

# devolution

and local government reorganisation



Issue 4 March 2024

## Update from Diane and Adrian



As you are aware, the government has announced that devolution will bring opportunities and growth to our region.

The government has confirmed that it has placed West Sussex, East Sussex, and Brighton & Hove on the devolution priority programme, to create a new Strategic Authority covering the wider region of Sussex and Brighton. They are currently consulting on this until 11.59pm on 13 April 2025 at: [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sussex-and-brighton-devolution](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/sussex-and-brighton-devolution). This would serve around 1.7 million residents.

With the changes set to bring investment and extra powers from the government to Sussex, we're encouraging anyone who lives and works in the region to give their views.

The aim is to agree a new strategic authority by September and, if approved, this would be created in early 2026, with mayoral elections taking place in May 2026.

As previously explained, local government reorganisation is separate to devolution, but links with the government's overall aims. The government wants all areas to have unitary councils across the country, with each serving an average of 500,000 residents. This will mean bringing county, district and borough council services together to form the new unitary councils.

Interim proposals were submitted to the government by West Sussex Leaders and Chief Executives on 21 March and our detailed business case has to be submitted by 26 September.



The interim proposals emphasise our collective commitment to devolution and a route map for creating unitary authorities that will deliver the best outcomes for our communities across West Sussex.

They outline potential options for new structures and highlight the opportunity for public service reform and improved outcomes, particularly in areas such as homelessness prevention and social care.

Within the submission we have proposed how to address democratic representation, governance arrangements, and how new structures will support devolution ambitions. We have also acknowledged that there has been limited local engagement due to the tight timeline, but made it clear that we are committed to extensive consultation with staff, local residents, businesses and wider stakeholders as our proposals develop. You can read the document at: <https://crawley.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/West%20Sussex%20local%20government%20reorganisation%20interim%20submission.pdf>

Indicative costs for preparing proposals and implementation have been provided, along with arrangements for cooperation and decision-making across all councils.



Several key questions remain that require clarification from government. Amongst these is the size and boundaries of potential new unitary authorities, particularly concerning any required expansion of Brighton & Hove. In addition, the group has also asked for guidance on how Crawley fits the unitarisation and devolution agenda, given its strong economic links to Surrey. We are also seeking clear guidelines on population size limits, funding, timelines and the impact of the Devolution Bill.

As things stand, the new unitary authorities will have shadow elections in May 2027, and they are expected to come into effect in April 2028.

## **Our commitment to you and our communities**

As we have already explained, the council's work will continue moving forward, the changes mean that our services will move into a new unitary authority, along with services from other local councils. Our priority is to work with all of the councils in West Sussex to develop plans that will meet the needs of all of our communities.

At this stage, we do not know what the geographical boundaries will be, but as soon as we are at this point, we will let you know. As you can imagine, this is a very complex piece of work and many different strands of work need to be completed as part of the process to ensure that we get the very best outcomes for our communities. Once we have the answers we need from government and have developed an evidence base, we can move forward with this work and consult on our proposals. We will let you know just as soon as we are in a position to do this.

A number of parish councils are keen to potentially take over some of our community assets. Due to this, we are currently developing a community asset policy, which will be considered by Cabinet on 13 May. This will enable us to measure any requests against the policy before making a decision. Once this policy is approved, it will be sent out to all parish councils.

As devolution and local government reorganisation are incredibly complex subjects, we have decided to not only provide you with this update, but also provide a recap on some of the information we have previously issued. This includes a visual breakdown of the government's vision, which you can view over the following two pages.

We want to reassure our communities that it is business as usual and regardless of what happens, our services will continue to be provided to them. We are also committed to making the transition as smooth as we possibly can.

We realise that people will have lots of questions and may be confused about the proposed changes and so we have created a dedicated web page at: [www.chichester.gov.uk/devolution](http://www.chichester.gov.uk/devolution) with frequently asked questions. that we are regularly adding to.

Best Wishes

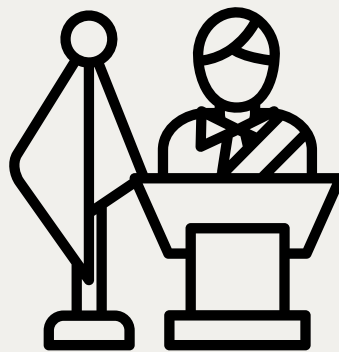
Diane  
Chief Executive

and

Cllr Adrian Moss  
Leader of Chichester District Council

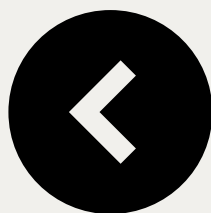
# The government's vision

## Step 1 - the creation of a new Strategic Authority



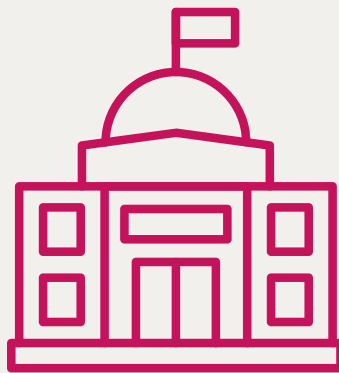
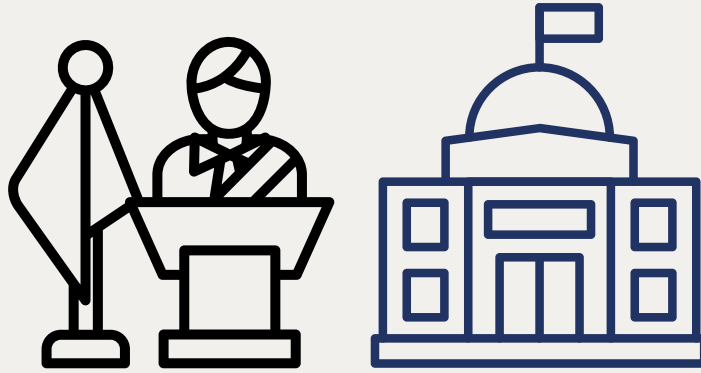
It is proposed that a new strategic authority will be created in March 2026, serving 1.7 million residents across West Sussex, East Sussex and Brighton & Hove. If given the go-ahead, an election will take place in May 2026 for a mayor, who will lead this authority. They will be handed more powers over strategic housing and planning; transport and infrastructure; adult skills; and employment support to drive economic growth. They will also be responsible for the Police & Crime Commissioners and the Fire and Rescue Authorities.

## Step 2 - New unitary authorities to be created



The government wants county, district and borough councils services to be brought together to create new unitary authorities, with each one serving an average of 500,000 residents. We expect to see one or two authorities created across West Sussex, with shadow elections in May 2027 and for the authorities to come into effect in April 2028.

## Step 3 - Strategic and unitary councils working together



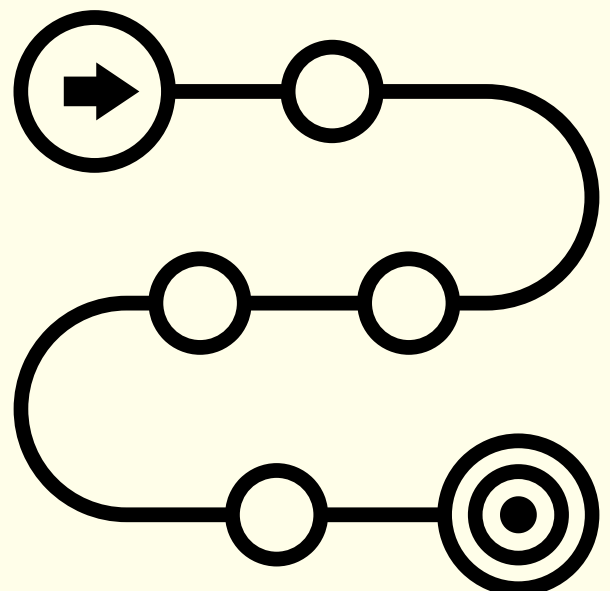
When the new unitary councils are created, the leaders from these councils will also sit on the strategic authority, along with the Mayor.

## Timeline

The government's devolution and reorganisation plans have separate timescales as indicated under the diagrams above.

New legislation will be needed for some of the proposed changes and will be included in the Devolution Bill next year. Some of the proposed changes are already in current legislation.

The government expects all areas of England to have an Elected Mayor within this Parliament and all two-tier areas (county and districts) are expected to reorganise by 2028.



# Devolution

The government wants to move away from the current system of devolution where it negotiates a bespoke 'devolution deal' with local government, to a standard devolution framework which will set out a standard set of powers and funding to be given to the Mayoral Combined Authorities. The government is currently consulting on establishing a mayoral combined authority covering West Sussex, East Sussex and Brighton & Hove.

Mayors will be given new powers and priorities including:

## Housing and Planning

Mayors will receive development management powers to call in applications. Mayors will also control grant funding for regeneration and housing delivery. All areas – whether or not they have a Strategic Authority – will have to produce a Spatial Development Strategy for strategic planning.



## Transport

Mayors will have a statutory role in governing, managing and developing the rail network to deliver a more integrated network. They will also gain powers to coordinate their road and bus networks.



## Environment

Established Strategic Authorities will help deliver Great British Energy Local Power Plans to support small-medium renewable energy projects locally. They will also have a strategic role in local nature recovery strategies.



## Support businesses and research

Growth Hub funding will be rolled into the Strategic Authority. The new Office for Investment will work with mayors to develop and market strategic investment propositions.



## Public safety

Police & Crime Commissioners and Fire & Rescue authorities will fall to mayors where geographies align and there is a long term ambition to align public sector boundaries, including police, fire, job centres, probation and health services with Strategic Authorities. It is expected that the mayor will chair the Integrated Care Partnership.



# New unitary authorities

## What does the government expect?

The government expects councils to come up with plans for the new unitary authorities. We expect one or two unitary authorities to be created within West Sussex. They want councils:

- **to propose the geographical areas each unitary (single tiered) council should cover.**

This should take account of a number of things, such as sensible economic areas with an appropriate tax base; a sensible geography that will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs; the structure of each council; and local engagement.

- **to make sure that each unitary council is the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.**

New councils should aim for an average population of 500,000. Councils are also being asked to look at how councils' finances can be improved, consider any transitional costs, and outline how taxpayers will get the best value for their money.

- **to prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to residents.**

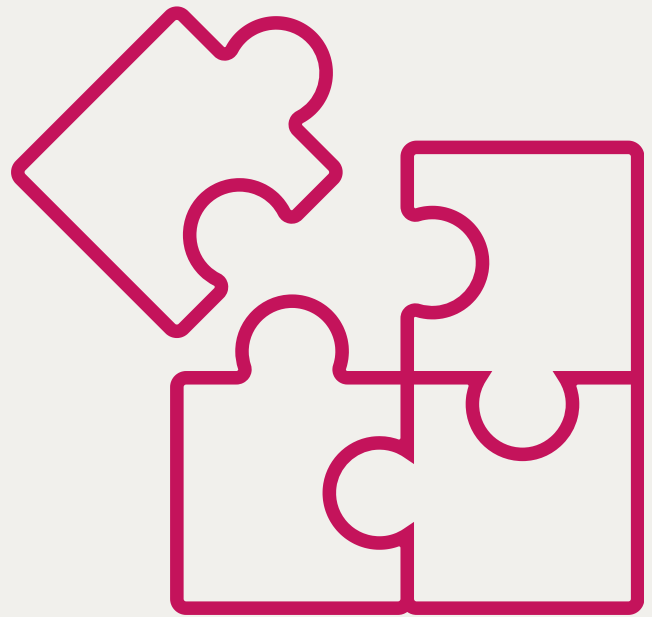
This should show how new structures will improve local government services, while avoiding unnecessary fragmentation of services. It will also look at how we offer better value to our residents.

- **to demonstrate how councils have worked together in reaching a proposal that meets local needs and is informed by local views.**

This should show how we have engaged with our local communities and how concerns will be addressed. We are also expected to show how we are considering issues of local identity and cultural and historical importance.

- **to show how the new unitary structures support devolution arrangements.**

This should look at how the proposal will help unlock devolution and that there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority.



- **to enable stronger community engagement and deliver opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.**

Proposals need to include plans on how communities are engaged.

- **to consider any boundary changes.**

Existing district areas should be considered the building blocks for proposals, but boundary changes will be considered where there is a strong argument. As part of this work, councils need to make sure that there are strong public services and there is financial sustainability for any proposals that involve boundary changes, or that affect wider public services, such as fire and rescue authorities.

- **to engage and consult on reorganisation.**

Local leaders are expected to engage with their Members of Parliament and ensure that there is wide engagement with local partners, stakeholder, residents, workforce, staff and businesses on any proposal. The views of other public sector providers will also be crucial. Once a proposal has been submitted it will be for the government to decide on taking a proposal forward and to consult as required by statute. This will be a completely separate process to any consultation undertaken on mayoral devolution in an area.

# Your questions answered

[www.chichester.gov.uk/devolution](http://www.chichester.gov.uk/devolution)

## Why does the government want to make these changes?

There are two separate things that the government wants - devolution and the reorganisation of local government. These are both separate pieces of work, but link with the government's overall aims.

In England, devolution is the transfer of powers and funding from national to local government. In order to achieve this, the government wants to introduce strategic authorities with an elected mayor.

Elected mayors would then oversee areas representing two or more current county council geographic areas and would be handed more power over areas such as strategic housing and planning; transport; environment; support, business and research; and public safety.

Local Government Reorganisation is the process in which the structure and responsibilities of local authorities are reconfigured. The government has set out plans to move away from the current two-tier system of district and county councils. The government has indicated that for most areas this will mean creating councils with an average population of 500,000, but there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, including for devolution. This will be decided on a case-by-case basis.

Under the government's proposals each Mayoral Strategic Authority would oversee at least two unitary authorities.

## What is a unitary council?

Unitary authorities are a single tier of local government responsible for all local services in an area. They may cover a whole county, part of a county or a large town or city. For example, Brighton and Hove; Portsmouth; and Southampton are all unitary councils. Large urban areas may have a unique form of unitary authorities called metropolitan councils, such as Oldham or Doncaster. London boroughs are also unitary authorities.

## What is a Strategic Authority?



A strategic authority will be a legal body set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries. We expect further detail to be set out as part of the English Devolution Bill. Depending on the form of devolution in an area, there are three levels of strategic authority available:

- **Foundation Strategic Authority:** Available to those areas without an elected mayor. It will have limited devolution.
- **Mayoral Strategic Authority:** For those with an elected mayor, a range of powers will be devolved.
- **Established Mayoral Strategic Authority:** For those mayoral strategic authorities, that are able to satisfy a number of additional governance requirements.

In this area, a proposal has been submitted to government to form a strategic authority covering West Sussex, East Sussex and Brighton & Hove. If given the go ahead there will be an elected Mayor and the leaders from the upper tier (county and unitary councils) will also sit on this. When the new unitary councils are created, the leaders from these councils will sit on the strategic authority. Until they are in place, the current leaders from West Sussex County Council; East Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove Council would take these roles.

## What is a shadow year?

Elections for the new authorities will be held and those who have been elected will sit on the newly formed council. During this year, they will only be given the powers to prepare for the new council coming into effect. This will involve creating a corporate plan, setting a budget for the following year, and producing a constitution. They will also appoint a Chief Executive, Statutory Officers and other senior officers to prepare for the transition. They will not run any services within the shadow year.

Prior to this year, the government will also issue a Structural Order to all existing councils, including ours, to advise on what we can and can't do during that year. Day to day decisions will continue, but financial decisions relating to new activities will be restricted.