

Report to **South Downs National Park Authority**
Date **16 October 2025**
By **Director of Growth and Organisational Development**
Title of Report **Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation Update**
Decision

Recommendation: The Authority is recommended to:

- 1. Note the updates contained in this report on the progress of devolution in Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton;**
 - 2. Endorse the guiding principles outlined in section 4 of this report as the foundation for the South Downs National Park Authority’s involvement in discussions on the proposed Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authorities; and**
 - 3. Endorse the South Downs National Park Authority’s position, set out in paragraph 6.5 of this report, in relation to proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton.**
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report is to update the Authority on two related, but distinct, processes currently underway across Hampshire and Sussex:
 - Devolution – which is the transfer of a variety of powers, funding and decision-making from national to local government and will involve the creation of new strategic authorities led by an elected mayor, known as the Mayoral Combined County Authorities (MCCAs).
 - Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) – which is a change to the structures and responsibilities of local authorities and will replace the two-tier system of local government (where it is still in place) with single-tier unitary authorities.
- 1.2 This report also seeks endorsement of the guiding principles that the Authority expects to see embedded within any new arrangements for the MCCAs and the guiding principles for the Authority’s engagement work on Local Government Reorganisation.

2. Policy Context

- 2.1 All of the Partnership Management Plan (PMP) outcomes are partly dependent on local authorities meeting their statutory duty under section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 to seek to further the purposes of the National Park. Examples include management of local authority owned land for nature recovery, climate action and public access and enjoyment (Outcomes 1-3 and 8); supporting cultural and visitor attractions through economic development activities (Outcome 4); managing public rights of way and supporting bus provision (Outcome 5); building in outdoor learning to education

curriculums (Outcome 6); recognising the health benefits of access to the National Park in Public Health Authority decisions (Outcome 7) and exercising statutory functions such as environmental health, flood management, housing and transport to support National Park communities and regulate any adverse impacts (Outcomes 9 and 10).

3. Devolution in Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton

- 3.1 The Government set out its plans for devolution and local government reorganisation across England in the English Devolution White Paper published on 16 December 2024. Local authorities across England were invited to express their interest in being included in the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), which would see devolution progress at pace in areas accepted into the programme.
- 3.2 East and West Sussex County Councils, Brighton and Hove City Council, Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth and Southampton City Councils, and Isle of Wight Council all submitted expressions of interest in joining the DPP and were accepted into the programme. The Government consulted on devolution in those areas in spring 2025 and the Authority agreed its [response to the consultations](#) at its meeting on 27 March 2025.
- 3.3 The Government has since introduced the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill on 10 July 2025 which is to make the necessary legislative provisions for devolution. The Bill is currently at committee stage.
- 3.4 On 17 February 2025, the Government published proposals and consultations on establishing MCCAs covering Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton. Under the proposals, the new Authority would receive devolved funding and wide-ranging powers from central government covering areas including housing and strategic planning, economic growth, skills provision, and transport infrastructure. An MCCA will assume responsibility as the Local Transport Authority for the area, will prepare a county-wide Spatial Development Strategy (with powers to ‘call in’ planning applications), and take on a leadership role in developing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). The first mayoral elections will take place on 7 May 2026.
- 3.5 Officers and Members have been working closely with other Protected Landscapes across both Hampshire and Sussex to ensure that designated landscapes, which represent a significant proportion of both counties, are represented in the devolution process. This collective approach aims to secure a clear role for Protected Landscapes within future governance arrangements.

4. Devolution guiding principles

- 4.1 The following principles in paragraph 4.2 have been identified by the New Forest National Park Authority to shape their ongoing engagement in the devolution proposals and were endorsed at their Authority meeting on 24 July 2025. The principles are considered to be in alignment with the SDNPA’s consultation responses agreed in March 2025 and, given our shared objectives for the landscape and the need to speak with a unified voice on devolution in Hampshire and the Solent, it is proposed that the SDNPA endorse these as our guiding principles for discussions on the new MCCAs across both Hampshire and the Solent, and Sussex and Brighton.
- 4.2 Key principles to inform the South Downs National Park Authority’s engagement in the Mayoral Combined County Authority proposals:
 - **Seek to further** – Under Section 245 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, all ‘relevant authorities’ are required to seek to further the statutory National Park purposes in undertaking their functions (known as the Protected Landscapes Duty) in relation to or where they affect land in the National Park. This duty would apply to the MCCA and should be recognised as proposals develop.
 - **Non-constituent with voting rights** – The Government’s consultations were silent on the role of national park authorities, which represent an important tier of local

government and cover a significant proportion of both Hampshire and Sussex. As set out in our consultation response, we seek the MCCA to appoint national park authorities within their area to be appointed as ‘non-constituent members with voting rights’. National park authorities are important delivery partners in achieving the ambitions of the new MCCAs, particularly in relation to the LNRS’ and given our statutory powers as the local planning authority. Including national park authorities in governance ensures spatial planning, climate resilience, green infrastructure, and nature recovery are coherently integrated and support the Protected Landscapes Duty.

- **Delivery partners** – The Hampshire and Solent, and Sussex and Brighton devolution deals should explicitly recognise the national park authorities in their areas as key delivery partners, reflecting their statutory planning roles and environmental leadership expertise. The deal should provide the resources necessary to implement Local Nature Recovery Strategies and include duties for the MCCA to set targets that halt species decline, protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, and achieve Net Zero commitments.
- **Spatial Development Strategy (SDS)** – The MCCAs will be responsible for developing Spatial Development Strategies. National park authorities are statutory local planning authorities for their areas under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990. Additionally, under the Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, national park authorities previously shared responsibility for preparing and monitoring the Regional Spatial Strategy. We therefore urge the MCCAs to formally include national park authorities in SDS governance and consultations to ensure aligned planning across unitary authorities and Protected Landscapes.
- **Power of Competence** – The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill provides an opportunity to grant national park authorities a general Power of Competence to support more flexible and innovative action, particularly across wider MCCA areas in such a way that is not within our existing powers (national park authorities have a more limited functional Power of Competence, as opposed to other local authorities – including county, district, and parish councils – who have a general Power of Competence). With such powers, national park authorities would be better positioned to utilise our unique expertise to act as delivery partners for major programmes across the whole MCCA area in support of the LNRS’ and other MCCA priorities, unlocking greater value for people and nature.

4.3 In addition to the above principles endorsed by the New Forest National Park Authority, we propose a further principle, as set out below, with the aim of prioritising rural issues and avoiding an urban skew in a majority-rural area.

- **Unlocking rural potential** - The new MCCA should establish a dedicated mechanism to ensure rural issues are addressed at the highest level. This could take the form of a Rural Commissioner or a rural working group. Such an approach would help unlock the full potential of rural communities and protected landscapes, supporting sustainable growth, enhancing resilience, and ensuring that their unique economic, social, and environmental contributions are embedded in strategic decision-making.

5. Engagement with Local Authorities and National Bodies

Hampshire

- 5.1 The Authority is working with the New Forest National Park Authority to provide coordinated input into the devolution agenda. Engagement is structured around eight emerging policy workstreams with officers sitting on the working groups, with particular emphasis on Strategic Planning and Environment & Climate Change.
- 5.2 A key ask is for both national park authorities to be included on Hampshire’s Portfolio Board, which is the forum where local authorities shape the work emerging from the policy workstreams. Representation at this level would provide a direct route to influence strategic

decision-making on behalf of Protected Landscapes, ensuring rural and environmental priorities are considered and helping align delivery across Protected Landscapes.

- 5.3 Early discussions suggest partners are open to the involvement of national park authorities, and a formal letter requesting this role is being prepared by the New Forest and South Downs National Park Authorities on behalf of all of Hampshire’s Protected Landscapes.

Sussex

- 5.4 The SDNPA has been invited to participate as a key stakeholder in the “Informal Partnership Board,” alongside Brighton & Hove City Council, West Sussex County Council, East Sussex County Council, and other stakeholders. This formal recognition ensures protected landscapes are represented within emerging governance structures.

- 5.5 To strengthen this work, the Authority is convening discussions with other Sussex-based protected landscapes to authentically represent their voices on the Partnership Board.

National

- 5.6 Alongside local dialogue, the Authority continues to advocate nationally. Recent engagement includes:

- discussions with the Chief Planner for England on the importance of fully involving National Parks in Spatial Development Strategies;
- dialogue with Defra on granting National Parks the Power of Competence to act flexibly and effectively within devolution frameworks; and,
- meetings with key partners, including Historic England, Heritage Alliance, and Wildlife Trusts.

6. Local Government Reorganisation

- 6.1 LGR can evoke strong emotions, reflecting understandable concerns and uncertainties within communities. Across Sussex and Hampshire, a range of proposals have emerged, each with distinct advantages, challenges, and locally held views. A summary of the various proposals is included at **Appendix I**.

- 6.2 Hampshire:

- Majority of councils: Twelve of fifteen councils are collaborating on a joint proposal, identifying three potential reorganisation models, with each council recommending independently (see diagram 1).
- Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council: Pursuing separate LGR work, considering four alternative models. A preferred proposal has been submitted to Government (see diagram 2).

- 6.3 Sussex:

- West Sussex: County, district, and borough councils have jointly prepared a business case considering a single-unitary model or a North-South / East-West split, with each council recommending separately (see diagram 3).
- East Sussex: All six local authorities are exploring a single-unitary model, replacing the two-tier structure (see diagram 4).
- Brighton & Hove: Proposals include population expansion per Government guidance, incorporating Peacehaven, Telscombe, and Falmer (see diagram 5).

- 6.4 All proposals for LGR were to be submitted to Government no later than 26 September 2025. A statutory consultation will follow, and a ministerial decision is expected on the proposals in March 2026. A transitional period will then follow with new unitary authorities being set up in shadow form for May 2027 in preparation for them to become fully operational on 1 April 2028.

- 6.5 **South Downs Position** - LGR remains complex and politically sensitive. The SDNPA aims to establish itself as a reliable, constructive partner, ensuring protected landscapes are fully considered while remaining adaptable to final governance arrangements. We therefore remain neutral and neither support nor oppose any of the current LGR models.
- 6.6 LGR is expected to be a complex and lengthy process, with potential impacts across multiple areas of the Authority’s work, including land management, host authority arrangements, and shared services. Particular focus is being given to assets that could be more effectively managed for public benefit, either through ownership or partnership, alongside the continuation of key services currently provided by local authorities on which the National Park depends.
- 7. Options and cost implications**
- 7.1 The devolution principles and LGR position will provide guidance in support of the work of both officers and Members when engaging with partners on both devolution and LGR. Whilst the Authority is free to agree what principles and position it considers to be in the best interests of the Authority and the National Park, it is proposed that the principles should align with those of the New Forest National Park Authority so that we are able to speak with a unified voice on behalf of all Protected Landscapes in Hampshire.
- 7.2 There are no immediate resource implications. Any representation of the Authority on the Hampshire Portfolio Board or on the MCCAs, should Protected Landscapes be given a seat at the table as a non-constituent member, would be considered by the Chair and the Chief Executive in the first instance and may in the future form part of the Authority’s annual appointments to outside bodies.
- 8. Next steps**
- 8.1 Once endorsed, the devolution principles and LGR position will provide the foundation for our engagement on these issues.
- 8.2 An officer team comprising James Winkworth (Head of Growth and Organisational Development), Tim Slaney (Director of Planning), Anooshka Rawden (Strategy Lead) Claire Tester (Planning Policy Manager), and Richard Sandiford (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer) has been established to track developments, assess emerging risks and opportunities, and keep Members updated by informing the Corporate Risk Register and through reports such as this.

Implication	Yes*/No
Will further decisions be required by another committee/full authority?	No
Does the proposal raise any Resource implications?	No. Any future actions open to or required of the Authority would be considered at the appropriate time along with resource and cost implications
How does the proposal represent Value for Money?	It is acknowledged that the processes of devolution and local government reorganisation aims to ensure the best use of public funds and increased value for money. The Authority is equally committed to value for money in the delivery of the National Park purposes and recognises opportunities for improved delivery with the MCCAs.
Which PMP Outcomes/ Corporate plan objectives does this deliver against	All, as detailed in section 2.

Implication	Yes*/No
Links to other projects or partner organisations	All local authorities in and around the National Park. New Forest National Park Authority. MHCLG.
How does this decision contribute to the Authority's climate change objectives	MCCAs will have a strategic role in delivering net zero and a transition to clean energy.
Are there any Social Value implications arising from the proposal?	None directly arising from this report
Have you taken regard of the South Downs National Park Authority's equality duty as contained within the Equality Act 2010?	Yes. The Authority notes devolution aims to address some current sources of inequality and that Government will undertake an equalities impact assessment prior to the implementation of new legislation. Local decision making in a variety of areas, including transport, health and wellbeing, public safety, and housing may have positive impacts on those with protected characteristics who live in, work in, or visit the South Downs National Park.
Are there any Human Rights implications arising from the proposal?	None directly arising from this report
Are there any Crime & Disorder implications arising from the proposal?	None directly arising from this report. However, it should be noted that the MCCA will play an important role in public safety.
Are there any Health & Safety implications arising from the proposal?	None directly arising from this report. However, it should be noted that the MCCA will play an important role in health and welfare.
Are there any Data Protection implications?	None directly arising from this report.

9. Risks Associated with the Proposed Decision

- 9.1 There is some risk that, in taking the position on LGR set out in paragraph 6.5, the Authority could be viewed as not protecting or defending the interests of the communities within the National Park pursuant to the Authority's duty to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of the local communities within the National Park in pursuit of our purposes. However, particularly given the complex and politically sensitive nature of LGR, the Authority maintaining a neutral position is considered important to ensure the Authority is able to respond positively to whatever arrangements emerge from LGR.
- 9.2 There are also a variety of other risks in relation to devolution and LGR. These are monitored and considered through the [Authority's Corporate Risk Register](#) which was last considered by the Policy and Resources Committee on 18 September 2025.

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South Downs National Park Authority

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Appendices:	I. Summary of Local Government Reorganisation proposals.
SDNPA Consultees	Chief Executive; Director of Landscape and Strategy; Director of Planning; Chief Finance Officer; Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer; Legal Services.
External Consultees	None
Background Documents	SDNPA Responses to the devolution priority programme – NPA March 2025

Summary of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposals

Diagram 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 [Community Forum - Our Place Our Future - Commonplace](#)

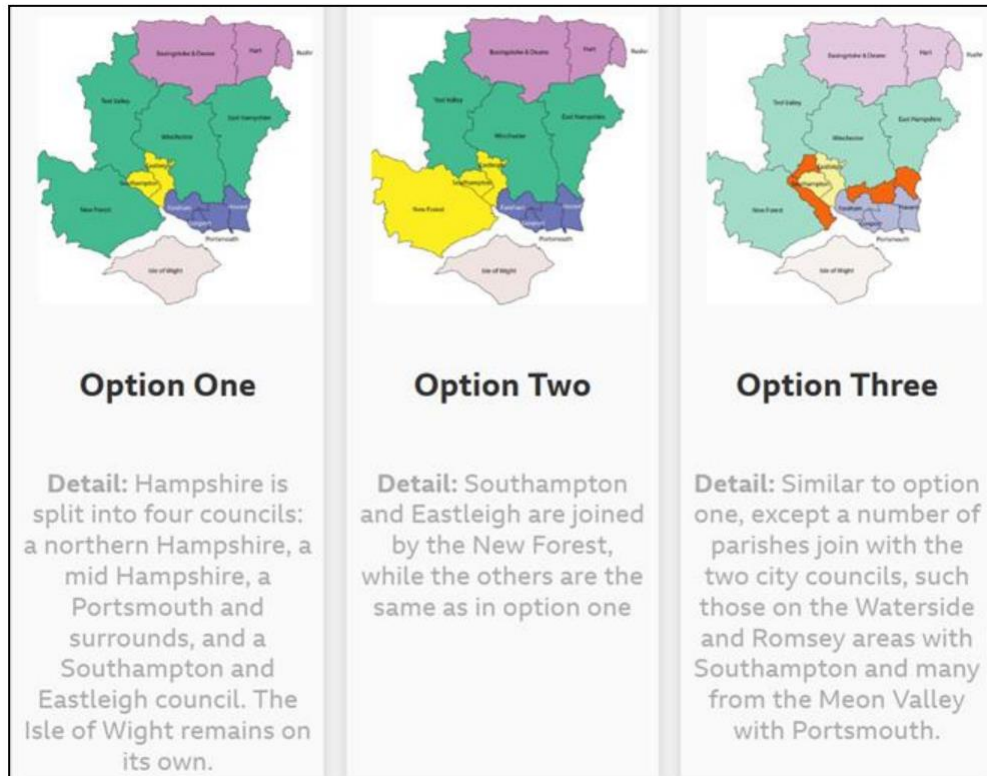


Diagram 2: Hampshire County Council and East Hampshire District Council options [Local Government Reorganisation | About the Council | Hampshire County Council](#)

Option	Geography	Components (City / district / borough level)	Population (% of total)
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%)
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%)
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%)
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%)

Diagram 3: West Sussex County and Districts options (Public Pack)Item 5 - Appendix A: Shaping West Sussex Business Case Agenda Supplement for County Council, 23/09/2025 10:30

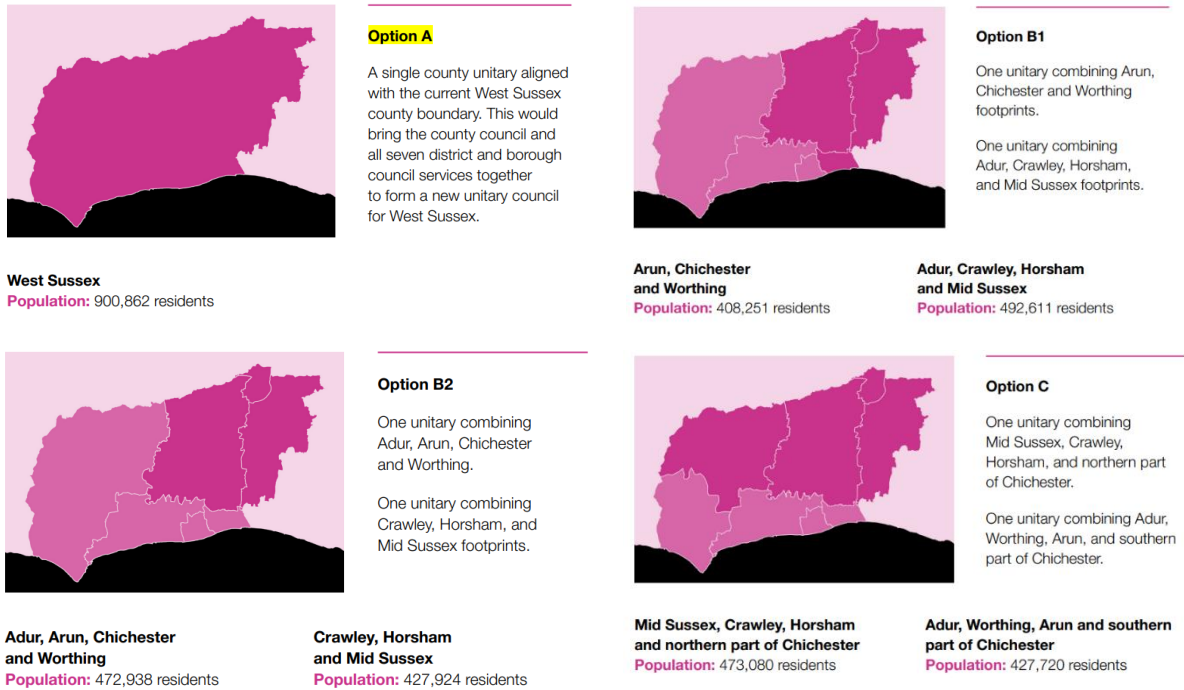


Diagram 4: East Sussex proposal <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/your-council/about/devolution-sussex/one-east-sussex>



Diagram 5: Brighton and Hove proposal [Five unitary option could unlock £52.4m in annual net benefits](#)

