

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the Extraordinary meeting of the Cabinet held on Wednesday 8 January 2025 at 6 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

Present

Councillor Steve Pitt (in the Chair)

Darren Sanders
Dave Ashmore
Chris Attwell
Kimberly Barrett
Peter Candlish
Lee Hunt
Matthew Winnington

In attendance
Councillors Charlotte Gerada, Mark Jeffery,
George Madgwick, Judith Smyth, Mary Valley

1. Apologies for Absence (AI 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Suzy Horton and Hugh Mason.

2. Declarations of Interests (AI 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Hampshire & The Solent Devolution Agreement and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

Natalie Brahma-Pearl, Chief Executive, introduced the report and outlined the background to the English Devolution White Paper. The extraordinary Cabinet meeting was being held as Portsmouth's request to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) had to be submitted by 10 January.

Councillor Gerada, Labour Group Leader, and Councillor George Madgwick, Portsmouth Independents Party Group Leader, made deputations.

Deputations are not minuted but can be viewed on the council's website at

[Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 8th January, 2025, 6.00 pm Portsmouth City Council](#)

Councillor Pitt offered members who were not Cabinet Members the opportunity to ask questions if they wished.

Members' questions

In response to questions, officers said the government were very clear there would not be a "yes / no" referendum for residents but if the council was chosen for the DPP the government would start a rapid consultation process around February 2025 to seek feedback. The local government reorganisation (LGR) consultation would start in spring or summer of 2026 though it was unclear who would oversee it. Compared with previous devolutions, the government would centralise the consultation process and report back to

councils. There was a requirement to consult and residents could say if they supported the proposals or not but it was unsure how this would fit with other responses. If local authorities ran the consultation it could be a bit restricted if the council took a decision today then changed its mind.

The council was still working through the proposals with more information received daily. It was not a "done deal" as Portsmouth would still have to be selected to be part of the DPP from amongst the first tranche of submissions. There would be other tranches in the next four to five years but officers were not aware of other timetables if Portsmouth was not selected for the DPP.

Although there were indications that Southampton, the Isle of Wight and Hampshire councils would sign up to the proposals, if Portsmouth rejected them the government could force its hand to implement devolution as they were very clear they wanted to cover all the country in the next few years. If there were no proposals, or they were not very clear or suitable, ministerial directives would be used.

With regard to providing simplified, universal and non-political web pages for residents on what was a challenging, difficult and emotive issue, work was already taking place with Corporate Communications about internal and external communications. If Portsmouth was chosen for the DPP, web pages could show where the two different processes of DPP and LGR ran in parallel and the crossover points.

Despite the White Paper saying that successful unitary authorities would not be put in this position, officers and the Leader had asked why Portsmouth had been told it had to reorganise when it was functioning well and smaller authorities had not been written to. There was consistent feedback that Portsmouth was too small to be one of the new unitary authorities as it could not withstand financial shocks and had to be able to make efficiencies over a bigger space.

With regard to surrounding authorities and the consequences of "frayed edges" for either devolution or LGR, the government were clear that Hampshire was a good fit for devolution. Health and police services had some crossover into different geographies but the government seemed keen to keep them coterminous within county boundaries. Other local authorities were still processing the ramifications in view of the White Paper only being published on 16 December. However, Portsmouth was keen that if it was told it had to work in a certain way it would endeavour to get the best outcomes for local people and attract investment to tackle deprivation, a priority in the White Paper. Members did not want to back something that fell at the first hurdle.

As to the exact benefits of devolution, being in the DPP meant more funding from the Treasury for capacity building as the costs and resources of enablement were massive. The later that local authorities participated, the more the uncertainty and danger that they would have to fund the process themselves. The DPP was a "sweetener" to participate early. It was possible that Portsmouth taxpayers would have to fund it and members would have to

consider if they wanted to be in control of the process or be forced into something.

The position on the Boundary Review had not changed. As there could be three elections (mayoral, all out, shadow unitary authority), the council had already written at least twice to the Boundary Commission in view of the cost to the public and challenges to the political process in that members might be elected for only one year. The MHCLG were working with the Commission as they were aware devolution and LGR would require increased capacity. At the moment the Commission was feeling its way though the council had a bit more clarity each time they contacted government officials.

Members' comments

Cabinet Members felt an increasingly autocratic government was intending to send local government into chaos. Portsmouth had broken away from Hampshire in 1997 as it wanted control its own destiny. There was a sense of excitement that Portsmouth was looking after itself and being held to account by residents. Whitehall autocrats were enforcing a "shotgun wedding" by enforcing mergers with other authorities. However, Portsmouth's economy was very different from areas like north Hampshire. London-based ministers in ivory towers did not realise that places and people had their own identity. The government had a mandate for devolution but not to scrap Portsmouth. "Shotgun marriages" were for other areas, not Portsmouth.

Although decentralised power was welcome, members felt a so-called elected mayor for the strategic authorities would be a bureaucrat and a sop to take the heat when things went wrong. It was not democracy but an extra layer of government. Since 1997 Portsmouth had grown into a vibrant, buzzing city with a profitable port and a world-class university. It worked on joint projects like the sea defences and had turned itself around without the need for an elected bureaucrat. Two out of ten mayoral authorities were in special measures and Liverpool and Bristol had got rid of their mayors. Amongst local government colleagues virtually no-one wanted a mayor. Portsmouth should be its own combined authority but successive governments had rejected that. Although devolution was in the manifesto regional assemblies were preferable to creating unsustainable authorities through mergers.

LGR would be bad for Portsmouth, a well-run authority that did not have to find tens of millions of savings each year to resolve financial crises. It already prioritised the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to communities when unitaries with over 500,000 were failing. Metropolitan authorities like Birmingham had gone bust and the expanded authority of Somerset was on the verge of 114 direction. Bigger did not mean sustainable. Members were particularly interested in what would happen with Plymouth (a Labour, well-run authority) and if it would be told what to do. Not a single London borough had been written to nor metropolitan boroughs in Greater Manchester, Merseyside nor South Yorkshire. The most egregious example of double standards was Berkshire where authorities smaller than Portsmouth had not been asked to merge or grow. Some authorities who wanted to be unitaries on their own would not have a chance of running an authority of 500,000.

If the proposals meant Hampshire postponing their May 2025 elections, they should not delay for long so that political leaders did not have distractions and instability. Having people scrambling for votes to stand for just one year was madness.

Members compared the speed of the proposals with those for social care reforms which had been postponed to 2028. Despite 25 reports and commissions there was another commission that would take three years to report as the relevant Minister said it needed to be done properly. Devolution and LGR would shape the country for years but priorities were wrong and not thought through; the constantly differing advice was bad for the city, members and residents. The consequences would be dire but if Portsmouth did not agree to the proposals it would lose control and worse things could happen.

Summing up, Councillor Pitt said the government should not have written to councils on 17 December, having published the White Paper (promised in October) on 16 December, as that left only 16 working days to respond with people forced to work over Christmas. The phrase "shotgun wedding" had been used a lot today but was correct. There had been no meaningful consultation with residents and elected members; it was clear that coercion was the government's chosen method to achieve its aims.

The Solent was a functional economic area and would support devolution on those terms as it was totally different to northern Hampshire. Over the last seven months the leaders of the four neighbouring authorities had been working respectfully together and in September 2023 jointly expressed interest in a Solent only deal but were being ignored. The economic development budget to promote growth in the Solent had already been removed.

Having strategic authorities of 1.5m was a farce as it was an arbitrary figure. The possibility of electing the mayor other than by "first past the post" was denied. The Prime Minister was fundamentally opposed to electoral reform, ignored his own MPs and imposed a morally bankrupt electoral system on local government.

Devolution was meant to secure economic growth, investment, collaboration, strategic focus but above all tackle deprivation. The police and fire authorities would transfer to the mayoral role with the Office of the Police & Crime Commission removed. The mayor would be accountable to local authorities' leaders and not their own agenda. Now the council would have to work tirelessly to make devolution successful despite the diktat.

The government had further instructed unitaries to expand to the arbitrary figure of 500,000 with no explanation. It would trap Portsmouth to do something that did not make sense and was not good for its neighbours, who also did not want it. Local authorities were asking why they were being railroaded into something that was not in the manifesto. While there were positive and constructive relationships with neighbours, Hampshire was heading towards bankruptcy; placing the problem on Portsmouth was unacceptable. The government were hiding failure and slashing services and

could say the decisions were not theirs. The proposals were cowardly, cynical and devious. Local government had been chronically underfunded for years and needed funding now. Funding to offset tax increases were "a bean to solve a problem" and would only increase costs.

Portsmouth did not need massive upheaval. Local authorities would waste money trying to meet timescales and the financial situation was already bad enough. The proposals were completely insane and there would only be breathing space of eight to nine months if Portsmouth agreed to be in the DPP. They were another example of how the government was getting it badly wrong. Councillor Pitt recalled the phrase "elective dictatorship" - a government elected by a minority but with a majority of seats. Realistically the only option was to accept the recommendations to enter into the DPP but he hoped the government would behave in the spirit of partnership, not dictatorship.

DECISIONS

The Cabinet

- 1. Agreed that Portsmouth City Council should seek to be a part of the Hampshire & The Solent Devolution Agreement thereby avoiding a Ministerial direction for what a devolved area will look like.**
- 2. Agreed that Portsmouth City Council, alongside our partner upper tier authorities in Hampshire & The Solent, should seek to be part of the national Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) and submit a letter to Government to this effect, recognising that this will mean more support and more money coming into the devolved area.**
- 3. Noted that subject to the Government agreeing that Hampshire and the Solent should be part of the DPP, that Portsmouth will be asked to submit outline proposals for LGR in March 2025 and final proposals in the Autumn (rather than final proposals in May 2025).**
- 4. Gave delegated authority to the Leader and to the Chief Executive to negotiate and take forward devolution and LGR discussions with other authorities and with The Government. As part of that, its starting position should be that Government should keep its hands off Portsmouth and let the city remain a standalone unitary authority.**
- 5. Agreed that further papers will come to Cabinet (and Council where appropriate) about progress in these policy areas. All councillors will be briefed ahead of key dates in the timetable.**
- 6. Agreed to ask Hampshire County Council, in order to deliver smooth and stable devolution and reorganisation, it does not delay its 2025 elections or, if it feels it must, to delay for a short period.**

The meeting concluded at 6.30 pm.

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Councillor Steve Pitt
Leader of the Council