

AM 713/25

**NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY
AUTHORITY MEETING – 27 MARCH 2025**

**PROPOSALS FOR A MAYORAL COMBINED COUNTY AUTHORITY FOR
HAMPSHIRE – GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION**

Report by: Alison Barnes, Chief Executive Officer and David Illsley, Policy & Conservation Manager

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In December 2024, the government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#). This sets out plans to move power out of Westminster and back to local communities, ensuring that every part of England is covered by devolution. The local council leaders from Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Isle of Wight Council, and Southampton City Council have since written to government expressing their interest in taking forward devolution within their area through the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority, with the first election for a Mayor taking place in May 2026.
- 1.2 There is a statutory process that has to be followed to establish a Mayoral Combined County Authority. This includes a public consultation to seek local views and inform a final decision by government.

2 Establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority for 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](#). Before taking a decision on whether to proceed with the making of the necessary legislation, the Government is seeking views from interested parties, including those who live and work in the area. The consultation includes questions on the proposed geography and how the Combined County Authority will make decisions, together with questions on the effects of working across this geography. The consultation closes on 13 April 2025 and this report sets out the key points it is recommended are raised in the Authority's response.
- 2.2 It is important to emphasise that this consultation on establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire is linked to - but separate from - the process of local government reorganisation. It is through the latter that new unitary authorities will be created and this process is not the subject of the current consultation or this report. The new unitary authorities would serve populations of at least 500,000 people, with Hampshire therefore likely to be covered by 2 – 3 unitary authorities that would sit below the new Combined County Authority. On 5 February 2025, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution

invited all councils in Hampshire to develop unitary proposals, before submitting their proposals to the Government by 26 September 2025.

Role and remit of the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority

- **Constitution:** Hampshire County Council, Isle of Wight Council, Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council would be the constituent councils of the proposed Combined County Authority. Hampshire County Council would appoint two representatives to be constituent members, while the Isle of Wight Council, Portsmouth City Council and Southampton City Council would each appoint one representative to be constituent members.
- **Mayor:** The Mayor of the Combined County Authority would be directly elected by local government electors (made up of those eligible to vote in local council elections who are on the electoral register) across the four constituent council areas. The first mayoral election would take place on 7 May 2026.
- **Funding:** The Combined County Authority would receive devolved funding from central government to support housing and regeneration, local growth, adult skills and local transport.
- **Transport and local infrastructure:** The Combined County Authority would become the Local Transport Authority for its area, which means it would be responsible for public transport services, like buses, instead of local authorities. The Combined County Authority would play an important role in decarbonising transport and reducing the environmental and health impacts of transport.
- **Housing and strategic planning:** The Combined County Authority would be given control of funding to support regeneration and housing delivery to help meet the Government's target of 1.5 million new homes over the term of this Parliament. The preparation of the 'Spatial Development Strategy' for Hampshire would be led by the new Combined Mayor Authority and the Mayor would be given powers to 'call in' planning applications of strategic importance for determination.
- **Environment and climate change:** The Combined County Authority would have a strategic role on net zero and well as playing a leadership role in the Hampshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy, through convening partnerships and coordinating action, funding and delivery.
- **Health and well-being:** The Mayoral Combined County Authority would have a key role to play in improving health and wellbeing alongside wider public service reform. To support the Mayoral Combined County Authority to drive a "health in all policies" approach, it would have a new bespoke duty in relation to health improvement and health inequalities.

3. Overview of the New Forest National Park Authority's intended response

- 3.1 The proposals for establishing a new Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire are fast moving and it is important that the voice of the National Park Authority is heard as part of the current devolution consultation (and also the

separate process of local government reorganisation). It is recommended that the Authority's consultation response is framed around the following key points.

Key points for the New Forest National Park Authority's consultation response

- The consultation notes the proposals for the reorganisation of existing councils, '...is a separate process and is not covered by this consultation.' There is understandable public confusion that these two linked processes are happening in parallel, but that this consultation only relates to establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority and not local government reorganisation.
- Under the provisions 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.
- One of the statutory tests for establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority is whether it is likely to improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of some or all of the people who live or work in the area. Given over a third of Hampshire is within a designated National Park, further evidence is sought on this. Reference is made to considering the conclusions of an 'environmental principles policy statement' in deciding the next steps, but this statement is not available to view.
- The consultation is silent on the role of the two national park authorities in Hampshire, which represent an important tier of local government for over a third of the county. The consultation states, '...district councils cannot be full constituent members of a Combined County Authority. However, they could participate as non-constituent members and serve on committees...' and we call for national park authorities to be afforded this same status as 'non-constituent members' as a minimum.
- There are potential benefits from the proposals. For example, having the Combined Authority with responsibility for transport across the whole area may be more effective than the current situation where different authorities have their own responsibilities. Active travel measures and the implementation of the Local Walking & Cycling Infrastructure Plans are cost-effective ways to reduce transport emissions and it is recognised that a Combined Authority has the potential to improve delivery.
- 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. This legal status recognised the importance of the statutory planning functions and justifies national park authorities having a formal role in the preparation of the future Spatial Development Strategies.

- In addition to our planning responsibilities, there are other elements of the proposed remit of the Combined Authority that justify a clearer role for national park authorities. For example, the Combined Authority would have a strategic role on net zero and would play a leadership role in Local Nature Recovery Strategies. This is a priority area where national park authorities are key – as acknowledged in Hampshire County Council's own consultation response. Hampshire's two national park authorities will be important stakeholders and delivery partners on the World Class Environment, health and well-being for the new Combined County Authority.

3.2 Of the questions posed in the current consultation, our recommended responses fit best under Question 2 on governance (which covers the statutory powers of national park authorities and provides an opportunity to seek clarification on how these may be affected); and Question 6 on the natural environment (which provides a hook for feedback on the role and remit of national park authorities and the strengthened statutory duty to seek to further the statutory Park purposes). National Park authorities play a key role in enhancing the natural environment and should be considered a key delivery partner of the new Combined Authority.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The Government is clear that it is minded to establish a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire, building on the examples elsewhere in the country where a similar model of local government has been in place for some time. The proposals have the potential to deliver benefits through addressing issues at a wider-than-local scale. This would include transport-related matters connecting cities, towns and their surrounding areas; tailoring skills and support to help address skills shortages across Hampshire; and deciding where new development should spatially take place over a wider geography.
- 4.2 From the National Park Authority's perspective, we call for investment in health & well-being, active travel and natural capital in the New Forest National Park as part of the vision for the future Hampshire Combined County Authority. With over a third of Hampshire falling within nationally designated landscapes, our National Parks should be seen as an asset for the county. In accordance with the strengthened legal duty to 'seek to further' the two statutory National Park purposes, the proposals for the new Combined Authority should protect the integrity and resilience of the landscape, ecology and communities of the New Forest.
- 4.3 Following the consultation, the Secretary of State will consider all responses and decide whether to establish a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire. If the Secretary of State decides to proceed, the government will confirm funding and the necessary secondary legislation will be laid in Parliament. If approved by Parliament, the Combined County Authority would be established in time for the first mayoral election to take place in May 2026.

Recommendations

It is recommended that members:

- (a) note the role and remit of the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority for Hampshire set out in section 2 of this report;**
- (b) endorse the key points set out in Section 3 of this report to form the basis of the New Forest National Park Authority's consultation response; and**
- (c) delegate authority to the Chief Executive to submit the National Park Authority formal response to the consultation by 13 April 2025.**

Equality and Diversity Implications:

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

Contact:

Alison Barnes

Chief Executive Officer

Tel: 01590 646633

Email: alison.barnes@newforestnpa.gov.uk