once approved, the eight-week consultation would begin after the EU referendum. The findings would be shown to the county's cabinet in September and to a special meeting of the full council in October.

Despite the apparent new urgency, on Wednesday the leader of New Forest District Council, Coun. Barry Riekman, poured cold water on any kind of Hampshire devolution deal happening

soon, because of the convoluted negotiations.

He told the 'A&T': "I believe it's so far in the long grass. We are at a point now where I can't see a decision on this being made in the near future."

He said the current two-tier system of district and county councils "works very well". But he felt some change was inevitable and added NFDC is currently also in talks about working more closely with Christchurch, East Dorset and Test Valley councils.