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Dear Keith and Dan

Local Government Reorganisation

Thank you for supporting the Beaulieu Parish Council in clarifying the matters related to LGR and for helping to address our various questions, including those raised during our recent public meeting. As both HCC and NFDC are currently conducting consultation processes, we thought that, as a parish council, it might be helpful to write to you with our current perspectives, which are set out as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Published Unitary Authority options
3. Disaggregation of HCC services
4. Aggregation of existing local services
5. Conclusion

1. Introduction

At present, we await the publication of preferred options from several councils across Hampshire. Consequently, the content of this letter may be subject to revision based on new information.

Whilst we do not directly address the Mayoral Combined County Authority proposal for the region, we acknowledge that the devolution of powers and funding from national to local government, enabling an elected mayor to oversee economic growth, transport, and infrastructure, should be a positive development.

We also note that, whilst there is always room for improvement, the overall services we receive from HCC and NFDC are generally good. As our County and District Councillors, you respond constructively when performance issues arise, which we most appreciate. The move to LGR is, therefore, a national political initiative and priority rather than a step that we currently consider necessary to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of council services provided in the New Forest area.

We note that the Government's objective for LGR, as articulated by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution on 3 June 2025, is "to achieve sustainable, efficient, and streamlined local government for the taxpayers ... capable of leading their communities, shaping neighbourhoods and convening local public service providers to improve outcomes for local residents". According to the current LGR timeline, NFDC, HCC, and other councils across Hampshire will be replaced by new Unitary Authorities by April 2028.

We set out below our current questions and concerns in achieving this objective and the proposed timeline.

2. Published Unitary Authority options

We have considered the various options that have an impact on the New Forest, including those preferred by NFDC and HCC.

The HCC Option B2

The HCC preferred option B2 is where the New Forest and Test Valley are joined with Southampton and Eastleigh. The proposed option is considered by HCC to be the most balanced and cost-effective approach for maintaining scale, fostering economic and housing growth, strengthening local identity, meeting local needs, ensuring a smooth transition, and providing a strong foundation for sustainable, high-quality public services that ensure that rural communities have a clear voice.

Our principal concern with the HCC Option B2 is that the New Forest and Test Valley are mainly rural communities, while Southampton, which is already a Unitary Authority, along with Eastleigh, are mainly urban areas. Southampton includes some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England, facing *inter alia* high levels of social housing need and health inequalities. The important work that Southampton City Council currently undertakes to tackle these critical issues must not be delayed or diverted.

As a rural community covering nearly 300 square miles, the needs of the New Forest are significantly different. Access to affordable housing, health and social care, transport, and youth services differs significantly for the rural and dispersed communities of the New Forest compared to those in densely populated urban areas. Also, as a designated protected landscape, the New Forest is subject to distinct requirements and standards that are not applicable within urban settings. Managing these rural needs is inherently complex and falls beyond the conventional scope and priorities associated with a primarily urban Unitary Authority.

We recognise HCC's rationale in combining Unitary Authorities of a similar size, meeting the Government's minimum requirement of 500,000 people whilst aiming to improve cost effectiveness and mitigate the risks of transitioning upper-tier services and maximising savings. However, merging communities in the way proposed would bring together groups with materially diverse needs. We do not believe the proposal would lead to a sustainable, efficient, and streamlined local government nor offer a clear representation for the rural area of the New Forest. In our opinion, it would not improve outcomes for our residents.

For these reasons, we do not support this proposal.

The NFDC "Mid-Hampshire" proposal (Option 1)

The NFDC's preferred option aims to merge the rural communities of the New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester, and East Hampshire into a single Unitary Authority. This proposed option is considered by NFDC to be optimal as it:

- protects New Forest district residents' needs when providing services, because they are designed around the requirements of rural communities
- promotes sustainable growth, balancing rural practices with education, innovation, and maritime and industrial clusters
- aligns careful stewardship of national parks and protected landscapes with a strengthened rural economy
- respects community identities by keeping the district together, maintaining people's connections with rural life

Serving a population of around 570,000, this option, while meeting the Government's size requirements and providing the necessary scale to transition upper-tier services economically, is quite large. We would like to better understand what local governance arrangements such a Unitary Authority might establish. For instance, introducing Neighbourhood Committees and Area Boards to support swift and effective responses to local needs and proactively assist our local schools, businesses, and voluntary groups.

We would comment that both Winchester and Andover act as significant business centres which should, over time, offer scale and access to skilled employment markets essential for supporting the vital central infrastructure that will be required.

We consider that this option has the potential to establish a sustainable, efficient, and streamlined Unitary Authority that should be capable of shaping our community and convening local public services to improve outcomes for local residents, thereby meeting the government's objective.

Although additional information is required, in our opinion, this proposal is the best and only option currently available for the New Forest's resident and business communities, living and operating in a rural and highly protected

environment.

Option 3

This option proposes dividing the New Forest, incorporating the more industrial and maritime areas, such as Totton, Waterside and Fawley, into Southampton and Eastleigh. The objectives of this proposal are not particularly clear, but we assume it would help address the current significant financial challenges faced by Southampton and, particularly, Eastleigh.

Local Government Reorganisation is already complex, and introducing boundary changes adds unnecessary complications. The New Forest area proposed to be split off includes important rural communities with distinct interests, including farming and commoning, that materially differ from Southampton City Council's priorities. There are important obligations in protecting the special nature of this part of the New Forest District and splitting it in the way proposed will, in our view, inevitably put this at significant risk.

In our view, the proposal would not lead to a sustainable, efficient, and streamlined local government for the rural area of the New Forest proposed to be split out, nor would it offer a clear representation for its residents. In our view, it would be significantly detrimental to the overall outcomes for the New Forest.

For these reasons, we do not support this proposal.

3. Disaggregation of HCC services

With a current year budget of £3.1bn, HCC is responsible for a significant range of essential services including adult and children's health and social care, education, SEND, waste disposal and highways. The current scale of HCC operations provides efficiencies of scale in service delivery and managing statutory duties with well-established expertise, processes and infrastructure.

Transitioning services across to the new Hampshire Unitary Authorities will be highly challenging, and will not be helped by the simultaneous LGR in England that will likely compete for essential IT and other resources. Issues that will need to be addressed include:

- a) recruiting experienced and skilled staff who can replicate the existing work across the new Unitary Authorities;
- b) critical investment in new IT systems to be installed at pace; and
- c) 'Shadow' elections scheduled for May 2027 bringing new councillors who will rightly wish to influence service delivery approaches.

The current implementation timeline of the new Unitary Authorities being in place and fully operational by April 2028 has been published ahead of the necessary transition planning having been undertaken. It is in essence a 'top down' government target. There is a high risk that the proposed timescales will not be achievable, which could impact the management of statutory duties and public services. Lives could be put at risk.

Reaching an agreement on transition plans across the existing 13 councils/authorities regarding the division of HCC's responsibilities will require substantial care and time. Reliable predictions of project timelines can only be made once these plans are in place and agreed with the respective Unitary Authorities. For this reason, Beaulieu Parish Council recommends that HCC supports the future Unitary Authorities through medium-term Shared Service Agreements and other hosting arrangements. Such an approach, which has been used elsewhere in England, would help retain the benefit of current expertise and systems, thereby reducing the risks associated with service transitions, allowing a measured and reliable transfer to Unitary Authorities only when they are proven to be ready.

Whilst this will initially possibly take more time and potentially cost more money, it would significantly mitigate the risk of critical service failure which is one of our highest concerns.

4. Aggregation of existing local services

Aggregating district council services involves key risks such as loss of local accountability, service disruption, financial uncertainties, staff resistance, IT integration challenges, and possibly political tensions.

We are concerned that having 13 mainland councils/authorities embarking on their respective integration processes will be a significant disruption across the county, again with the risk of service failure. The issues at stake are complex and we have seen this illustrated in the New Forest with the current changes to recycling and rubbish collection, which have led to service failures despite the significant planning that had been undertaken.

We are therefore concerned that aggregating services over such a large area, involving many councils in a short timeline of launching new integrated services by April 2028 is at high risk of failure. We appreciate that the government has unexpectedly raised the prospect of LGR on the Hampshire & the Solent area and much work is currently underway.

As a parish council, it is crucial to us that there are no significant local service disruptions during the integration of existing district council services into the Unitary Authority. We are keen to see early and coordinated planning among the involved councils, a phased integration approach, investment in digital infrastructure, and local representation through area boards. Parish councils should be involved throughout the process and receive transparent information, including details on any significant issues that may arise.

5. Conclusion

We recognise that LGR is complex and affects local accountability, service delivery, and community identity. It is essential that the National Park's protected status and rural character are prioritised in the new Unitary Authority plans. In summary, the Beaulieu Parish Council:

- a) Considers the NFDC 'Mid-Hampshire' proposal as the only suitable option for the Parish of Beaulieu and the New Forest area;
- b) Does not support breaking up the existing New Forest area under Option 3;
- c) Believes the April 2028 deadline for disaggregating HCC's statutory responsibilities is unrealistic and risks failure; and
- d) Has similar concerns about aggregating local services to the new Authority by the same deadline.

We look forward to engaging further as your plans develop, and trust these views will inform your consultation.

With kind regards

Nick

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