

Council Budget and Priorities. The council has now finalised its budget for 2025/26 and once again, despite the ever increasing pressures, mainly around social care, we are presenting a balanced budget. Not only is it balanced, but we are putting in just under £60m of additional funding, meaning more money in frontline services, with no cuts to services. The County Council is expected to spend just over £2.2bn on day-to-day services (including schools) and just over £118m through capital investment into areas such as roads, highways infrastructure, schools, Fire and Rescue service, and digital infrastructure. After taking account of grants, fees and charges and other contributions, our net revenue budget 2025/26 is proposed to be £827m. The proposed budget will be presented to the Performance & Finance Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 22nd January, Public Cabinet on Wednesday 29th January and finally presented to full council on Friday 14th February. All these meetings will be webcast and obviously the papers will be available on our website.

The Government's Devolution Proposals. The government has published its white paper on devolution and the implementation period is extremely challenging. Basically, the proposal is that areas will become Mayoral Strategic Authorities (with a minimum population of 1.5 million). There were two choices, either you put forward a plan to become a mayoral area or the government would introduce legislation to achieve this aim. Those County Councils, or Unitary authorities, wishing to be on the priority programme were asked to register their expressions of interest to be a Priority Scheme Mayoral area by Friday 10th January. Following approval at their respective cabinet meetings, West Sussex, together with East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, subsequently submitted their combined expression of interest on Friday 10th January. It was made clear in the white paper that if authorities did not choose to do this then the government would enact legislation to force them to go down the devolution route by May 2028. The proposal is that for the areas on the priority list (confirmation is expected end January/early February) will have elections for a mayor in May 2026.

A Mayoral Area will cover a minimum of 1.5m people, and the mayor will eventually (not all at first) have powers such as:

- Economic development and regeneration;
- Environment and climate change;
- Health, wellbeing and public service reform;
- Strategic Planning (roads and infrastructure);
- Transport & Local Infrastructure;
- Economic development; skills & Employment Support;
- Fire and Rescue and Police.

Running parallel with - but separate from - devolution there will be Local Government Reform (LGR). The proposal is that current two tier areas (CC plus D's & B's) of E & W Sussex will become individual Unitary authorities with one tier of government. B&H is already a unitary authority, so our Strategic Mayoral area will be made of three separate Unitary Authorities - E. Sussex, W. Sussex and B&H. The government will be publishing a paper on LG reform shortly and the CC, together with the D's & B's will be required to put forward our plans by this Autumn.

If our bid to be included in the Priority Scheme is successful, then the Minister has suggested that in order to meet the demanding timetable of both Mayoral elections and LGR - and to avoid any disruptions to the process - he is minded to lay secondary legislation to postpone local elections from May 2025 to May 2026. Both E. & W. Sussex,

together with B&H have requested the deferral of elections, as have our immediate neighbours, Hampshire, Kent and Surrey.

The proposal is that in May 2027 there will be elections for a shadow Unitary Authority which will run in tandem with the CC and the D's and B's until May 2028. At that point, the CC and the D's and B's will cease to exist and the shadow unitary will take over full control. In the Devolution White Paper it is made very clear that localism is very much to the fore of these plans and engagement with parish and town councils is planned to increase, devolving more powers to local areas.

The Devolution White Paper can be found

at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

Local Issues:

Charlton 20MPH Scheme - The public consultation is currently running and will close on 6th February. Following a review of the consultation, assuming there are no objections, it will be signed off and go forward for implementation. If there are any objections it will be passed to me to review those objections and then make the final decision.

Singleton CH Scheme - I'm delighted to see that this is now being implemented on the ground. Hopefully not causing too much disruption to local residents, but I'm sure it will be worth it in the end. A great result for all the work put in by the PC road safety team.

Southern Water - delighted to see that extensive lining works are currently going on in Charlton and will shortly be extending down to Bankside. I visited the works in Charlton recently and was impressed by both the extensive work going on, as well as the helpfulness of the engineers that I spoke to.

Finally, please don't forget to keep an eye on our website, especially our news and campaigns page where you can keep up to date with all our latest news.

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/about-the-council/news-and-campaigns/>

Also, a reminder that all our public meetings are webcast live and are also archived, so you can always view them later. <https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/about-the-council/how-the-council-works/watch-county-council-and-committee-meetings-online/>

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