

# 'Public should decide councils' future'

## Residents to have say on rival local government plans

BY BEN CRAIG

POLITICIANS battling to stop Hampshire being split in two hope to recruit the public's support after signing off a £150,000 consultation into how the county should be run.

The eight-week survey of residents' opinion will launch hot on the heels of the EU referendum on June 23rd, after the county council's ruling cabinet agreed an action plan from its leader, Coun. Roy Perry, on Monday.

After months of increasingly acrimonious debate, he is now

leading calls for Hampshire to become a single unitary council responsible for all major services. District councils like the New Forest's would vanish, with more powers to towns and parishes.

The opposing side wants Hampshire split into two administrative regions: Heart of Hampshire and Solent, each under directly-elected mayors, which could unlock £30m annual funding from the government.

But time may run out for Coun. Perry as Coun. Simon Letts, leader of Southampton City Council, told the 'A&T' the bid for a Solent authority would not wait.

He said: "Recent events have added a layer of complexity to the devolution agenda in Hampshire.

"However, there are currently no plans to delay our bid to gov-

ernment for a combined authority for the Solent region; indeed we know that Her Majesty's Treasury is keen for us to progress with our bid at the earliest possible opportunity."

Nevertheless, the Hampshire cabinet agreed to back the proposals from Coun. Perry, who says his model will save taxpayers £40m a year, according to a £89,000 report he commissioned from consultants Deloitte.

After the meeting he attacked the rival plan, saying: "Rather than simplifying and reducing the cost of services to residents, the two combined-authorities models would add an additional layer of local government including elected mayors, thereby, increasing bureaucracy and adding extra cost."

He added: "There are other alternatives that could be considered, such as a unitary council for Hampshire, with or without the cities, a combined authority for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight with or without an elected mayor, or even the status quo.

"We must also consider any proposals the public may have themselves. To my mind, it is the residents who must decide which option best serves their interests, and it is why we need a proper and objective consultation first."

The independently-run consultation will include district and parish councils, as well as residents. The findings will go to the cabinet in September and to a special meeting of the full county council in October.

The two New Forest county

councillors in the Conservative-controlled cabinet are Coun. Keith Mans, of Lyndhurst, and Coun. Mel Kendal, of New Milton.

Coun. Kendal backed his leader and said: "The county proposal for a new unitary council will mean that local town councils like New Milton would have greater powers over local matters such as planning, traffic management, highways and so on.

"It also does not suffer from a loss of capacity which two such smaller councils, north with New Forest and Solent separately, would have."

Coun. Mans added: "We will be guided by the result and no final decisions will be taken until the consultation is complete."