

**Hampshire council leader defends decision to thwart devolution plan**

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The reported 'collapse' of the plans for a so-called Solent City - the Solent Combined Authority - brought sharp criticism from some quarters of the approach by [Hampshire County Council](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Hampshire+County+Council&topic_id=6987).

The Daily Echo invited the Council' leader, Councillor Roy Perry to explain his thinking behind the issues around devolution in Hampshire.

Like the Daily Echo, I will only truly believe the Solent Combined Authority devolution deal is dead when it is confirmed by Government - we will know for sure in the forthcoming budget, which I suspect will in fact be its death knell.

Some have tried to blame me for its demise, but when I met the Secretary of State, Sajid Javid, he was very clear that he only wanted deals where there was genuine agreement. We know the Isle of Wight Leader who signed up over the head of his council has thrown in the towel and resigned. So, that takes the Island out of the deal, which really finished the three-council pact. It was surely never correct for the two cities to think they could ignore their Hampshire neighbours as we are interdependent. If that separation deal is indeed dead, the key question is where does that leave this whole area? Do we stay as we are or can we map a future together?

Devolution should mean the transfer of power and resources from central to local government. Sadly, in England as it has played out, it has caused confusion across the country, with many areas hugely disappointed by what they were actually offered – more government control not less, very few real powers passed down, money actually being taken away with one hand, more than was ever being offered with the other hand.

It also comes with a new imposed layer of expensive bureaucracy in the form of a mayor. A single person with unknown but potentially significant power – locally elected but able to override local councils - with powers decided by Ministers in Whitehall rather than local people.

In reality residents care about bread-and-butter issues like jobs for local people, how our children are doing, the state of the roads and the quality of care for the sick and vulnerable rather than extra bureaucracy. The Solent proposal was a bad deal for residents and businesses. In return for little power and plenty of strings, the deal would have isolated the Solent’s economies from the wider county and broken up the county highways service - one of the best in the country. Inevitably it was the beginning of a route to dismantle other high-performing and efficient county services on which all our residents depend.

I was also profoundly concerned that the Solent City proponents wanted to use an un-bankable promise of £30m for 30 years to take out a £500m mortgage, saddling future council taxpayers with a 30-year interest bill and the risk a future government might decide to end the annual payments. It was a ‘spend today’ strategy which at best would leave us with no new investment in a few years, at worst would have left us with unfunded debt. I couldn’t sanction such an approach. Nor were there any guarantees that other grants to local government or the LEPs would be safeguarded.

That £500m might seem a lot to some but it would have to cover 30 years. To put it in perspective, the County Council plans to spend more than £500m in the next three years alone on schemes including Newgate Lane south, [Redbridge](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Redbridge&topic_id=999) Lane roundabout and [Stubbington](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Stubbington&topic_id=1069) Bypass, with no risk to taxpayers whatsoever. Fundamentally, the Solent economy should not be cut off from the rest of the county to which it is so strongly linked.

[Southampton](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/?search=Southampton&topic_id=7090) has strong links with [Eastleigh](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/eastleigh/) and other parts of the Solent. But it has equally important links to the districts to the north and the west. In transport terms alone, Southampton’s prosperity is heavily dependent on projects outside the contrived Solent boundary and the unreliable devolution funding. The South West Main Line and M3 to [Winchester](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/winchester/) and London, the routes west to the [New Forest](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/district/newforestpost/) and Salisbury, and the critically important corridor from the Port to the Midlands, all need upgrades far beyond the M27 and the Solent. An isolated and introverted Solent would have less influence on these issues outside its boundary.

We need to take careful note that based on GVA per head, the Southampton economy was 25% more prosperous than the UK average in 1997, but has since dropped to 7% below. Meanwhile by contrast the Hampshire economy has been advancing, improving from 5% ahead of the UK average in 1997 to 7% ahead now. Post-Brexit, a city such as Southampton needs to seek benefits from new trading relationships with the rest of the world, but also needs to work on a wider stage at home with greater influence, rather than to create new internal borders.

Public services for Hampshire residents would have been damaged by the deal. It would have immediately split the Hampshire Highways service in two, with roads in the Solent area handed to the mayor, incredibly with powers to introduce road-charging! This would have caused massive disruption as the county council would have had to stop repairing roads and withdraw funding for schemes if districts had joined. Highways would have been just the first service to be transferred. Undoubtedly more power would pass to mayors over time. The rest of the county would risk diminished services for children and especially for the elderly.

I want us all to consider a sensible way forward for the good of all – using our collective powers to make a strategic difference.

I set out my suggested wish list below. There may be other ideas. And it may be that we can only do one or two of these.

• **Health and Care**: We should join forces, to work with our NHS local partners to review and implement the new Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) which is itself a pan Hampshire plan. We can do this in a way that does not interfere with local control but uses our shared strategic influence to get the best deal for our wider area and finally put some local democracy into the NHS.

• **Economy**: Bearing in mind just how much all parts of this whole area, the county, the island and the cities, are economically dependent upon each other, it is surely time we drew our capacity together to plan for the post-Brexit economy with our local businesses to open up our potential ensuring the whole prospers.

**• Further Education and Skills**: To enable that economic growth we must press on with the development of our skills base – especially vocational and technical skills. This area is blessed with some of the finest higher and further [education](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/education/education_news/) institutions in the country. While we respect their independence, surely we can together craft a better role for local government to help better connect them with the needs of our [business](http://dailyecho.co.uk/business) community and residents.

**• Transport**: Aside from our infrastructure needs, we must be able to collaborate better, perhaps through an area-wide passenger transport executive, to ensure we are maximising precious resources to help our residents travel and keep this crucial whole economy going.

• **Planning**: Maybe the time has come to replace PUSH which has had some success but also more than its share of problems with a pan Hampshire Partnership rather than an “Urban” partnership with that aim again of meeting our residents and businesses needs and also better protect the [environment](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/campaigns/greenwatch/).

United we will prosper but divided we will surely fail. We have to show to London and whoever is in command at Westminster and Whitehall that we are big enough to do more ourselves.