

‘Hampshire and Solent’ Devolution consultation

The [devolution consultation](#) invites you to **comment on each of the questions below by 13 April 2025.**

The consultation seeks views on a proposal to form a Mayoral Combined County Authority for the local government areas in Hampshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Isle of Wight Council, and Southampton City Council (referred to as ‘Hampshire and the Solent’ in this consultation).

This note provides suggestions¹ about what you might want to say in your response to the Government consultation on Devolution.

It is designed for those with limited time for research. The suggestions are not definitive but serve as a general guide.

Preamble

The consultation concerns Devolution, not Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). However, LGR is happening concurrently, with proposed LGR options expected in the Autumn. Where relevant, references are made to potential impacts and interactions between Devolution and LGR.

Evidence and Data

Without clear data and a number of missing mandated Mayoral duties it is difficult to determine the appropriateness/benefits of the ‘Hampshire and Solent’ devolution. This is heightened by a number of democratic governance shortcomings and how the interests plus needs of local communities and local identities will be protected.

Democratic Representation

England has one of the most centralised power structures in the developed world. Devolution from Westminster seems beneficial, offering Hampshire and Solent representation at ‘The Council of the Nations and Regions’. However, placing a single elected mayor at the centre—without an elected assembly or similar—risks distancing democracy from residents.

Strategic Authority (Mayoral Combined County Authority - MCCA) - New regional duties & powers.

- Funding & investment
- Transport & infrastructure
- Skills & employment
- Housing & development
- Economic growth
- Environment & climate change
- Health & wellbeing
- Public safety

Note: The new Authority currently will **not** have statutory duties for **Climate and Nature**.

¹ Compiled from open-source information, national and local organisations. The ideas do not reflect all concerns or positive aspects and are provided to help consultees with suggestions that may not have had time to research.

Key Concerns:

- Hampshire & Solent (2.1m people) – larger than Northern Ireland (1.9m), which has a 90-member Assembly. (*Hampshire County alone – 1.4m people*)
- Hampshire & Solent economy (£80bn) – similar to Wales (£85bn), which has a 60-member Senedd.

Instead of an Assembly, a single elected mayor will serve a four-year term, unchallenged, unlike council leaders or even the Prime Minister, who can be removed if necessary. Other regions, including Bristol, Liverpool, and Cornwall, have abolished mayors due to concerns over excessive power centralisation.

At a time of growing dissatisfaction with democracy, devolution should bring decision-making closer to residents. However, this proposal does the opposite—placing power in the hands of one individual, with key decisions made by unelected civil servants.

Additionally, low voter turnout (30% average) in mayoral elections highlights the urgent need for electoral reform to ensure broader and more diverse community engagement.

Flaws in the Current Approach:

- Strategic decisions may be geographically closer, but democratic representation is moving further away.
- The lack of mandatory Climate and Nature duties suggests the Devolution approach will be flawed from the outset.
- A single mayor for 2.1 million people, no assembly, and civil servants making key decisions is not improving democracy—it is undermining it.

Impact of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR):

- The UK already has one of the lowest ratios of councillors to residents among democratic nations. Further reducing councillor numbers under LGR will weaken local representation.
- It remains unclear whether new LGR Unitary Authority leaders will have appropriate voting powers within the MCCA.
- It is not yet clear how the interests and needs of local communities will be protected including local identities.

Financial Risks:

- Devolution costs may be covered by central government, but LGR costs must come from existing budgets.
- Many new Unitary Authorities have failed to deliver promised savings—transformation costs are huge, raising concerns over the impact on ongoing service delivery.

True devolution must be shaped by public input based on clear evidence of cost benefits (social, economic and environmental) before decisions are made, not after. A stronger democratic model, with climate and nature duties embedded, is essential to deliver lasting regional benefits.

The Devolution and LGR needs to be considered together but unfortunately is largely a sequential and separate process for the purposes of this consultation.

This devolution plan for many does not represent democratic progress—it is a missed opportunity.

Consultation Questions

Question 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?

A coordinated approach across a wider area is welcomed, ensuring all parts of England are represented at 'The Council of the Nations and Regions' ensuring our region plays an equal role in discussions with Mayors, Government, and First Ministers.

Unfortunately, the more local benefits for Hampshire and the Solent cannot be determined without more data and evidence of options alongside new representative and electoral democratic processes.

Key missing evidence includes: Population projections, Geographic options, Housing targets, Council tax base, Economic growth potential and Deprivation and health data. Nor is there clarity on the strategic environmental planning approach as statutory duties for nature and climate have been omitted from the Devolution paper.

Without this information, it is argued an informed decision cannot be made.

The Devolution White Paper does not propose an improved electoral and representative model to reflect the diverse Hampshire and Solent region. Devolution, combined with LGR and fewer councillors, will dilute local voices, especially in rural Hampshire, where representation is already stretched. Additionally, there is:

- No elected assembly for the MCCA
- Unclear voting rights for LGR Unitary Authority leaders

This weakens local democracy rather than strengthening it.

The White Paper's approach to climate and nature is insufficient and unhelpful in answering a question about appropriate Devolution geography. A truly effective devolution geographic model should integrate:

- Strategic environmental planning (e.g., water catchment areas, ecosystem services, and Local Nature Recovery Strategies)
- Mandatory Climate & Nature Strategy for the Combined Authority
- Integration of transport, spatial planning, health, climate, and nature

Without geographic statutory duties for climate and nature, the new authority will lack the mandate, resources, and accountability needed to drive effective environmental policies. This need can be explained further with the following key points:

- A statutory duty should require a Climate & Nature Strategy and Action Plan, coordinated with LGR Unitary Councils and ideally with the National Parks.
- Clear targets for carbon reduction, renewable energy expansion, and biodiversity protection must be established and monitored.
- Ecosystem services, as pioneered by South Downs National Park, should be expanded to the Hampshire and Solent region.

The Integrated Settlement Outcomes Framework should include measurable climate and nature objectives linked to the optimal geographic area.

Without clear evidence and the missing data an informed judgment cannot be made about whether the proposed geography will deliver improved benefits.

The Northern Powerhouse experience highlights the risks—ambitious aims undermined by unclear objectives and insufficient funding.

True devolution must be shaped by public input based on clear evidence of cost benefits before decisions are made, not after. A stronger democratic model, with climate and nature duties embedded, is essential to deliver lasting regional benefits.

Question 2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined County Authority?

A single mayor for 2.1 million people without an assembly, and ‘civil servants’ making key decisions is not improving democracy—it will undermine proper democratic governance.

Current proposed electoral and governance arrangements for the new *Mayoral Combined County Authority* (MCCA) introduces a number of fairness and effective governance risks for Hampshire and Solent. The fundamental problem is the method of electing a Mayor followed by the unrepresentative mix of legitimate decision makers that will support the Mayor in Strategic decision making.

UK already has one of the lowest ratios of councillors to residents among democratic nations. Further reducing councillor numbers under LGR will weaken local representation. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether new LGR Unitary Authority leaders will have appropriate voting powers within the MCCA.

Hampshire and Solent’s population is comparable to Northern Ireland and a governance structures should reflect its scale, diversity and complexity. A MCCA with a Proportional Representation Assembly would enhance democratic representation and engagement.

The results of the First Past the Post voting system currently used in elections does not adequately reflect Hampshire’s diverse communities, exacerbating democratic disillusionment. Replacing local tiers with mayoral authority’s risks creating a “democratic deficit” given the low voter turnout (30% on average) in mayoral elections.

Elections to appoint representatives to the combined authority would be a better way forward for improved democratic legitimacy, representation and governance of a new Hampshire and Solent devolved region.

Question 3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the economy of the area?

The only acceptable growth is green growth.

Unsustainable consumption with dwindling and limited natural resources and the rising impact on the climate, nature and natural ecosystems undermines the well-being of people and our economy.

Without clear economic evidence and data of the benefits of Devolution an informed judgement cannot be made about geography and the economy.

The document says, “Southampton is important in the efforts to drive sustainable growth, focusing on carbon capture and storage, hydrogen production, and Sustainable Aviation Fuel production.” Currently, these aspirations are all “unicorns”- fantasies that will not become a reality and will not deliver sustainable growth nor reduce pollution which is the flip-side of the climate and nature crises. Putting effort into them will not help the local economy as it will undermine the environment and community well-being without solutions which are not yet available.

Similarly, whilst the maritime sector is one of the Solent’s primary sectoral strengths, it must not be expanded until the current environmental shortcomings are fixed - much of what happens is bad for both communities, the climate, nature and air pollution. Investment in cruise ships should not be a sustainable target for growth until these problems can be avoided.

For similar reasons any investment in aerospace, should not be undertaken until this industry changes its life-cycle impacts on people and the environment.

Whatever growth there is, it should be green growth and arguably away from the overcrowded regions to other parts of the country where there is least employment, most deprivation and less risks to the environment and communities.

Without data and known improved governance processes any cost benefits cannot be determined of working across the proposed geography set against the costly transformation process compounded by LGR without savings.

Question 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve social outcomes in the area?

The skills section could improve social outcomes – both by helping people find jobs especially in the green economy, and by contributing to green industries such as retrofitting buildings and homes and creating renewable energy. Combined with improved sustainable agriculture and green space provision the Hampshire and Solent region with optimal governance and climate/nature duties could be an exemplar to improve social outcomes.

But overall, it depends on what the politicians decide about how funding is allocated – both whether central Government gives enough to the Mayor, and whether the Mayor and new unitaries allocate funding to where it is most needed.

Until more information is made available the cost benefits cannot be determined for improved social outcomes for the proposed geography.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve local government services in the area?

It can only improve services if there is funding from central Government to cover the cost of devolution and to address any Unitary Authority budgetary ‘black holes’ before vesting day of the new LGR Unitary Authorities. That would mean that savings can be redirected to improving services. It’s no good if we have to use savings (e.g. from cutting duplication in posts) to pay the costs of (for example) statutory redundancy, transformation costs and/or to address funding shortfalls.

A Mayoral Combined County Authority will be more likely to succeed if it has better representation across local areas via LGR Unitary Authorities with improved governance using Local Area Boards or similar panels, with sufficient power, to work alongside Town and Parish Councils.

There is no evidence any of this will happen to improve social outcomes and local government services in the geographic area.

Question 6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?

The natural environment doesn't fit local government boundaries. It is better considered from a different geographical perspective e.g., water catchment or natural ecosystem areas or..... A larger area might be a better idea.

The Integrated Settlement Outcomes Framework should include stringent, ambitious and measurable climate and nature outcomes. Followed by mandated commitments with a coordinated Climate and Nature strategy, action plan, performance framework and reporting system to both National and local communities.

Just as Combined Authorities will promote a "health in all policies" approach, they should also be expected to ensure a "climate and nature in all policies" approach. This would have regard to the need to reduce emissions, look for climate mitigation and adaptation opportunities and protect/replenish nature in the exercise of all their functions.

The proposed Mayoral Authority currently doesn't have the statutory and mandatory duties for **Climate and Nature**. It is therefore likely that won't create a coordinated nature and climate action plan across all local governance areas in the Mayoral Combined County Authority, including the national parks. Coordinated performance frameworks, targets and monitoring is needed if we are serious about green growth and our well-being . The roll-out of an Ecosystem services approach as per the South Downs National Park is a necessary requirement for the whole of the Hampshire and Solent region.

I therefore agree with the 13 climate networks across England who wrote to the Government asking for climate and nature duties to be included in the Devolution Bill - see [here](#).

But as it stands, the White Paper is too weak, it will not improve the local natural environment and national environment!

Question 7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?

To ensure devolution supports " the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities we need parish and town councils to ideally have some money-raising powers and encouragement to become a force to make changes locally.

There is a need for the strongest rights of local places within the Devolution and LGR change process. If the above is not feasible Devolution could mandate new Unitary councils to adopt and adapt a Wiltshire style

‘Local Area Board’ model to work with increased empowered local Town/Parish to set local priorities, allocate some resources, oversight of highways and footways improvements. Local Area Boards could have some grant making powers to set strongest prioritization for climate, nature plus green growth and transportation improvements within a Strategic governance structure.

The new governance arrangements should include the requirement to build structured and systematic partnerships with community-led climate and nature initiatives.

Much of the success in tackling climate change and nature restoration depends on local engagement. Community, environmental, and faith groups play a vital role in driving awareness and action. As local governance structures shift towards unitary councils, there is a risk that the relationships built between borough/district councils and local climate groups will be lost.

Without clarity and provision of these aspects or similar it is not clear working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities!

[Click here to reply to the consultation](#)

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