

COPYTHORNE PARISH COUNCIL MEETING – FEBRUARY 10TH 2026

ITEM 14. To ratify the Parish Council's responses to the MHCLG Local Government Re-Organisation Consultation

BACKGROUND

On November 17th 2025 the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ("MHCLG") launched a consultation of the proposals for unitary government for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The proposals to be consulted upon were those submitted to the MHCLG by the various existing unitary and Tier 2 Authorities in late September 2025. The Consultation closed on January 11th 2026.

The four proposals in this consultation were as follows:-

Hampshire County Council & East Hampshire District Council proposed 4 unitary councils across the whole of the area of Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton comprising the current areas of:

- Mid North: Basingstoke and Deane, East Hampshire, Hart, Rushmoor, Winchester
- West: Eastleigh, New Forest, Southampton, Test Valley
- South East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth
- Isle of Wight: Isle of Wight to remain unchanged

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council proposed 5 unitary councils across the whole of the area of Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton comprising the current areas of:

- North: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor
- Mid: East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester
- South East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth
- South West: Eastleigh, Southampton
- Isle of Wight: Isle of Wight to remain unchanged

Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, Hart District Council, Havant Borough Council, Portsmouth City Council, Rushmoor Borough Council and Southampton City Council proposed 5 unitary councils across the whole of the area of Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton. This includes a request to split some existing district council areas between the proposed new councils. These would comprise the current areas of:

- North: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor
- Mid: East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester, (less 11 parishes from all 4 areas)
- South East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth, (plus 3 parishes of East Hampshire and 1 parish of Winchester)
- South West: Eastleigh, Southampton plus 4 parishes from New Forest and 3 parishes from Test Valley
- Isle of Wight: Isle of Wight to remain unchanged

Winchester City Council proposed 5 unitary councils across the whole of the area of Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton. These would comprise the current areas of:

- North: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor
- Mid: East Hampshire, Test Valley, Winchester
- South East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth
- South West: Eastleigh, New Forest, Southampton
- Isle of Wight: Isle of Wight to remain unchanged

Gosport Borough Council and Isle of Wight Council did not submit proposals.

The consultation asked questions about each proposal to help inform the assessment of the proposals.

Given the ongoing flow of information, the Council (along with many others) agreed to leave the submission of a response for as long as was possible (the closing date for the consultation was January 11th 2026) to ensure that as much consideration as possible could be given to all of the information.

In reaching a decision on their response to the consultation, members of the Parish Council took into account the clear feelings from the 2025 Annual Parish Meeting that those present wanted the NFDC area to remain intact; presentations and briefings from NFDC; and individual discussions with residents.

Based on the above, it was agreed to support the proposal (*known in the consultation as option 1*) submitted to the MHCLG by NFDC (and others) as below:-

Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council proposed 5 unitary councils across the whole of the area of Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton comprising the current areas of:

- **North: Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Rushmoor**
- **Mid: East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester**
- **South East: Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth**
- **South West: Eastleigh, Southampton**
- **Isle of Wight: Isle of Wight to remain unchanged**

At the request of members, I compiled a response to the consultation which was agreed to following an exchange of e-mails. A copy of the response, submitted on January 10th 2026, is attached.

Additionally, over the Christmas/New Year Break, the Council received a request from Beaulieu Parish Council to co-sign an open letter from New Forest East Town and Parish Councils to our Member of Parliament, Sir Julian Lewis, asking him to:-

- 1. Oppose any reorganisation proposal that integrates the New Forest in its entirety, or partially, into the Southampton and Eastleigh authority;**
- 2. Advocate for realistic timescales that prioritise service continuity and a smooth transition;**
- 3. Ensure that protected landscapes and rural communities are considered as a distinct policy issue in national decision-making regarding the proposed reorganisation; and**
- 4. Ensure all New Forest parish and town councils are fully involved throughout any transition process.**

Once agreement had been reached on the MHCLG consultation response and again, following an exchange of e-mails, members of the Council, agreed on January 12th 2026 to support the "Open Letter" request. In total 14 Town & Parish Council's - along with the New Forest Association of Local Councils - signed the letter. A copy of the letter is attached.

REQUIRED ACTION

Council is asked to formally ratify the response submitted to the MHCLG and the open letter sent to Sir Julian Lewis.

David Rigby
Clerk to Copythorne Parish Council
January 15th 2026

Dear Sir or Madam,

Copythorne Parish Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Government's consultation on Local Government Reform for Hampshire and the Solent. Our response supports Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council for 5 unitary councils and draws directly on the evidence published in:

- *Local Government Reorganisation Business Case (NFDC, 2025) - [LGR Business Case NFDC 4573]*
- *Local Government Reorganisation Appendices (NFDC, 2025) - [LGR Appendices NFDC 4572]*

We have structured our response around the core consultation questions and have included additional context explaining why the Council supports Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council and rejects the alternative structural options being consulted on.

Question 1. Is Option 1 based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

Yes. New Forest District Council's preferred model - the Mid-Hampshire Unitary (Option 1) groups New Forest, Test Valley, Winchester and East Hampshire into a geography that reflects the rural and semi-rural identity of the area. The Business Case (Section 2, p.13 17) put forward by the proposers highlights that this forced urban-rural mergers, and respects natural communities.

For Copythorne, influenced heavily by New Forest heritage, this arrangement reflects real-world geography, travel-to-work patterns and shared identity.

Conclusion Q1: Yes. The geography of Option 1 is appropriate and respects the identity of the rural and coastal communities within the New Forest.

Question 2. Will the proposed council of Option 1 be able to deliver the outcomes described?

The Business Case (Sections 3 & 5) put forward by the proposers suggests that Option 1 will support more integrated, joined-up public services, reduce duplication, and strengthen strategic oversight. The proposal is credible, though it acknowledges that new unitary authorities being created will inherit "legacy financial pressures" (Business Case, p.78)

Outcomes will depend on disciplined transition, reinvestment of savings, and ensuring that rural and coastal priorities are not overshadowed by higher-population areas.

Conclusion Q2: Yes. Provided the new authority manages transition responsibly and protects rural/coastal priorities.

Question 3. Are the proposed Option 1 councils the right size for efficiency and resilience?

Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane BC, NFDC and TVBC strikes a balance between scale and community identity. The Business Case (Section 5) demonstrates that this model provides:

- financial resilience through a broader tax base;
- economies of scale;
- integrated service delivery;
- strengthened capacity for long-term planning.

Crucially, it avoids the excessive scale and urban dominance seen in other options.

Conclusion Q3: Yes. The proposed scale is appropriate and balanced.

Question 4. Will this put local government on a firmer financial footing?

The strategic modelling (Business Case, p.84 89) shows that reorganisation will deliver substantial savings that can stabilise finances, reduce duplication, and support better long-term planning across Hampshire. Given current pressures, including some authorities receiving Exceptional Financial Support, a consolidated financial structure is necessary.

Conclusion Q4: Yes. The proposal strengthens financial sustainability across the region.

Question 5. Will the proposed council of Option 1 deliver high-quality, sustainable public services for our area?

Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane BC, NFDC and TVBC supports consistent, integrated and modernised public services. It also maintains the coherence of the New Forest and Waterside, enabling more sensitive management of environmental, coastal and rural priorities.

However, service quality will only be sustained if rural/coastal needs remain prominent in budgeting, planning and staffing.

Conclusion Q5: Likely yes. With the caveat that rural and coastal service needs must be actively protected.

Question 6. Has the proposal been informed by local views and will it meet local needs?

The Engagement Reports in the Appendices of strong demonstrate extensive consultation with:

- residents,
- businesses,
- parish and town councils,
- voluntary sector partners.

The evidence shows clear support for keeping the New Forest whole with a strong preference for structural options that protect rural identity. NFDC Cabinet papers confirm that Option 1 directly reflects this feedback. 97% of the local community identified as a rural community. Only 3 % identified as more urban. This demonstrates that this community does not support any option that merges this area with Southampton.

At the Copythorne Annual Parish Meeting held in May 2025 there was a request from a resident that those present should express concerns to the leadership of NFDC about the possibility of a split of NFDC across different new unitary authorities and ask them to do all that they could to avoid this. Another asked if the meeting could request that a letter be sent asking NFDC that. This resolution passed with strong support.

Whilst we are aware that Option 2 of the proposal from HCC & EHDC for 4 unitary councils suggests the inclusion of the whole of the NFDC area within a west unitary authority (along with Southampton, Eastleigh and Test Valley), many residents of the parish have been clear with parish councillors that they do not want to be part of unitary authority with predominately urban areas.

The same concerns exist with the proposal from Winchester City Council for 5 unitary councils with the NFDC area being included in a "South West" unitary authority with Southampton and Eastleigh.

Only Option 1 of the proposal from Basingstoke & Deane BC, NFDC and TVBC is supported.

Conclusion Q6: Yes. The preferred proposal aligns with the expressed views and needs of local communities.

Question 7. Does the proposal support devolution (e.g., a strategic authority)?

The Business Case (Section 6) confirms that the proposed unitaries of Option 1 of the proposal from Basingstoke & Deane BC, NFDC and TVBC are designed to slot directly into future devolution arrangements. A smaller number of well-balanced unitaries makes strategic governance (across transport, skills, environment and coastal management) far more coherent.

Conclusion Q7: Yes. Option 1 is well-suited to future devolution.

Question 8. Does the proposal enable stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment?

Option 1 emphasises clear accountability, simplified governance, and stronger partnership with parish and town councils. The Business Case (p.27-33) sets out improvements to local influence and community involvement. This will only be meaningful if the new authority embeds strong parish-level involvement and ensures fair representation for rural and coastal areas.

Southampton City Council has no experience of dealing with Parish Councils; nor does it have experience of working directly with a National Park; or an understanding of the unique characteristics and ways of governance that have shaped the New Forest (Verderers and Commoners for example).

Conclusion Q8: Potentially yes. With the right safeguards for parish and neighbourhood engagement.

Why Copythorne Parish Council does not support:-

- 1. The Hampshire County Council/EHDC proposal; Option 1a, 2, and Hampshire County Council/East Hampshire.**
- 2. The “Option 1a” proposal from Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, Hart District Council, Havant Borough Council, Portsmouth City Council, Rushmoor Borough Council and Southampton City Council.**
- 3. The “Option 2” proposal from Winchester City Council for 5 unitary councils.**

Copythorne Parish Council rejects the alternative structural models for the following well evidenced reasons:-

1. They undermine rural identity

Alternative options would place the New Forest into large, urban-led unitaries. These risk diluting the rural, coastal and environmental characteristics that defines New Forest and Waterside communities. The Business Case reflects strong local opposition to being absorbed into urban-dominant structures.

2. They split natural communities

Several options require dividing the New Forest or separating Waterside communities from long-standing rural and coastal partners. Engagement evidence shows residents and parish councils strongly opposed splitting the Forest or merging it into unrelated areas.

3. They introduce service delivery risks

Models mixing heavily urban and rural areas create uneven demand and conflicting priorities. Rural roads, coastal infrastructure, environmental management and planning controls risk being overshadowed by urban pressures. Service access would likely centralise away from communities like ours.

4. They threaten cultural, coastal and forest heritage

The environmental heritage Forest, and the wider cultural context of the new Forest could be diluted within broader structures lacking local understanding. The Business Case highlights the importance of keeping heritage-centred communities together, alternative options fail to do so.

5. They contradict resident and stakeholder feedback

The Engagement Reports and direct comments from our own residents show the public’s consistent message:

- keep the Forest whole,
- protect rural identity, and
- avoid forced urban-rural mergers

Alternative options run directly against this.

Overall position of Copythorne Parish Council - why we support Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council and reject the alternatives

Copythorne Parish Council supports option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council because it:

- keeps the New Forest whole;
- respects rural, coastal and environmental identity;
- maintains natural community groupings;
- provides an appropriate scale for resilient public services;
- reflects the views of residents and local councils;
- protects heritage, landscape and community cohesion;
- supports effective devolution without sacrificing local voice.

We reject the alternative options because they:

- dilute rural identity;
- break up cohesive communities;
- risk service inequalities;
- threaten cultural and environmental heritage;
- fail to reflect the clear wishes of local residents and stakeholders.

In summary:

Option 1 of the Proposal from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, New Forest District Council and Test Valley Borough Council is the only one that protects the identity of the New Forest; meets the practical needs of our coastal and forest-edge communities; align with the stated wishes of many of our residents; and offers a stable, effective foundation for long-term local government.

David Rigby as Clerk to Copythorne Parish Council

OPEN LETTER FROM NEW FOREST (EAST) PARISH COUNCILS

Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

14 January 2026

Dear Sir Julian,

Local Government Reorganisation – New Forest Concerns

This is an open letter from the New Forest (East) parish and town councils listed below.

We recognise the Government's objective to simplify local government and, in principle, support devolution where it strengthens accountability and improves efficiency and outcomes for residents.

Our concern is that some of the Local Government Reorganisation proposals under consideration for Hampshire and the IOW risk undermining effective service delivery and diluting representation for the New Forest.

In particular, we strongly oppose proposals that would merge all or part of the New Forest with the proposed large urban authority of Southampton and Eastleigh. The New Forest is predominantly rural, with a nationally protected landscape and dispersed communities. This includes the areas of Totton, Hythe, Fawley and Marchwood which, whilst fully integrated into the New Forest rural community, provide vital employment to the area and business rate income that support services delivered across the whole of the New Forest. Proposals to transfer these income-generating areas to the Southampton and Eastleigh authority would significantly weaken the financial sustainability of the remaining New Forest authority and its rural communities.

The needs of the New Forest — for instance, housing, transport, education (including SEND), adult social care, access to health services, and the protection of commoning rights — are fundamentally different from those of a city-based unitary authority. Merging all or part of the New Forest with the Southampton and Eastleigh authority would place the delivery of services to our communities at significant risk and is likely to cause long-term harm to coherent planning, environmental protection, and community identity, without delivering clear governance or service benefits.

Of the options currently under consultation, we believe that the proposed Option 1 by Basingstoke & Deane BC, New Forest DC, and Test Valley BC for five Unitary Authorities is the only feasible choice. This Option 1 includes a 'Mid' Unitary Authority covering the predominantly rural communities of East Hampshire, New Forest, Test Valley, and Winchester and, in our view, is the only workable framework that can balance scale, financial sustainability, and meaningful local representation for these mainly rural communities. It provides a coherent geographical area and creates an opportunity to establish effective local governance arrangements.

We also believe that the proposed April 2028 timetable for disaggregating county services and establishing new unitary arrangements is unrealistic. The extent of

OPEN LETTER FROM NEW FOREST (EAST) PARISH COUNCILS

organisational change across multiple authorities poses a significant risk of service disruption and failure, especially for our more vulnerable residents. A flexible and phased implementation will be essential.

We therefore ask that you:

1. Oppose any reorganisation proposal that integrates the New Forest in its entirety, or partially, into the Southampton and Eastleigh authority;
2. Advocate for realistic timescales that prioritise service continuity and a smooth transition;
3. Ensure that protected landscapes and rural communities are considered as a distinct policy issue in national decision-making regarding the proposed reorganisation; and
4. Ensure all New Forest parish and town councils are fully involved throughout any transition process.

We would welcome the chance to discuss these concerns further as a matter of urgency. We also ask you to include them in your submissions to Ministers as the process develops. We attach a summary annex to assist with this briefing.

Signed on behalf of the following:

Ashurst & Colbury Parish Council
Beaulieu Parish Council
Bramshaw Parish Council
Brockenhurst Parish Council
Copythorne Parish Council
Denny Lodge Parish Council
East Boldre Parish Council
Exbury & Lepe Parish Council
Fawley Parish Council
Hythe & Dibden Parish Council
Lyndhurst Parish Council
Minstead Parish Council
New Forest Association of Local Councils
Sway Parish Council
Totton & Eling Town Council

OPEN LETTER FROM NEW FOREST (EAST) PARISH COUNCILS

Annex: Key Points for Briefing

1. Fourteen New Forest (East) Parish and Town Councils, together with the New Forest Association of Local Councils, collectively oppose any form of LGR proposal that splits the New Forest or places it within a predominantly urban authority.
2. Service delivery across our New Forest community, protecting landscapes, and sustaining community identity require distinct governance arrangements.
3. The Option 1 'Mid-Hampshire' option¹ is currently the only viable proposal for the New Forest area.
4. The April 2028 implementation deadline presents a high risk of service disruption and failure.
5. Parish and Town councils should be involved throughout the transition process.

¹ Proposed by Basingstoke and Deane BC, New Forest DC, and Test Valley BC