

Stephen Morgan MP
MP for Portsmouth South
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On behalf of the Friends of Old Portsmouth Association (FOOPA) Committee

Gail Baird FOOPA Chair
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LGR is not Devolution

Dear Mr Morgan,

I write to you as our Member of Parliament and as someone who, I know, has the best interests of Portsmouth and its people at heart. With the Government now determining the future structure of local government, we hope you will be willing to champion Portsmouth's case.

The Friends of Old Portsmouth Association (FOOPA) is a small voluntary organisation, made up of nearly 300 members based in Old Portsmouth, but we speak for a much wider community with serious concerns about the choices currently being made on our behalf. We were consulted at the beginning of the process, and 82% of those who responded clearly expressed their preferred option. We assumed that the Government would respect local opinion—otherwise, why ask us? Instead, it appears that the views of Portsmouth residents and those in the surrounding area, have simply been set aside.

The arbitrary Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) threshold of 500,000 residents appears to outweigh local wishes for a smaller authority. Yet this criterion is not being applied consistently across the country, with many smaller authorities being granted unitary status. England's only island city, together with our longstanding relationship with the Isle of Wight, surely merits special consideration.

We are also disappointed that the proposed authority makes no reference to Portsmouth in its name. 'South East Hampshire' neither reflects our identity nor conveys who we are. If 'Greater Manchester' is an appropriate name for one of the country's largest city regions, why should 'Greater Portsmouth' not be considered?

Most importantly, LGR is not viewed here as devolution. Portsmouth is already a successful unitary authority and has worked collaboratively with the Isle of Wight, Gosport, Fareham and Havant for many years. We therefore struggle to understand the rationale for adding an arbitrary section of Hampshire to an arrangement that is already functioning effectively.

Many local people are also concerned that Portsmouth taxpayers could end up sharing responsibility for Hampshire County Council's significant debt. We did not incur those liabilities, and we do not believe our residents should bear the consequences. We are already hearing of the likelihood of cuts to libraries, social services and education. To us, LGR does not represent opportunity or empowerment; it represents fewer services, lost jobs and a backward step for a city that has worked hard to manage its own affairs responsibly.

Portsmouth has recently applied to become the UK's next City of Culture, highlighting everything that makes our city distinctive. We are proud of our heritage, our diversity, our naval history, our growing defence industries and our strong sense of identity. These are the qualities that define Portsmouth—not an anonymous administrative area called 'South East Hampshire'.

We believe Portsmouth has already demonstrated that collaboration and devolution can work successfully. We therefore urge you to oppose proposals that would weaken our city's identity and diminish local accountability.

Finally, may I ask whether you and Amanda Martin MP might be prepared to work together on this issue? Whatever our political differences, this is about the future of Portsmouth. A united voice from both of the city's Members of Parliament would send a powerful message that Portsmouth's interests should come before arbitrary administrative boundaries.

We would very much welcome your support and would be grateful to hear your views.

Yours sincerely,

Gail Baird

FOOPA Chair

c.c. ward councillors Chris Attwell, Ian Holder, Mark Jeffery

