

**NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
AUTHORITY MEETING – 24 JULY 2025**

AM 717/25

UPDATE ON DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Report by: Alison Barnes, Chief Executive Officer and David Illsley, Interim Head of Planning & Place

Recommendations

It is recommended that members:

- a) Endorse the key principles set out at paragraph 2.3 of this report to form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement on the proposed Hampshire Mayoral Combined County Authority;**
- b) Endorse the key principles set out at paragraph 3.8 of this report to form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement on the proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire. We support the option that delivers the closest alignment with our priorities; and**
- c) Agree that the National Park Authority will formally respond to the relevant authorities setting out our position and findings against the various options for Local Government Reorganisation currently subject to consultation.**

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report updates members on the current position regarding the related - but separate - processes of: (i) devolution in Hampshire; and (ii) Local Government Reorganisation. Members will recall that the New Forest National Park Authority's consultation response to the proposals for a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire were considered and approved at the March 2025 Authority meeting (report 713/25). This report sets out the current position with regard to devolution and the key principles that the National Park Authority would expect to see incorporated into the new devolved arrangements for Hampshire.
- 1.2 The second part of the report focuses on the proposals and alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire. The report identifies a series of key principles setting out the New Forest National Park Authority's position on the proposals as they continue to evolve. There is currently a public consultation initiated by a group of 12 of the 15 local authorities in Hampshire on options for Local Government Reorganisation that runs to 27 July 2025. A separate set of unitary authority options have been developed by Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council. Further details of these separate options for Local Government Reorganisation are provided in Annex 1 and 2 to this report.

2. Devolution in Hampshire

- 2.1 On 17 February 2025 the Government published proposals for establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority across Hampshire, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight

and Southampton, with details available at [Hampshire and the Solent devolution consultation - GOV.UK](#). The new Mayoral Authority would receive devolved funding from central government to support housing and regeneration, growth, adult skills and transport. They would become the Local Transport Authority for the county; prepare a Spatial Development Strategy, with the power to 'call in' applications; and have a leadership role for the Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy. The current timetable is for the first elections to take place in May 2026.

- 2.2 The consultation closed on 13 April 2025 and the New Forest National Park Authority's response was agreed at the March 2025 full Authority meeting (report 713/25). This identified a series of key areas to be the focus for the National Park Authority's response. Since the consultation closed we have been liaising with the South Downs National Park Authority to ensure that Hampshire's two National Parks – which make up around a third of the land area of the county – are engaged in the devolution process with the Government and providing consistent feedback to ensure protected landscapes are given due consideration.
- 2.3 The following key principles have been identified to frame the New Forest National Park Authority's future engagement in the Hampshire Devolution proposals. These are based on our consultation response approved by members in March 2025, and subsequent liaison with the South Downs National Park Authority.

Key principles to inform the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement in the Hampshire Mayoral Combined County Authority proposals

- Under Section 245 of the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023, all 'relevant authorities' are legally required to seek to further the statutory National Park purposes in undertaking their functions. This strengthened duty would apply to the Mayoral Combined County Authority and this should be recognised as the proposals develop.
- The recent consultation was silent on the role of Hampshire's two national park authorities, which represent an important tier of local government for a third of the county. The consultation stated, '...district councils cannot be full constituent members of a Combined County Authority. However, they could participate as non-constituent members and serve on committees...'. We call for national park authorities to be afforded this same status as 'non-constituent members' with voting rights as a minimum. National park authorities are important delivery partners in achieving the ambitions of the new Authority - particularly in relation to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and through our role as statutory planning authorities. The inclusion of national park authorities in the new governance arrangements would ensure that spatial planning, climate resilience, green infrastructure and nature recovery are coherently integrated, helping to deliver the strengthened Section 245 duty.
- The Hampshire & Solent Devolution Deal should explicitly recognise the New Forest and South Downs National Park Authorities as key delivery partners, reflecting their statutory roles in planning and expertise in environmental leadership. The Deal should provide the resources necessary to implement Local Nature Recovery Strategies, alongside duties for the Mayoral Authority to set targets that halt species decline, protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, and achieve our Net Zero commitments.

- The Mayoral Combined County Authority would be responsible for developing Spatial Development Strategies. National park authorities are legally the sole local planning authorities for their areas under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990, which confers on national park authorities the responsibilities of a local planning authority. In addition and at a regional level, under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 national park authorities previously shared responsibility with local government and others for preparing, revising, implementing and monitoring the Regional Spatial Strategy. We therefore urge the new Mayoral Authority to formally include national park authorities in Spatial Development Strategies governance and consultation to ensure joined-up planning across both Unitary Authorities and Protected Landscapes.
- Devolution should also be used as an opportunity to grant national park authorities the Power of Competence. This would enable national park authorities to act more flexibly and innovatively - especially when operating across wider Combined or Mayoral Authority areas. With such powers, national park authorities would be better positioned to serve as delivery partners for major programmes, unlocking greater value and impact for people and nature across our landscapes.

3. Local Government Reorganisation – Hampshire

- 3.1 Alongside greater devolved powers for the new Mayoral Authority in Hampshire, the Government has confirmed it will replace the current two-tier system of county and district/borough councils that operates across much of Hampshire with larger unitary councils. The Government has established the following key principles:
- New unitary councils should aim for a population of 500,000 people or more. Reorganisation will include the existing smaller unitary authorities in the county (Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council).
 - Existing district and borough areas should be considered the ‘building blocks’ for the new unitary authorities, but where there is a strong justification more complex boundary changes will be considered.
- 3.2 The national Government is not leading the public engagement and consultation on proposals, with this responsibility falling on local authorities in the county. Within Hampshire this has resulted in the formation of two groups of local authorities that are engaging on various alternative options for Local Government Reorganisation.
- 12 of the 15 councils in Hampshire are working together on options for reorganisation. They have identified 3 options and these are the subject of a public consultation that closes on 27 July 2025. Further details are set out in Annex 1 and at [Have Your Say Today - Our Place Our Future - Commonplace](#).
 - Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council are undertaking separate work on reorganisation options. They have identified 4 alternatives, with further details in Annex 2. Hampshire County Council’s Cabinet are considering a report on Local Government Reorganisation on 18 July 2025 ([Issue - items at meetings - Local Government Reorganisation | About the Council | Hampshire County Council](#)) which identifies a preferred option (Option B2). A stakeholder engagement programme is due to take place between 21 July – 17 August 2025, prior to the submission to Government.

3.3 Set out below are the key principles the Authority would expect to be delivered through Local Government Reorganisation. They are based on the statutory National Park purposes that all relevant bodies are required to further ([Guidance for relevant authorities on seeking to further the purposes of Protected Landscapes - GOV.UK](#)). The principles are also guided by the National Park Partnership Plan agreed by key organisations, plus Government targets for National Parks within the Environment Improvement Plan. They can be summarised as:

- *Partnership Working and the legal duty to seek to further:* The integrity of the New Forest landscape and communities are critical to the delivery of National Park purposes and duty. Collaborative working within and beyond the boundary of the National Park is essential to ensure the resilience of the landscape, communities and particularly the unique cultural heritage of commoning. This key principle is based on statute and national Government targets, including: (a) all public bodies and statutory undertakers have a duty to further National Park purposes under Section 245 of Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2024; (b) statutory bodies are signatories to the New Forest National Park Partnership Plan (constituent councils through Cabinet approval) and are co-leading its implementation through a Leaders' Panel; and (c) the New Forest National Park is subject to targets to deliver outcomes from the Environment Improvement Plan 2023. The targets are for the place and it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to support their delivery.
- *Landscape and cultural heritage importance:* The New Forest's unique ecosystems, culture (including built heritage and commoning) and landscape character extend beyond the Park boundary to surrounding areas of New Forest District and Test Valley Borough. Proposals should recognise the interface and relationship between the New Forest and its hinterland, in particular the reliance on areas outside of the New Forest to maintain the grazing system of commoning and the critical role these areas will play in meeting government's international commitments and 30 by 30 target.
- *The socio-economic importance of the New Forest:* Recognition of the New Forest as an asset for the region, with its natural capital and cultural heritage underpinning the economy of the New Forest and beyond, delivering benefits and resilience for nature, climate, water management, health & well-being.

3.4 The table below assesses the various alternative options identified against these key principles and objectives. The table highlights those options which deliver best for the National Park and this will form the basis of our engagement. It is recognised that the Government may decide on an alternative option for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and therefore it is important that our key principles are established, rather than focusing on a single option at this stage.

3.5 The National Park Authority is not directly affected by the proposed reorganisation and the statutory functions of the Authority would remain unaffected. However, the implications for the communities of the National Park, the areas neighbouring the National Park and the work we do with partner bodies in and around the area are significant and it is therefore important we engage in the process.

- 3.6 Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire will also affect the membership of the New Forest National Park Authority, with the current membership model (whereby Hampshire County Council appoint 5 members, New Forest District Council appoint 4 members and Test Valley Borough Council appoint 1 member) due to change. Wiltshire Council (who appoint 2 members) became a unitary authority in 2009 and will not be affected by the reorganisation in Hampshire.
- 3.7 As outlined in the Government's published criteria, the existing administrative boundaries of local authorities should form the building blocks of the new arrangements. Adopting this principle – and recognising the points raised by New Forest District Council at [The proposed options for local government reorganisation - New Forest District Council](#) – a key element of the Authority's position is the need for the New Forest to be considered as a whole.

	12 Hampshire Local Authority Proposals (Annex 1)			Hampshire County Council & East Hampshire proposals (Annex 2)			
NFNPA Key Criteria and Objectives	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option A	Option B1	Option B2	Option C
	Whole of NFDC part of a new Mid-Hampshire Unitary Authority	Whole of NFDC joined with Eastleigh & Southampton Unitary Authority	Waterside area of NFDC joined with Eastleigh & Southampton Unitary Authority	3 Unitary Authorities (NFDC in the 'North' Unitary Authority)	4 Unitary Authorities (NFDC in the 'South West' Unitary Authority)	4 Unitary Authorities (NFDC in the 'South West' Unitary Authority)	5 Unitary Authorities (NFDC in the 'South West' Unitary Authority)
The New Forest is considered as a whole – linked to the Partnership Plan themes and the legal duty to further	Retains the integrity of the New Forest	Links with Test Valley lost	Severs the Waterside from the rest of the New Forest	New Forest part of a wider rural-based Authority, although some identify may be lost due to the size of the Authority	New Forest combined with urban Eastleigh & Southampton	Some links with Test Valley, but mainly urban focused	New Forest combined with urban Eastleigh & Southampton
Landscape, cultural heritage and ecological links to surrounding areas are retained	The landscape and ecological links between the New Forest and Test Valley are retained	Landscape and ecological links to the north will be less certain – will need to work harder to retain them	Landscape, ecological and cultural links (including commoning) with the Waterside compromised	Landscape, ecological and cultural heritage links to the north retained	Landscape and ecological links to the north lost	Would retain some landscape, ecological and cultural heritage links north with Test Valley	Landscape and ecological links to the north lost
The contribution the rural land-based economy and Natural Capital makes to the wider area is recognised	The new rural unitary authority would have more of a focus on the land-based economy and have a clear interest in natural capital	The new Southampton-focused unitary authority likely to have less of a focus on the land-based economy	The economic links between the Waterside and the rest of the New Forest would be weakened	The new 'North' unitary authority would have a rural focus, although it would cover a large area of nearly 1 million people	The new Southampton-focused unitary authority likely to have less of a focus on the land-based economy	The new 'South West' unitary authority would be centred on Southampton and its economic needs and strengths	The new Southampton-focused unitary authority likely to have less of a focus on the land-based economy

- 3.8 Of the current options identified by the two groups of local authorities (see Annex 1 and Annex 2), it is considered that Option 1 put forward by 12 of the 15 local authorities in Hampshire represents the best fit for the National Park Authority's priorities for nature, climate, people and place in the New Forest. This option would keep the New Forest as a whole, combined with the predominantly rural authorities of Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire. Around one third of this area is designated as National Park (New Forest and South Downs) and this new unitary authority would be well placed to work with the two national park authorities to deliver the Government's agenda for National Parks (including the 30x30 targets and the Protected Landscapes Targets & Outcomes Framework).

Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire – NFNPA position

The National Park Authority recognises the Government's intention to reform local government within Hampshire. We expect reorganisation to: (i) recognise the integrity of the New Forest landscape and communities as critical to the delivery of National Park purposes and duty. Collaborative working within and beyond the National Park is essential to ensure the resilience of the landscape, communities and commoning; (ii) acknowledge that New Forest's unique ecosystems, culture (including built heritage and commoning) and landscape character extend beyond the National Park boundary. Proposals should recognise the relationship between the New Forest and its hinterland; and (iii) recognise the New Forest as an asset for the region, with its natural capital and cultural heritage underpinning the economy of the New Forest and beyond, delivering benefits for nature, climate, water management, health & well-being.

The New Forest has many features in common with the other predominantly rural local authorities in Hampshire. The nationally designated landscape of the National Park for example, stretches into southern Test Valley, recognising that landscape character crosses existing boundaries. The Natural Capital Assessment for the New Forest highlights the economic contribution the National Park makes to the wider area. Reorganisation options that place the New Forest District as a whole within a new rural focused unitary authority are a better fit for the New Forest National Park area.

Any options that involve splitting the New Forest risk jeopardising important links between the Waterside and the rest of the New Forest. Residents of wider New Forest District have an affinity and connection to the National Park area. Recent evidence on commoning for example, illustrates the importance of the Waterside area to the commoning system that plays such a key role in managing the landscape and designated sites of the New Forest National Park. In addition, there are important ecological links between the New Forest and Southampton Water – as evidenced by the [Waterside Green Links - New Forest National Park Authority](#).

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The changes now underway in and around the New Forest will fundamentally change the delivery of local government services. Although the National Park Authority will be less directly affected by the changes than other tiers of local government (reorganisation will not affect the statutory functions of the Authority or the legal framework that national park authorities operate within), the move to devolve powers to the new Mayoral Combined County Authority and to reorganisation the next tier of local government will certainly impact our work.

- 4.2 Members are asked to endorse the key principles set out in the box at paragraph 2.3 on page 2 to guide our on-going engagement on the new Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire. We have liaised with the South Downs National Park Authority on these key points to ensure Hampshire's two national parks are inputting consistently as matters progress. The current timetable is for the first elections to the Hampshire Combined County Authority to take place in May 2026.
- 4.3 In terms of the proposals for Local Government Reorganisation, the box at paragraph 3.8 on page 7 sets out the Authority's key principles that reorganisation should be based on. The designated National Park areas make up around one third of the land area of Hampshire and it is important that reorganisation gives appropriate weight to what National Parks can deliver for nature recovery, climate change, the rural economy and local communities. There are separate options being prepared by the existing local authorities in Hampshire and it is recommended that these principles form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement in these proposals. The next milestone in the process is for the local authorities in Hampshire to submit their proposals to the Government for consideration by the end of September 2025.

Recommendations

It is recommended that members:

- (a) Endorse the key principles set out at paragraph 2.3 of this report to form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement on the proposed Hampshire Mayoral Combined County Authority;**
- (b) Endorse the key principles set out at paragraph 3.8 of this report to form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's engagement on the proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire. We support the option that delivers the closest alignment with our priorities; and**
- (c) Agree that the National Park Authority will formally respond to the relevant authorities setting out our position and findings against the various options for Local Government Reorganisation currently subject to consultation.**

Equality and Diversity Implications:

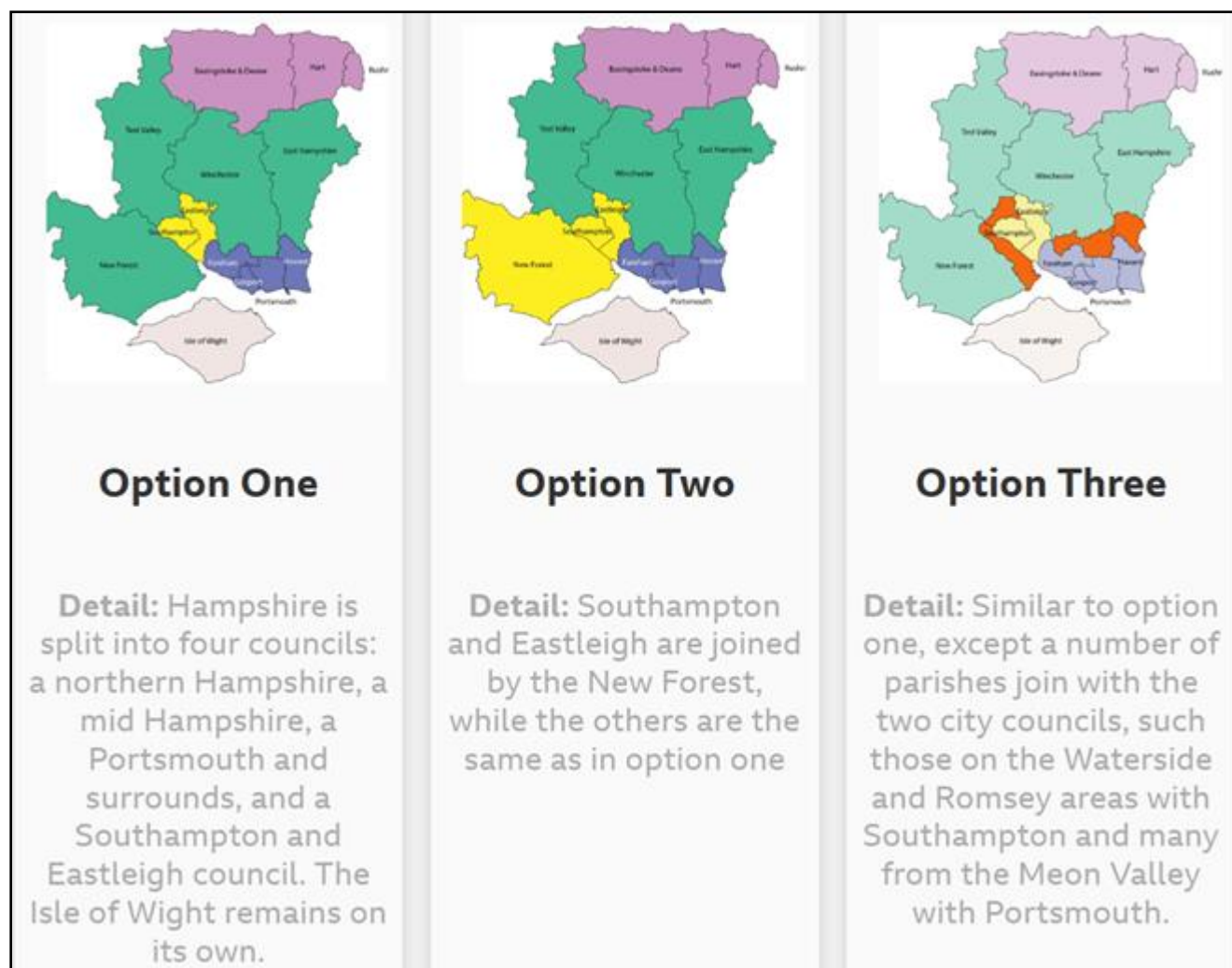
There are no specific equality or diversity implications arising out of this report

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Annex 1: A group of 12 of the 15 councils in Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight are working together on options for reorganisation – [Have Your Say Today - Our Place Our Future - Commonplace](#)



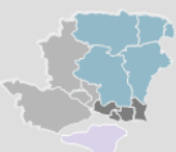



A1. The maps above illustrate the alternative options being considered – each treating the area currently administered by New Forest District Council differently.

- Under **Option One** the whole of the current New Forest District Council administrative area would be incorporated into a new rural unitary authority for mid-Hampshire (also including Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire).
- Under **Option Two** the whole of the current New Forest District Council administrative area would be combined with the existing Southampton City Council and Eastleigh Borough Council areas.
- Under **Option Three**, the current administrative area of New Forest District Council would be split, with the Waterside area forming part of the wider Southampton-centred unitary authority and the remaining area of New Forest District forming part of the new rural unitary authority as per Option One.

A2. This consultation run by most of the existing local authorities closes 27 July 2027.

Annex 2: Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council options – [Local government reorganisation](#) | [About the Council](#) | [Hampshire County Council](#) and [Corporate report template](#)

Option	Geography	Components (City / district / borough level)	Population (% of total)
A 3 Unitary Authorities		North: Basingstoke and Deane, East Hampshire, Hart, New Forest, Rushmoor, Test Valley, Winchester South: Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth, Southampton Isle of Wight	North: 965,387 (47.4%) South: 929,579 (45.7%) Isle of Wight: 140,906 (6.9%)
B1 4 Unitary Authorities		North: Basingstoke and Deane, East Hampshire, Hart, Rushmoor, Test Valley, Winchester South-West: Eastleigh, New Forest, Southampton South-East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth Isle of Wight	North: 789,989 (38.8%) South-West: 572,458 (28.1%) South-East: 532,519 (26.2%) Isle of Wight: 140,906 (6.9%)
B2 4 Unitary Authorities		North: Basingstoke and Deane, East Hampshire, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester South-West: Eastleigh, New Forest, Southampton, Test Valley South-East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth Isle of Wight	North: 655,528 (32.2%) South-West: 706,519 (34.7%) South-East: 532,519 (26.2%) Isle of Wight: 140,906 (6.9%)
C 5 Unitary Authorities		North-East: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor Central: Test Valley, Winchester, East Hampshire South-West: Eastleigh, New Forest, Southampton South-East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth Isle of Wight	North-East: 394,648 (19.4%) Central: 395,341 (19.4%) South-West: 572,458 (30.2%) South-East: 532,519 (28.1%) Isle of Wight: 140,906 (6.9%)

A1. Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council have formed a separate group and are assessing the four options summarised above for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire. The County Council has indicated that there will be consultation/engagement on their options in July – August 2025.

- Under Option A the existing New Forest District Council area (including 94% of the National Park) would form part of a large 'North' Unitary Authority also including Basingstoke & Deane, East Hampshire, Hart, Rushmoor, Test Valley and Winchester and serving around 965,000 residents.
- Under Options B1 and C the existing New Forest District Council area would be combined with Eastleigh and Southampton in a new 'South West' Unitary Authority serving around 572,000 residents.
- Under Option B2 the existing New Forest District Council area would be combined with Eastleigh, Southampton and Test Valley in a new 'South West' Unitary Authority serving around 706,000 residents. This is Hampshire County Council's preferred option at this point in the process.

A2. None of the four options identified by Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council propose the splitting of any existing districts/boroughs. Hampshire County Council have indicated they will be holding a stakeholder engagement programme between 21 July – 18 August 2025. This will inform the submission they make to the Government by the deadline of late September 2025.