



## Winchester City Council January 2025

### Devolution Looms!

We are back to work today with a busy few weeks ahead following the publication of the Government's English Devolution White Paper on 16 December which sets out proposals for devolution and Local Government reorganisation across England.

The vision outlined by Government is that all parts of England are to be part of regional Strategic Authorities that have a regional Mayor. These Strategic Authorities, working in a similar way to existing Mayoral Combined Authorities will have responsibility for driving growth and shaping public services across wider regional geographies covering strategic leadership of key place shaping responsibilities such as economic regeneration and growth, strategic planning, skills and employment and strategic transport.

These Strategic Authorities will consist of Unitary Councils, which the White Paper indicates will ultimately replace the current two tier local government structure.

If an area wishes to progress quickly and join the Priority Programme it may ask Government to defer elections in 2025. The County Council has published a paper to consider this opportunity as can be seen in the Agenda for Extraordinary County Council on Thursday 9 January 2025, 10.00 am

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Below that would be four unitary authorities covering a population of about 500,000 each.

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So the new Strategic Authority would be Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. There are obvious geographical and social issues, but whether a deviation from the 500,000 approximation is allowed is up to HMG.

### Whence Parish & Town Councils?

They will be essential to look after so many local services, but is there a model to create 'hub towns' (basically market towns) plus surrounding villages? There is an economic logic to this.

And provide a local voice to whoever represents us at the unitary level?

### In the meantime

Winchester Council carries on with current responsibilities. We are concerned that staff may be drawn into devolution work, and seeking other jobs.

We have a governance review in the Council Plan, and we expect parishes to form a significant voice in that process.

### Financial Issues

The major problem facing the county councils is the huge financial burden of adult and children's services, importantly education, special needs and social care. These are statutory duties, whilst repairing roads and running libraries is not. At the same time the proportion of centrally funded spending going to County councils has halved. Both Labour and Conservative governments have previously pledged to get a grip on social care funding to best serve the nation's ageing population but have rejected or deferred major



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proposals due to financial pressures. In short there is some there is some nasty medicine to be swallowed about who pays the bills.

The experience of most councillors is that residents care most about the services that effect the most immediately; will their bins be emptied? Will they be able to make their voices heard about local planning?

**Watch this space!**

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