

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION: POSITION PAPER

1. Introduction

Hampshire Association of Local Councils (Hampshire ALC) is a membership organisation representing the 265 Local Councils (parish and town councils) in the county of Hampshire.

Hampshire ALC supports Local Councils to improve the quality of life of people living and working in the county through the provision of training and advice to enable Local Councils to overcome challenges, plan for the future and successfully represent their communities. A vital part of the Association's work is to provide a strong, collective voice for Local Councils across Hampshire, to advocate for the interests of communities and neighbourhoods on their behalf – providing a collective voice and amplifying the message.

2. Local Government re-organisation proposals

Individual Local Councils, as well as the seven District Associations where Local Councils currently exist across Hampshire, may have a view on which of the particular Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proposals under consideration in the current consultation best reflects their preference for local government re-organisation in their locality. This is likely to differ between areas and amongst individual Local Councils. Accordingly, Hampshire ALC does not have an agreed pan-organisation preference for any of the proposals which are under consideration, however we continue to engage with the various principal authorities who have put forward different alternatives.

Hampshire ALC is committed to working to ensure that the final shape of re-organised principal authorities across the county delivers effectively for communities throughout the entire area, and, in consequence, the arrangements for the engagement and involvement of Local Councils and local communities is an important priority.

As part of these discussions, we will continue to press for the establishment of Local Councils in the areas of the County where Local Councils do not currently exist.

3. Community Governance arrangements

Whatever the final structural outcome of LGR, Hampshire ALC believes it is critical that communities across the county continue to be represented and have input into the various matters and initiatives which impact them following the reorganisation.

There are a range of current initiatives across government which are focused on neighbourhoods. These appear to assume different population sizes and characteristics, for example, neighbourhood health arrangements under consideration within the NHS are considerably larger than the concept of a neighbourhood commonly assumed in local government.

In the context of local government re-organisation, it is important that arrangements for neighbourhood governance do not become a proxy for

recreating district or borough level structures; for that reason, Hampshire ALC believes that appropriate arrangements for sub-unitary governance are vital and should be focused on the ability of individual communities to exercise agency and influence on those priorities which relate to their particular circumstances. This is likely to be different for the range of communities even across a particular unitary council area, and it is important that they should reflect the characteristics and circumstances of the individual community concerned – not imposed upon them by means of a uniform model chosen to apply in all cases. Where Local Councils do not already exist, it may be beneficial for communities to be engaged with a view to exploring how the arrangements for community governance could provide empowerment and benefit for those areas.

Local councils represent an unequivocal link between communities with demonstrable democratic legitimacy. Following local government re-organisation, communities are likely to perceive that the unitary authority making decisions for them are more remote – particularly for those services and initiatives currently determined by the district and boroughs in the county. It is vital that communities are able to engage in a structured and systematic way with matters which are relevant to them, and Hampshire ALC strongly believes that Local Councils constitute a suitable vehicle for that to be achieved in a democratic and representative way.

Local Councils have demonstrated a willingness to embrace opportunities which may arise out of the changes in local government structures. This has included asset transfers, increasing their delivery of public services and participating in forums which advance the advocacy of local priorities.

The Government has expressed an on-going commitment to the principles of community governance, and there is a broader public policy interest in the provision of a range of local services – including in policing and health. Whilst differing definitions of what a ‘neighbourhood’ comprises are used by differing stakeholders, Hampshire ALC welcomes the focus on retaining a local involvement in decisions which impact on that locality. However, it is important that there is both democratic legitimacy and consistent involvement in these representations, and the role of Local Councils in providing that is unrivalled and should be reflected in whatever arrangements are implemented.

4. Conclusion

Hampshire ALC underscores the importance of the contribution of Local Councils in supporting communities throughout and beyond local government re-organisation: they are well-placed to ensure effective communication and iterative engagement, serving communities in a way that other stakeholders cannot replicate as efficiently and meaningfully.