

Hampshire County Councillor Update – March 2026

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Devolution Update – Hampshire and the Solent

The County Council has received a detailed update on progress towards establishing the proposed Hampshire & Solent Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) – a body that brings together Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth, and the Isle of Wight to access additional Government powers and funding.

1. *Mayoral Election Deferred to 2028*

The Government has confirmed that the first election for a Hampshire & Solent Mayor has been postponed until May 2028. However, the new MCCA may still be legally created in 2026 and start operating before a mayor is elected.

2. *Establishing the MCCA (Pre-Mayor Period)*

The new authority will be created through a Statutory Instrument (SI) laid before Parliament. All four constituent councils will need to give their consent once the final wording is provided.

3. *Powers and Responsibilities Before the Mayor is Elected*

Even without a mayor, the MCCA would take on a range of functions, including:

- Transport and highways planning, including producing a Local Transport Plan.
- Skills, employment and economic development responsibilities.
- Handling major Government funding streams, such as the Highways Maintenance Block, Local Transport Plan Grant, and Adult Skills funding. These grants would be paid to the MCCA rather than to individual councils. In the first year, they are expected to be “passport-ed” straight back to councils to avoid disruption.
- Access to 40% of the long-term devolved investment fund (£44.6m per year when fully operational).

Mayoral-specific powers (such as raising a mayoral precept or designating a Key Route Network) would only apply after the 2028 election.

4. *Governance and Voting Arrangements*

During the period before a mayor is elected:

- Hampshire County Council would have 40% of the voting share, lower than its 70% population share.
- To balance this, unanimous voting is required for major decisions (e.g. budget, constitution, key transport strategies).
- Each council will have a local veto on major issues. These safeguards are designed to protect democratic balance until a directly elected mayor is in place.

5. *Opportunities*

The report highlights several potential benefits if the MCCA is created:

- Access to major national funding streams for transport, housing, skills, green energy and regeneration.
- Enhanced ability to work strategically across the region.
- Potential future powers over climate and energy programmes (e.g. local power plans, warm homes schemes).

6. *Risks and Uncertainties*

The update also identifies key risks:

- Some grants could be delayed or disrupted if the MCCA is not fully established by April 2026. Councils may need to temporarily underwrite funding.
- Representation may feel imbalanced before the mayor is elected.
- New administrative processes may create short-term complexity.

- Several legal clarifications are still required, especially around transport authority status and grant-handling powers, though Government has committed to resolving these.

7. Next Steps

- The Statutory Instrument is expected in Spring/Summer 2026.
- The MCCA could be formally created later in 2026, operating without a mayor until the first election in May 2028.

Local Government Reorganisation

The Government is anticipated to make its formal announcement in March, with transition planning taking place over the following two years before new councils come into effect in April 2028. Elections to a Unitary Authority are expected in May 2027, after which the shadow authority will lead the transition.

📄 For more information, visit: [Local Government Reorganisation | Hampshire County Council](#)

County Council Elections – Key Dates Announced

Hampshire County Council has confirmed the timetable for the full County Council elections, which will take place on Thursday 7 May 2026. These elections normally happen every four years and will cover all 76 County Council divisions across Hampshire.

The election was originally due in 2025 but was postponed by Government as part of the national devolution programme. The May 2026 election will now go ahead as planned.



Key Dates for Residents

- 25 March 2026 – Notice of Election published
- 9 April 2026 (4pm) – Deadline for submitting candidate nominations
- 20 April 2026 – Last date to register to vote
- 21 April 2026 (5pm) – Deadline for postal vote applications
- 28 April 2026 (5pm) – Deadline for proxy vote applications
- 7 May 2026 (7am–10pm) – Polling Day

Hampshire County Council Budget & Council Tax Rise

Hampshire County Council has agreed its 2026/27 budget, which highlights significant ongoing financial pressures. The council faces a £101.9 million gap next year and will rely heavily on one-off reserves to balance the budget. By the end of the year, only £41.1 million will remain in the Budget Bridging Reserve, which is not enough to balance the following year's projected £179.7 million shortfall.



The County Council element of council tax *will increase by 4.99%*, the maximum allowed without a referendum, but this still does not keep pace with rising demand in social care, SEND services and home-to-school transport.

Government funding changes will further reduce Hampshire's income: under the new "Fair Funding" arrangements, the council will lose £10.9 million next year, rising to £42.9 million per year by 2028/29. *Hampshire is expected to receive the lowest government funding per resident of any county council.*

There is also uncertainty around the Government's proposed High Needs Stability Grant, intended to address the deficit in SEND funding. This is not expected until Autumn 2026 and depends on Government approval of Hampshire's SEND reform plan.

The Council's Chief Financial Officer has advised that, based on current forecasts, reserves for 2027/28 are "not adequate", meaning a Section 114 notice (the mechanism councils use when they cannot legally balance their budget) could become necessary during 2026/27 unless additional funding or support is secured.

Despite these challenges, investment continues in key areas such as highways, schools and social care through the capital programme – but Hampshire's overall financial position remains extremely difficult.

If you have questions about how this may affect local services, please feel free to get in touch.

National SEND Reforms – What They Mean for Hampshire

The Government has just announced a major package of national reforms to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system. Hampshire County Council, the NHS Hampshire & Isle of Wight, and the Hampshire Parent Carer Network have issued a joint response welcoming the proposals.



Local organisations say the reforms align closely with the direction Hampshire has already been taking — especially the focus on:

- *Earlier support for children*, so families get help before needs escalate.
- *More local provision*, allowing more children to be educated close to home.
- *Greater inclusion in mainstream schools*, backed by better training for teaching staff.
- *Stronger partnership working* between education, health and care services.

Hampshire has already been expanding specialist school places and investing in SEND support within mainstream schools, so this announcement reinforces work already underway. The partnership also welcomed the Government's commitment to proper funding, which will be essential for making improvements sustainable.

Parents and carers may understandably have questions about what the reforms mean for their own children. More detail will come from Government in the months ahead, but the overall aim is clearer, earlier and more consistent support across the whole SEND system.

Hampshire Biodiversity Report 2026

Hampshire County Council has published its first statutory Biodiversity Duty Report, covering January 2023–December 2025. It highlights extensive work across the county to protect and enhance nature, with several areas particularly relevant to the Meon Valley.



County-wide achievements include:

- Management of 2,906 hectares of priority habitat and 2,611 hectares of designated land such as SSSIs, SACs and National Nature Reserves.
- Major restoration projects including chalk grassland, heathland, wetlands and coastal habitats; 18 woodland actions and 21 farming-for-nature actions delivered.
- Species recovery work for field crickets, helleborine orchids, juniper, marsh harriers and other priority species.
- More than 123,000 trees planted and 13.5 km of hedgerows created since 2023 through the Hampshire Forest Partnership, including disease-resistant elms.

- Over 50,000 volunteer hours supporting habitat management, surveying and community projects.

Meon Valley–specific relevance:

- *Chalk Grassland & Downland*: The report highlights extensive chalk grassland restoration, most notably at Butser Hill National Nature Reserve (230 hectares) – directly relevant to the wider downland landscape connected to the upper Meon Valley.
- *Meon Valley Trail*: The Trail receives active biodiversity management including vegetation scalloping and habitat-improving works along woodland edges.
- *Woodlands & Ash Dieback*: The report notes ash dieback affecting hundreds of hectares of woodland across the county, with safety and habitat implications for rural lanes and rights-of-way – a major issue along Meon Valley bridleways and village approaches.
- *Rivers & Wetlands*: The report emphasises nature-based flood management, SuDS, and wetland enhancements as key future priorities – all relevant to Hambledon, Warnford, Droxford, and other areas affected by groundwater and fluvial flooding.
- *Hedgerow & Tree Opportunities*: The Hampshire Forest Partnership’s hedgerow creation and disease-resistant elm trials align well with parish-led nature projects in Meonstoke, Soberton, Swanmore and West Meon, supporting local pollinator networks and landscape connectivity.

Looking ahead, Hampshire plans further habitat restoration (300 ha), 15 new woodland management plans, expansion of pollinator corridors, more hedgerow planting and improved monitoring tools through 2026–2028.

Hampshire Bus Service Improvement Programme

Hampshire has been allocated £14.88 million capital funding and £8.27 million revenue funding for 2026/27, with further indicative funding through to 2029/30 under the Government’s Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG). This investment will support a range of improvements including upgraded bus stops and shelters, additional real-time information screens, enhanced interchange facilities, and bus-priority measures at selected junctions. Passenger numbers across Hampshire continue to increase, reaching 26.6 million journeys in 2024/25, up 1.7 million on the previous year.



While the funding is welcome, the report highlights that Hampshire faces particular challenges due to its size, rural geography, and the cost of operating services across dispersed communities. Much of the grant allocation is directed toward countywide infrastructure schemes, support for the broader commercial network, and preparatory work for future bus-priority projects.

From April 2026, a new statutory requirement will also come into effect for councils to identify and protect “socially necessary” bus services, defined as routes that play an essential role in helping residents access work, healthcare, education, goods and services. Hampshire will undertake consultation over the coming year to compile this list, and this process will be important for ensuring rural voices are heard. However, the BSIP report confirms that this new duty must be met within existing funding, which may place additional pressure on available resources.

Free Advice to Reduce Your Home Energy Bills

The Environment Centre has launched a ground-breaking service to make our homes warmer, greener and cheaper to run.

It's called ***My Home Made Better***, and it offers free and impartial advice on everything from insulation and heating upgrades, to switching to new energy-efficient technologies.

Experienced energy advisers will simplify complex information and dispel myths to guide you through your options and help you find the best ways to keep the heat in, lower your energy bills, and make your home more comfortable.



This is how it works:

1. You call 0800 804 8601 (or email) to chat with one of the friendly advisers. Lines are open Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm.
2. You'll be asked about your property and circumstances, following which you will receive tailor-made recommendations and your own personalised plan. This will comprise a summary of everything discussed, including recommendations and things to consider before taking your next step.
3. When you're ready, search the independent directory to find local suppliers and installers.

For more information go to myhomemadebetter.org