

REPORTS - HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL COUNCILLORS

Malcolm Wade

County Council Leader sets out new vision for local government in Hampshire

The Leader of Hampshire County Council, Councillor Roy Perry has announced to the County Council at the AGM meeting on the 13th May that before there are any changes in local government structure across Hampshire, whether it be for combined authorities, an elected Mayor or a unitary council, there must be a full and genuine public consultation.

He said he had met very few people who wanted a 'Solent City' established and still fewer who wanted a 'Metro Mayor' anywhere in the area. He felt before councils give in to external pressure it was the people of Hampshire who should have their say. The County Council has been encouraged to support a bid by Portsmouth and Southampton and some of the Hampshire districts to create a Solent combined authority based on: Southampton, Portsmouth, Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant and East Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight, whilst other Districts are proposing a Heart of Hampshire combined authority to cover: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester, Test Valley and the New Forest. Both of those proposals are based on an elected Mayor with all the expense of elections, and a new layer of administration that would entail. These proposals set a path towards the creation of separate unitary councils. Furthermore, the geography pays little regard to the Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries, to economic needs, the NHS geography, and the fact that a Fire and Rescue Service exists, together with a Police and Crime Commissioner for all of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

In the face of these moves to split Hampshire, the County Council has recently commissioned an independent study by Deloitte, to provide an initial analysis of how services could be better provided across the whole county, at lower cost. Their report, which explores a number of options in detail, has indicated the creation of a new unitary structure for local government in Hampshire could cut council tax for the majority of Hampshire households (by the County Council's analysis, around 90 per cent), streamline services and deliver tens of millions of pounds of savings each year. Their estimates suggest this would be at least a third more than the £30 million, apparently offered by the Government to a Solent combined authority. Councillor Perry advised: "One of the options under consideration is the creation of a new unitary 'Hampshire Council' which would replace both the County Council and Hampshire's 11 district councils – delivering lower council tax, more efficient services and clearer democratic accountability to Hampshire residents."

A unitary authority would be like those for Southampton and Portsmouth. As a single local authority it would carry out the full range of local government services for its area, encompassing all the duties and functions that are carried out in 'two-tier' areas with both district and county councils like Hampshire. For example, a unitary council would combine the collection and disposal of household waste, whereas in a two-tier area these functions are split between the district council (waste collection) and the county council (waste disposal).

This latest suggestion for a 'Hampshire Council' follows the failed negotiations on securing greater devolution to the whole Hampshire and the Isle of Wight area, which Ministers had suddenly insisted could only happen if there was an elected Mayor. The Solent proposal was due to be announced in the Chancellor's budget in March but was postponed when the County Council said it could not sign up until there was evidence to show this was what people wanted.