

Councillor Roger Huxstep's Report on Salient Issues

Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC)

A previous review of HWRCs resulted in changes to opening hours at Hampshire's 24 centres from 1st April 2015. The change followed consultation with residents on a number of options to shape the service for the future. These looked at affordable ways to ensure the County Council continued to deliver a modern, value for money service for Hampshire's residents. The changes did not result in recycling centres being closed down to meet the required overall budget savings for 2015/16, however, because of continuing budget restraints a further review through consultation is under way. The 10-week public consultation asks residents how they think savings can best be made in the cost of running the county's household waste recycling centres (HWRCs). "The cuts the government has made to Hampshire's grant are now so severe that we simply cannot afford to carry on as before." The county council had been planning to make savings to meet a £98million funding shortfall by April 2017, but when the government announced its funding plans for local authorities for the next three years, Hampshire lost £48m more this year than had been anticipated.

"It is therefore vital that the resources we have in Hampshire are focused on where they can make the most impact, and how we deal with Hampshire's waste is part of this. We are now in a position where we need to establish how we can run the HWRC service with a smaller budget in a way that is financially sustainable for Hampshire council tax payers in the long term."

The 24 sites are currently open every day except Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's Day.

24 is a large number compared with other areas, and it is clear we are no longer in a financial position to be able to provide this same level of service.

"This consultation is a genuine opportunity for people to tell us how they think a different and more affordable model can be established. We are asking people what they think of changes in opening hours - an hour less each day, weekend-only opening, winter closures - and what they think of closing some sites altogether. We will be looking at how many people use each of the sites, how much waste is collected, and the distances between sites."

I urge Hampshire residents to take part in this consultation and help us define an affordable service which works for them. "No decisions will be made until we have looked at all the evidence and taken people's views into consideration."

For more information, and to respond to the consultation, visit www.hants.gov.uk/hwrc2016. If you answer question 6 you may wish to qualify your answer at Box 8. Otherwise you might find yourself agreeing to the closure of at least 4 sites. Paper copies of the consultation can be obtained by calling 0300 555 1389 or emailing hwrc.consultation@hants.gov.uk.

Whatever, please make your views known by the close of the consultation at noon on Wednesday, 25th May.

Devolution and Combined Authorities: "The Leader of Hampshire County Council, Councillor Roy Perry has announced to the County Council at the AGM meeting Friday, 13th May, that before there are any changes in local government structure across Hampshire, whether it be for combined authorities, an elected Mayor or a unitary council, there must be a full and genuine public consultation.

He said he had met very few people who wanted a 'Solent City' established and still fewer who wanted a 'Metro Mayor' anywhere in the area. He felt before councils give in to external pressure it was the people of Hampshire who should have their say.

The County Council has been encouraged to support a bid by Portsmouth and Southampton and some of the Hampshire districts to create a Solent combined authority based on: Southampton, Portsmouth, Eastleigh, Fareham, Gosport, Havant and East Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight, whilst other Districts are proposing a Heart of Hampshire combined authority to cover: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester, Test Valley and the New Forest. Both of those proposals are based on an elected Mayor with all the expense of elections, and a new layer of administration that would entail. These proposals set a path towards the creation of separate unitary councils. Furthermore, the geography pays little regard to the Local Enterprise Partnership boundaries, to economic needs, the NHS geography, and the fact that a Fire and Rescue Service exists, together with a Police and Crime Commissioner for all of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

In the face of these moves to split Hampshire, the County Council has recently commissioned an independent study by Deloitte, to provide an initial analysis of how services could be better provided across the whole county, at lower cost.

Their report, which explores a number of options in detail, has indicated the creation of a new unitary structure for local government in Hampshire could cut council tax for the majority of Hampshire households (by the County Council's analysis, around 90 per cent), streamline services and deliver tens of millions of pounds of savings each year. Their estimates suggest this would be at least a third more than the £30 million, apparently offered by the Government to a Solent combined authority.

Councillor Perry said: "One of the options under consideration is the creation of a new unitary 'Hampshire Council' which would replace both the County Council and Hampshire's 11 district councils - delivering lower council tax, more efficient services and clearer democratic accountability to Hampshire residents."

A unitary authority would be like those for Southampton and Portsmouth. As a single local authority it would carry out the full range of local government services for its area, encompassing all the duties and functions that are carried out in 'two-tier'; areas with both district and county councils like Hampshire. For example, a unitary council would combine the collection and disposal of household waste, whereas in a two-tier area these functions are split between the district council (waste collection) and the county council (waste disposal).

Councillor Perry said: "I have worked hard to make the two-tier structure work but the Districts and Cities have now come up with their separate proposals that will begin to divide the county immediately. We are convinced that this would lead ultimately to unitary councils based on a perverse geography which will do little to enhance the economy of the area. Interestingly, the independent analysis shows that two such unitaries based on the Solent and Heart of Hampshire proposals would be the most disruptive and least efficient model out of all of the options open to Hampshire. It is simply indefensible that we should be taken down that path with so little information or attempt to establish if there is public consent."

This latest suggestion for a 'Hampshire Council' follows the failed negotiations on securing greater devolution to the whole Hampshire and the Isle of Wight area, which Ministers had suddenly insisted could only happen if there was an elected Mayor. The Solent proposal was due to be announced in the Chancellor's budget in March but was postponed when the County Council said it could not sign up until there was evidence to show this was what people wanted.

Councillor Perry added: "Our priority has been, and always will be, serving the best interests of all Hampshire residents. We have thought long and hard about the devolution negotiations with Government - and the two current combined authority proposals covering the Hampshire and Isle of Wight area: Solent and Heart of Hampshire. Unfortunately, these proposals devolve very few powers down from central government but would transfer, and therefore split, some of the county's key services such as highways and transport. They don't bring greater clarity or efficiencies. They add a new layer of local government and additional costs and will inevitably disrupt high quality countywide services. The County Council has painstakingly built over many years a range of services, especially in the protection of vulnerable adults and children that are the envy of the country. I cannot accept that these should be broken up in this way, for these reasons. I would far rather lose the County Council as we know it, and establish a new 'Hampshire Council' than threaten those services."

"As such, we reluctantly concluded that the County Council had been left with no choice but to explore other options for the future of local government in Hampshire, including reorganisation. The concept of a new unitary 'Hampshire Council' has been identified as a way that provides residents with the greatest level of continuity in services, the highest savings and the lowest cost of implementation. The anticipated savings far outweigh what would have been gained from the Government in a devolution deal. We would very much like to study other examples of unitary councils. This option would also give much more influence and power to local Town and Parish Councils, thereby strengthening local democracy. This proposal is not about protecting historical arrangements, or matters of individual sovereignty, but about securing a sustainable future for Hampshire residents with high quality and efficient services and a buoyant economy."

"However such a fundamental decision about the future of Hampshire can only happen if residents want it, and are given a proper opportunity to voice their views. This is why the County Council will shortly be going out to a full public consultation on this issue."

"We will also be liaising with our MPs and other key stakeholders - and all our Town and Parish Councils to enter a debate about how we can create a radical shift in real localism. If Southampton and Portsmouth want to proceed with their Solent City idea, then that is up to them. The financial evidence we have indicates a county unitary could save well over £40 million per annum - every year, not just the 30 years promised in the Solent deal so it should be good news for the Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as local taxpayers."

"In conclusion, I will not be endorsing the current Solent and Heart of Hampshire proposals unless and until the people of Hampshire tell me that is what they want. And we will set before the public real alternatives which have a strong evidence base and will deliver what I think people want: more efficient local government with fewer layers of bureaucracy and consistently high quality services - at scale and locally. The next stage, in a proper democratic process, will be a special meeting of the Cabinet at which these proposals will be considered and taken forward in a full public debate."

Both of the above local issues are important at ward and at divisional level in our district and county and I commend them to your attention. If there are other issues you wish to raise, please do so and I will address them separately.

Cllr Roger Huxstep

Member for Curbridge, Curdridge, Shedfield, Shirrell Heath & Whiteley, Winchester City District Council
Member for Meon Valley Division, Hampshire County Council.

19th May 2016