

January 2025

Devolution and Local Government reorganisation

The main item this month is the decision by Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Southampton city Council and Isle of Wight council to jointly submit an application for a Mayoral Combined Authority. This is in response to the Government's white paper published on 16th December.

The white paper is here:

[English Devolution White Paper - GOV.UK](#)

This is very much driven by the Government and the promise of more devolution has to come with an elected Mayor and reorganisation of local government into Unitary council, combining the roles of County and District councils.

The full agenda of the HCC meeting is here. The detail is in Item 4.

[Agenda for Extraordinary County Council on Thursday 9 January 2025, 10.00 am | About the Council | Hampshire County Council](#)

Devolution

The new combined authority will have an elected Mayor (projected to be elected across all four councils in May 2026) and a promise of potentially additional (unspecified) funding. The CA will have statutory powers in the following areas:

Transport and Local Infrastructure

Skills and employment, particularly 16-19 employment

Housing and strategic planning (a full area spatial development strategy)

Responsibility for delivery of Growth Hubs

Coordinating Local Energy planning

Responsibility for Local Nature Recovery

A bespoke statutory health improvement and health inequality duty

Accountability for both Police and Fire & rescue

Much of this is quite vague, and the financial implications are very unclear, but there is a promise of greater local decision making and a seat at the "Council of Nations and Regions".

On balance, the overwhelming majority of councillors of all parties in all four councils voted in favour of applying for fast track devolution.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The Government cleverly tied Devolution to the reorganisation of local government into unitary councils. This means that the functions of the Districts/Boroughs and Counties will be combined. There will be a number of unitary councils that make up the combined authority, and these will be responsible for: social services, children services, education, transport, waste collection and disposal, planning and all the other services that these two tiers of government provide.

What happens next?

The government have promised to approve all applications for fast track devolution by January 31st – clearly this could come at any stage in the next three working weeks. If successful, the 4 councils will have to submit the outline of a local government reorganisation plan by 31st March

and a full application for devolved powers and LGR in the Autumn. The letter confirming these dates may add more detail. The white paper has stipulated that the unitary authorities have to be at least 500,000 people, and should be based on the whole area. There is also a policy that the LGR should be done as swiftly as possible – this appears to rule out any boundary changes or boundaries that cross county boundaries.

“We expect all councils in an area to work together to develop unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area, rather than developing competing proposals. We will also expect all councils in an area to work with us to bring about these changes as swiftly as possible.”

Hampshire County Council has also had to apply to postpone County elections by a year to May 2026. Taking 3 months to elect a new council that would only be in existence for 1 or 2 years was seen by the councils as being against this government guidance to bring about the changes as swiftly as possible.

What does all this mean for local residents

(a personal view). All major services will in future be delivered by one council which will be bigger with more resources and more responsibility. Planning will be done on a larger area (except in the SDNP where there will be no change). HCC's main services (Social services, children's services, transport, education) will be split along different geographic lines. My best guess is that there will be three unitaries, an expanded Southampton, an expanded Portsmouth and an Inland Hampshire. It is very unclear which one will include East Hampshire, although we can be pretty sure that it won't be in Southampton. The split is likely to be heavily debated and ultimately will be evidence based on what is best for the residents. The Isle of Wight maybe a special case. The whole process will take several years and lead to considerable disruption for staff, but hopefully very limited disruption of services for residents.. The waste collection services will have to be integrated into those of other districts and the Combined Authority will be able to decide on the position of new towns without asking the opinions of local residents. Finally, this will not help solve the financial problems at HCC caused by the cost of adult social services, children social services, SEN education, homelessness and Home to School transport.

I think it is realistic to expect the Unitary councils will have elections in 2027 – but it is possible that they could be in place before then.

Implications for Parish and Town Councils

This is totally unclear. The two following sentences were in the white paper:

“We will also work with the town and parish council sector to improve engagement between them and Local Authorities.

We will also rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice”.

It is unclear what “rewire” means or “improve engagement”. It is also unclear what the plan is for all the urban areas and boroughs that do not have parish/town council (e.g Basingstoke which is unparished on a population of 95,000 or Southampton, unparished on a population of 250,000.

There is no promise of new statutory powers for parishes/towns in the white paper – but this may change as the process gets underway.