

Devolution in Sussex

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In December, a week before Christmas, the government published a paper on Devolution. Unusually they did not choose to publish a consultative Green Paper but a White Paper which sets out what they plan to do. It was much more specific than expected and with a tight timetable. This note sets out the facts and corrects the widespread misunderstanding about Devolution.

In the White Paper the government invited councils, including East Sussex, to submit expressions of interest to be considered for the Government's Devolution Priority Programme indicating support for a Sussex Mayoral Strategic Authority. This could unlock new money and powers for the region.

The expression of interest, which was sent on Friday 10th January, is from the leaders of East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove. East and West Sussex would each have a unitary authority, taking on responsibility for the services provided by the Districts and Boroughs which, along with the county council, would cease to exist. (Brighton is already a unitary authority). Staff from the Districts and Boroughs are expected to transfer across.

The Government's White Paper sets out in detail the key areas that a strategic authority would be in control of to drive growth and provide support on shaping public services. These include:

- Transport and local infrastructure
- Skills and employment support
- Housing and strategic planning
- Economic development and regeneration
- Environment and climate change
- Health, wellbeing and public service reform
- Public safety

The most likely model is that the Mayoral Strategic Authority would be 'light touch' with most of the services for residents provided at unitary level.

The expected timeline following the submission of the proposal is:

- A more detailed discussion and proposal before the end of March 2025.

- Further extensive discussions with councils and others in Spring 25 following which a Ministerial decision will be taken as to whether to proceed with a Mayoral Strategic Authority (prior to unitary re-organisation). The Spending Review will then confirm future mayoral investment funds for new mayoral areas.
- Relevant legislation will be laid before Parliament in relation to the creation of Strategic Authorities.
- In March 2026 notice of mayoral elections will be given for a Mayoral election in May 2026. A decision whether to move to a Mayoral Strategic Authority under the reorganised arrangements would follow.

A letter from the two county council leaders has also asked for a delay in the May 2025 elections. This has caused some debate, but the rationale as expressed by council officials as well as leaders is:

- Given the timescales set out by the government, much of the work involved in consultation and writing proposals for devolution would be at the same time as the build up to, and follow on from, the May 25 elections. This could not be done during an election period.
- Other local government reorganisations generally have a delay in elections. The white paper specifically mentions delaying elections.
- Local elections invariably lead to a turnover in council membership across all parties. This would give a new set of councillors who would need significant work by officials to bring up to speed, at a time when their workload would be dominated by the reorganisation and continuing to manage services.
- The resulting county councillors would only be in office for 2 years, could only pass one meaningful budget and could not make any fundamental changes to council policy.

A debate on this was held in an emergency meeting of the full council in East Sussex on 9th January and rejected a motion to continue to hold the elections. A subsequent cabinet meeting agreed to submit the letter including requesting a delay. On the same day West Sussex and Brighton also agreed to submit the letter. However, the decision as to whether to delay the election is made not by councils but by government ministers and parliament.