

Good evening,

So much has happened over the last year it would take a lengthy report to cover everything. My bi-monthly reports over the year cover many key County Council activities, so I won't report them all here. I hope that you are able to access my reports through the PC website. You might be interested to know that the County Council has a gross spend on £2.2bn and provides over 300 services, such as social care, libraries, West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, highways, libraries, registration services, disposing of your waste, public health and education and schools, to name but a few key services. Please find below an update on three key areas.

Obviously the key political change in the last year was the election of a **new Labour government** last July. As far as the County Council is concerned this has brought about some challenges, not least is the increase in NI - and the lowering of the threshold where NI payment begins. This, together with the above inflation increase in the minimum wage, will push up the already challenging costs of social care - in both adults and Childrens services - as many of our providers struggle with these unexpected increases. Our social care budget is by far our largest spend and accounts for nearly 70% of our spend on services. The huge pressures on the social care budget is not just a WS issue, but is a national one, and unless government acts soon, many councils - even well run ones - could well be in trouble.

Unfortunately, although the government talks a lot about promoting growth, they seem to put in place policies that stifle growth. Also, very relevant to WS, are the new taxes they have introduced on farmers and small businesses. Both these industries are vitally important to the economy of WS, providing employment which is so vital for our residents, the sustainability of our communities and the sustainability of our countryside. In fact at recent County Council Meetings a number of motions have been put forward by the Conservative Group, including one supporting our farmers and calling on the government to look again at their new tax policies on farmers and SMB's, and another one calling on government to introduce an exemption from national insurance employer contribution increases for all care providers, charities and hospices. These motions coincided with similar calls from numerous organisations and other bodies, but unfortunately the government have so far failed to respond.

Then of course we have the **Government's Devolution Proposals**. They published the white paper on devolution in December, with an implementation period which is extremely challenging. I am sure many of you already understand these proposals, but I think it is worth repeating them here again. Basically, the proposal is that areas will become Mayoral Strategic Authorities (with a minimum population of c.1.5 million). Those 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 a combined expression of interest. I know that some people wonder why we did this in such haste. However, it was made very 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. In other words, you would then be at the back of the queue when it came to influencing how your strategic area would be governed. The government also made it clear that those on the priority programme would receive devolved 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 and Fire and Rescue and the Police, ahead of those not on the programme. Following extensive discussions between the three authorities, it was felt that in the best interests of supporting our residents, we should apply to be on the priority programme. Subsequently, we were notified that we had been accepted.

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. So in March the West Sussex Councils - that's the CC plus the seven District and Borough councils - submitted their [draft interim plan for Local Government Reorganisation \(LGR\)](#), outlining their progress and seeking guidance on several critical issues to ensure a successful final submission in September 2025. These plans included a number of possible unitary options.

The interim plan, submitted by West Sussex Leaders and Chief Executives, emphasises the councils' commitment to devolution and a route map for creating unitary authorities that will deliver the best outcomes for citizens. The interim plan outlines potential options for new council structures. It also highlights the opportunity for public service reform and improved outcomes, particularly in areas such as homelessness prevention and social care. The councils have also proposed how to address democratic representation, governance arrangements, and how new structures will support devolution ambitions. While acknowledging limited local engagement due to the tight timeline, all councils have committed to extensive consultation with local residents, businesses and wider stakeholders as proposals develop.

The plan is that there will be Mayoral elections in May 2026. We then understand that the current proposal is that in May 2027 there will be elections for the shadow Unitary Authority - or Authorities - 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 - or unitaries - 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>

Finally, probably the most discussed service provided by the CC is **Highways**. We have put an additional £50m into our highways over the last two years and despite what is often said, they are improving. Yes, there is a long way to go, but we do receive many reports from residents saying that they feel we are generally improving the state of the roads. Our figures for the 2024-2025 financial year have highlighted the significant progress made by its highways team in improving the condition of the county's 2,500 miles of road. Between April 2024 and March 2025, the council's highways team delivered a wide programme of essential reactive maintenance and proactive improvements including:

- 44,767 potholes repaired, using durable methods such as 'sawn and sealed' patching and 'spray injection patching'
- A decrease in the average time between receiving a report and repairing a pothole to just 14 days
- 134.5 miles of surfacing works, including surface dressing, micro-asphalt and major carriageway patching
- 36,031 sqm of small and medium scale patching

Over the winter months, the highways team have also been working hard to keep drainage systems clear and ensure water can run off the roads as effectively as possible, cleansing 123,000 drainage gullies and completing 63 small scale drainage schemes. These works help to protect road surfaces from water damage and reduce the risk of flooding in the event of heavy rainfall.

As part of our efforts to improve winter resilience on the road network, extra resources were provided to clear more gullies, ditches and areas where leaves build up. Extra CCTV resource was also brought in to monitor and identify issues, and an additional jetting unit was provided to clear flooded areas and get them moving as soon as possible.

The team's hard work has been reflected in the number of reports of defects, such as potholes or blocked drains being submitted by the public. In recent years, there has been an upward trend in the number of defects being reported, however, in a clear sign of the improvement in the condition of the county's road network, there has been a drop in reports from 69,669 last year to 53,574.

At the start of this financial year, the council implemented a new highways contract with VolkerHighways Limited, for the delivery of core carriageway maintenance across the county. VolkerHighways' remit covers everything from rapid-response pothole and jet patching repairs to our winter maintenance programme and vegetation management. A key focus of the contract will be the cutting of average repair times by up to 25% while still ensuring that high quality services are consistently delivered. At the same time, FM Conway took on the contract for cyclical and small-scale drainage works. Their responsibilities include routine gully cleansing and the installation of new pipes and chambers, applying root-cause solutions to reduce repeat defects and extend the lifespan of drainage assets. As part of this new partnership, we have also increased the frequency of our gully cleansing programme. This means that all 140,000 gullies will now be emptied every 2 years instead of every 4 years.

Residents are encouraged to continue reporting any issues using the council's [online reporting tool](#), helping the Highways Team respond quickly and effectively. More information about ongoing improvements to the road network can be found on the council's [Better Roads campaign page](#).

Local Issues:

Charlton 20MPH Scheme - This scheme has now been fully approved, so it is now out with our contractors for installation. We have recently appointed new contractors, so I am waiting to get an update on when this work will be scheduled.

Halnaker Windmill - slightly out of your area, but I thought you might appreciate an update. In simple terms, and following a frustrating time addressing the bat issue, a design now seems to have been agreed with all parties, including ecologists and conservationists, with a proposal that, with a fair wind, we could complete next summer.

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/>

Jeremy Hunt – West Sussex County Council Member for Chichester North
c/o Cabinet Office, County Hall, West Street, Chichester, PO19 1RQ

E-mail: jeremy.hunt@westsussex.gov.uk Tel: 0330222419536 Halnaker Windmill