

Appendix L

Summary of Parish and Town Councils' feedback and engagement on the proposed structure and neighbourhood empowerment

Background and introduction

Background to Local Government Reorganisation

- Central Government has asked Hampshire and Solent councils to create new 'all purpose' councils, to replace current borough, district and city councils, as well as Hampshire County Council, via a process called 'Local Government Reorganisation' (LGR)
- A number of different engagement activities with residents and key stakeholders was carried out to help inform recommendations to the central Government regarding the structure of Local Government Reorganisation, which is expected to be presented in autumn 2025

Engagement with Parish Councils

Following an initial briefing and engagement session about Local Government Reorganisation on 15 July 2025, parish council representatives from across Hampshire and the Solent were invited to attend one of two follow up feedback and engagement sessions on 7 August 2025, to discuss the specific option being proposed by Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council.

Methodology

Each session was held face to face and was 2.5 hours long.

The sessions began with a short presentation to recap the Government's parameters for LGR and to present the proposed structure for Hampshire and the Solent. Attendees were then invited to ask questions and to give their feedback about the proposed new structure by answering the following two questions:

1. What are the benefits of the proposal from a parish and town council perspective?
2. What issues and concerns do you have?

Following a short break, the sessions then re-convened for a short presentation on neighbourhood empowerment in the context of LGR, and a discussion around aspirations for and barriers to effective neighbourhood empowerment under the proposed unitary councils system.

This report collates and summarises the key points raised during the session.

What are the benefits of the proposal from a parish and town council perspective?

It could be simpler and more efficient

- A single contact point would simplify access to council services.
- Currently, it's unclear how to seek support, and this could improve
- One authority for planning would be beneficial.
- Reducing duplication is a positive step.
- Scaling services could improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- Promised savings would be good if realised.

There could be opportunities for parishes

- Parishes can join forces to pool resources, manage local schemes, and have a stronger collective voice with principal councils.
- Working in clusters offers smaller parishes greater support and opportunities, similar to the benefits of a larger town council.
- Local area committees provide direct communication channels for parishes, enhancing their influence.
- Neighbourhood plans give parish councils a chance to impact local planning, provided larger authorities respect their local expertise.
- Asset transfers—such as car parks—could empower parishes to deliver popular local services.
- Effective engagement with new unitary councils is crucial to ensuring community voices are heard, with parished areas serving as ready-made forums for local input.

It presents opportunities for service improvement

- Integrating social care services and streamlining senior management may reduce costs for frontline care.
- Potential benefit if housing targets can be achieved over a wider area, rather than within individual districts. Could help with directing where the right place for growth is.
- Improved services in rural areas (such as transport and healthcare) may result from higher populations, helping retain families and address aging demographics.

It's been fully considered

- Hampshire's approach was felt by some to be logical, financially sound, and built on thorough research.
- Due diligence and engagement has been undertaken
- The four-council model minimises risk and maximises existing expertise.
- Parish councils remain integral to the southern areas in the proposal
- Constructive engagement with stakeholders was valued.
- Hampshire's proposal was notable for including town and parish councils early in the process.

NB: Some attendees felt that there would be no benefits.

What issues and concerns do you have? Process

Concerns about the LGR process

- Parishes reported that people feel uninformed or confused about Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), with information fragmented between sources, differing proposals, political tensions and insufficient detail about what the future will look like.
- The process appears rushed, leading to fears that it is a 'done deal'.
- Perceived imposition of new governance models on historic areas
- Concerns about using existing district boundaries as building blocks
- There is frustration over consultation methods and fears that government-led engagement may lead to further missteps.
- Some feel there is not enough time to properly contribute to the process.

Practical and financial concerns

- Concerns were raised about the practicality, necessity, and accountability of LGR, with doubts that promised benefits will materialise.
- There were doubts that LGR would deliver financial savings, given rising statutory service costs, implementation costs and substantial setup expenses such as redundancies.
- Concerns exist over the lack of clear accountability, the risks associated with merging authorities, and the absence of guarantees or backstops if LGR does not succeed.

What issues and concerns do you have? Marginalisation

Concerns about mix of communities in new authorities (especially rural & urban), and housing allocation

- Widespread fears that urban areas will dominate new unitary authorities, potentially marginalising rural communities and their interests.
- Concerns about housing allocations, with rural parishes worried about targets and development being pushed into their areas, particularly in areas that incorporate national parks.
- Risk of local identity loss and disconnect as smaller parishes are grouped with large urban centres, leading to less tailored services and diminished local influence.
- Issues with centralising services, including fears of increased costs and reduced ability to deliver and manage services locally.
- Anxiety over the focus on administrative boundaries rather than addressing substantive issues important to parish and town councils.

Concerns about a weakening of the relationship between parishes and new unitaries.

- Parish councils are worried about being sidelined in new, larger unitary authorities, particularly rural parishes far from central hubs.
- Key concerns include diminished unitary councillor representation at parish meetings, loss of direct communication with knowledgeable staff, reduced support and resources, unclear accountability, and the risk of local issues being overlooked.
- There was a call for clearer lines of accountability, community governance reviews, and safeguards to ensure parish voices remain heard and local needs are understood in the new structure.

What issues and concerns do you have? Resourcing

Concerns about future resourcing of parish councils / area committees

- There are concerns about devolving too many responsibilities to town and parish councils and a perception that this will lead to a loss of volunteers, as many are not trained for large-scale asset management.
- Increasing workloads and lack of resources at higher unitary levels risk overburdening parish councillors and may require additional staff.
- Scepticism exists about promises of satellite offices and the effectiveness and funding of area committees, with fears that they may not represent parish interests adequately.
- There is disappointment with the Government's approach, which is viewed as not valuing the role of town and parish councils, and concerns that new area committee structures prioritise larger district representation over genuine local needs.

Concerns about asset transfer and associated precepts

- Parish councils expressed concern about taking on assets that may not be financially sustainable, with worries about the need to raise precepts to cover costs and how this would be received by residents.
- While there is some willingness to pay higher precepts for tangible local benefits, significant increases could erode trust. Linking precept rises to new services or protection of community assets is more acceptable to communities.
- The process of asset transfer and advice to increase precepts rapidly is causing apprehension, especially for smaller councils that may not have the capacity. Larger councils may be better equipped to handle devolved responsibilities such as planning.

Neighbourhood Empowerment: Ensuring local representation

A need to ensure continued representation of local communities

- Recognition that parish councils play a central role in empowering communities, but uncertainty about how this will continue under new structures.
- Small parishes want to maintain distinct identities.
- Worries that smaller rural communities will be absorbed and unheard within larger authorities, leading to disengagement and loss of effective personal connections.
- Fears that new unitary or strategic authorities may replicate problems of remoteness and lack of empowerment.
- Worries that small parishes will struggle with complex planning applications and that their needs may be overlooked in larger units.
- Barriers to neighbourhood empowerment include a lack of resident interest, limited capacity of small parishes, and challenges in influencing wider decisions or accessing resources

But doubt over whether Area Committees are the right approach

- Debate over their necessity and effectiveness, concerns about them becoming just another bureaucratic layer or “talking shop,” and possible overlap or competition with parish councils.
- Noted that they would need regular meetings, structure, staffing, authority to do things, work with partners, lean into structures that already exist. Important that parish councils are retained within any new structure.
- Scepticism regarding the creation and effectiveness of satellite offices and area committees, based on previous unfulfilled promises.
- How can we ensure consistency in quality of area committees, if they are run by unitary councillors who have different interests and skillsets? Could there be flexibility in who runs/supports them
- Concern that Area Committees could just be a talking shop if they have no budget.

Neighbourhood Empowerment: Providing support and governance

Unitary councils need to be responsive and supportive

- Parish councillors are directly accessible and accountable to residents but can't do anything unless they are listened to / effectively supported by unitary councils. Ensuring that Unitary councils provide a speedy response to parish council requests is really important.
- There is a desire for clear, two-way communication channels with councils and to ensure that Unitary councillors continue to come to parish council meetings and answer questions from councillors and members of the public.
- Parishes place great emphasis on the value of personal relationships and networks between parish and unitary councils for effective local governance and problem-solving.
- Particular value is placed on experienced parish clerks and parishes want to ensure that these roles will be retained.
- Advocacy for retaining small local grants and funding streams that make a real difference in rural communities.

and strong governance is needed to ensure systems work effectively

- Calls for clear data on parish sizes and budgets to ensure fair representation and funding, especially for small parishes.
- Requests for timely community governance reviews or other mechanisms (e.g. a Town and Parish charter with clear terms of reference) that would ensure new structures are effective in reflecting local needs and circumstances.
- Need for transparency about where accountability lies, defined support tiers, clear relationships between parishes and new unitaries, and clarity about council officers' roles and skills.
- There is interest in learning from and adapting successful models from elsewhere (e.g., Buckinghamshire) and building on good practices.
- Ambitions for future governance also included calls for partnership-based relationships with unitaries, valuing local knowledge, supporting parish skill development (e.g. building websites, guidance on practical engagement with residents) and a general assembly of councillors to bring all parishes together to meet, speak, share best practice, receive updates + network.

Neighbourhood Empowerment: Resourcing challenges

It's already hard to resource parish councils

- Increasing challenge in finding parish councillors and volunteers due to busy lives and growing demands.
- Points to the broader importance of supporting voluntary and community sectors, not just statutory bodies, within new structures.
- Concern over the potential increase in number and length of meetings parish councillors may be required to attend, making it harder for people to participate
- In-person meeting requirements make it harder for people to get involved; online meetings would be more practical.

And additional responsibilities could make this worse

- Worries about the affordability of taking on new assets and the potential need to raise precepts (local taxes) to fund additional responsibilities or staff, with limited willingness among residents to pay substantially more unless tangible benefits are seen locally.
- Support for certain collaborative schemes (like the lengthsman scheme for footpath management), but apprehension about taking on additional assets that may not be financially sustainable.

