

Detailed local government review now seeks opinions of residents and business

New Forest District Council is taking part in a review of local government in Hampshire, and independent advisors PwC have been appointed.

Working with the Department of Communities and Local Government, 14 authorities in the county, and other organisations, the PwC study follows on from recent work on a possible devolution deal in the future.

Cllr Barry Rickman, Leader, said "We have said since the outset that we will keep all options open. The New Forest is a very special place and my aim is to ensure, if there are to be future changes, that they work well for our residents and business, as well as providing improved value for money. The aim of the study is to help us better understand those options."

The outcome of the study is expected around September 2016 and will be shared with the Council when completed.

New Forest District Council will contribute in the region of £20,000 to get this work completed. This will be identified from the savings made in 2015/16 that were reported to the Council's June Cabinet.

Please see Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council's (who have commissioned the study) media release below.

Residents' needs drive 'joined up' review of local government in Hampshire

A joined up review to make sure that local government in Hampshire meets the needs of its residents and businesses in the 21st century has been launched by the district and unitary councils in the county.

Leading advisor PwC has been appointed to carry out the detailed study working with the Department of Communities and Local Government, the 14 authorities, residents and businesses and a whole range of different local organisations to identify options for local government, including unitary and combined authorities.

The move comes in response to Hampshire County Council announcing that it is planning to consult residents across the county on a unitary option for Hampshire after rejecting the idea of either joining a combined authority for the Heart of Hampshire or a Solent Combined Authority.

The study has been commissioned by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council on behalf of Hart, New Forest, Rushmoor, Test Valley and Winchester councils. In addition, support has been pledged by the Solent Combined Authority group of councils.

PwC, which has worked extensively with councils on analysing options for local government reform, will begin an evidence-based, independent assessment of all options this week. This is aimed at expanding on the more limited focus of work already done by Hampshire County Council, which concentrated on reducing costs rather than improving services for residents.

The county council has expressed a strong interest in a county-wide unitary authority, locally known as a 'mega unitary', serving 1.3 million residents. But the other councils in Hampshire have agreed that a comprehensive review of all the options, starting with residents' needs and improving services, is needed as well as focusing on value and cost efficiency. The councils are appealing for Hampshire County Council to join them to make the review as comprehensive as possible rather than rushing into a consultation with residents based on research on a limited range of options.

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council's Leader Cllr Clive Sanders said: "We want all councils in Hampshire, including the county council, to work together for the good of our residents. What we are doing is commissioning a complementary piece of work to that already carried out by the county council, to look at what residents need, want and expect from local government in today's world. It is important that we consider how to balance local voice and choice in decision making against the need to make the best use of limited resources in today's economic reality."

The current system of county council and district councils in Hampshire was set up over 42 years ago before fax, mobile phones and the internet and the review aims to look at the best system of local government to meet residents' and local business needs today. It will work up options to ensure residents have a real understanding on all of the possibilities and the implications.

Cllr Sanders said: "The Hampshire County Council study is an important piece of work but it is only part of the picture and there are significant areas that need to be explored more fully. For example, the county council suggests a new role for town and parish councils when large parts of the county do not have town and parish councils, with no information on the cost or practicality of setting them up. What we need is proper consideration of all the facts and possibilities, starting with real engagement with residents and other key partners, organisations and groups to build a picture of what is required of local government in our area. It is important that we don't rush into quick assessments on something that will last for years and will have a significant impact on quality of life for each of us."

Leader of Portsmouth City Council Cllr Donna Jones, said: "I am fully behind this review. It is important that there is a collaborative and comprehensive approach to any proposals for local government reorganisation across Hampshire. I would like to thank Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council for being so inclusive and inviting us and other Solent councils to be a part of it. It is crucial we have a credible piece of work that organisations across the county have had the opportunity to contribute to and that looks at how proposals for change can best support the growth of the region's economy, with a specific focus on how to achieve accelerated business growth reflecting functional economic areas."

Richard Parker, partner at PwC, said: "We will work with Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, New Forest, Rushmoor, Test Valley and Winchester councils and other authorities to examine options to help deliver the most effective and efficient form of local government for the area. Our study will be independent and evidence based, providing a critical juncture in the development of a new structure for local government in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. We are looking to engage widely with all key stakeholders and partners to ensure their views are carefully considered in our work."