

**BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL**

**PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY**

**3.00pm 22 SEPTEMBER 2025**

**HOVE TOWN HALL COUNCIL CHAMBER**

**MINUTES**

**Present:** Councillor Evans (Chair) Cattell, Loughran, Fowler, Mackey, Winder, Fishleigh, Sykes and Lyons

**Other Members present:** Mary Davies (Older Peoples' Council); members of People Overview & Scrutiny Committee: Councillors O'Quinn, Simon (online), Pickett, Maria Cowler (online), Adam Muirhead CVS (online), Anusree Biswas Sasidharan (online); and members of Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee: Cllr Hill and Geoffrey Bowden, HealthWatch (online).

**PART ONE**

**27 PROCEDURAL BUSINESS**

27. Procedural Business

27(a) Substitutes

27.1 Cllr Lyons substituted for Cllr Meadows.

27.2 Apologies were received from Cllr Goddard and from Mark Strong (CVS)

27(b) Declarations of interest:

27.3 There were none.

27(c) Exclusion of the press and public

27.4 There were no Part Two items, so the press and public were not excluded.

**28 MINUTES**

**28 Minutes**

**28.1 RESOLVED** – that the minutes of the Place Overview & Scrutiny Meeting 16<sup>th</sup> July 2025 and the Special Place Overview & Scrutiny Meeting 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025: minutes were approved.

**29 CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

29.1 The Chair gave the following communication:

Today we have a full agenda with 5 items for discussion, which is why we are starting the meeting slightly earlier today so thank you for accommodating this.

We will be starting with Local Government Reorganisation and have invited members from People and Health Overview & Scrutiny Committees to attend due to the overlap in remit. You are welcome to stay for the whole meeting if you wish but feel free to leave after the LGR item. This is the final scrutiny of LGR following the public engagement on the proposed options for the boundary for BHCC. This final proposal will be submitted to central government pending cabinet approval on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Following LGR, we will look at the King Alfred Leisure Centre regeneration project which is also going to cabinet on the 25<sup>th</sup>. We are being asked to note the plans for the new leisure centre, and any comments from this meeting will be shared with cabinet in advance of their meeting.

Next, we have our first look at the budget for 26/27, this report is to inform us of the council's current budget position ahead of further scrutiny on more detailed budget proposals closer to Budget Council in February 2026.

Our last two agenda items are update reports as agreed at previous Place O&S Committees. It was agreed at our meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2024 to receive an update on solid fuel burning, looking at the results of air monitoring, the comms campaign and an enforcement pilot within the existing smoke control areas. We are being asked to note the updates and to comment on the suggested options for further work in this area.

Our final item on the agenda is another update report on Housing Safety and Quality Compliance following the judgement made by the Regulator of Social Housing back in September 2024. We are being asked to note and comment on progress made in addressing these issues.

As you can see, we have a lot on the agenda for today and so we will have a lot of questions to get through. Can I therefore please request that both those asking and answering questions are as brief and to the point as possible, as we want everyone who wishes to contribute to have the opportunity to do so. We also don't want the meeting to overrun too much into the evening.

## **30 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

30.1 There was no public involvement.

## **31 MEMBER INVOLVEMENT**

31.1 There were no member questions.

## **32 LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION UPDATE**

- 32.1 Cllr Hewitt presented to the committee on Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Key points included: the proposal is for 5 balanced unitary councils with populations around 300,000 – 400,000; that Unitary A combines Brighton & Hove with East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven and Falmer Parish; that the idea behind this was to avoid having very large councils in favour of having 5 equal partners for the Mayoral Authority when Devolution takes place. The boundaries follow communities and travel links and retain parish and town councils. The consultants, Ignite, have done the financial modelling; there will be one-off costs to deal with ICT and data migration which will be done over several years, and council tax will be harmonised gradually.
- 32.2 Cllr Sykes asked about the costs for this; that the consultation has been done in a very short timeframe for such a big decision and they have chosen the option with the highest risk. Cllr Sykes said that the ongoing costs may be underestimated and the benefits overestimated and asked about the calculations for the agile unitaries element of the benefits. Cllr Sankey disagreed that this option was the highest risk as it depends how risk is calculated and what is being looked at. This model is sustainable and it preserves local identities and will be closer to local voices. The public engagement showed that people do not want too much change and are worried about unitaries being too big and too far away from localities. Jess Gibbons added the council is looking closely at areas that have already been through this process such as Dorset, Somerset and Northamptonshire.
- 32.3 Cllr Lyons asked where the one-off cost would come from. Cllr Sankey responded that there are potential sources such as savings from having fewer authorities across the region, flexible use of capital receipts, and the possibility of using reserves. Government will also be asked to help fund the process.
- 32.4 Cllr O'Quinn was strongly in favour of the 5 unitaries proposal as she believed it was more able to deliver democracy at a local level. She asked a question about ICT systems and that changes can cause problems; how would a seamless move be achieved? She also asked about recruiting more officers and that the pool of experts or experienced staff in the area might be small with a lot of competition. Cllr Sankey said there would be initial dual running of some ICT systems until there is confidence that a risk-free switch can be made. Staff from existing Sussex councils would be moved across to the new unitaries, which would allow for continuity.
- 32.5 Cllr Hill asked about the deficits of the proposed unitaries and suggested that Unitary B would end up in emergency financial measures almost immediately. Cllr Sankey said that these figures should be used as indicators and not specific or precise forecasts. Local Authority finances are not in a good place, and there is no way to arrange councils in Sussex that would eliminate deficits. Councils are lobbying government to fund the process appropriately and to look at disparities across the region that already exist.
- 32.6 Cllr Hill asked what the leaders across the regions thoughts were on the proposal. Cllr Sankey said they need to work together and that collaboration and co-design is essential. Cllr Sankey has reached out to the leaders of East and West Sussex Councils. West Sussex are looking at a 2 unitary option and some elected representatives in East Sussex including in Rother, Wealden and Hastings are interested in the Brighton & Hove proposal. The government will make the decision on which proposal goes out for statutory consultation. Jess Gibbons said she has been

regularly communicating with Chief Executives at East and West Sussex councils and they have held a workshop together.

- 32.7 Cllr Hill asked about the people living in Saltdean and Telscombe who were against the proposal but also most affected by it; and about the Lewes Report that stressed the economic value of their current footprint and potential harm if current parts of East Sussex were to be removed. Cllr Sankey said that there was misleading rhetoric when the consultation went out that has clearly contributed to fears, for example of overdevelopment. There is a requirement to work across boundaries and these areas already have strong links with Brighton & Hove. For instance, there is no local over 16 education provision in Peacehaven, so people are already coming to Brighton to access such services. The potential benefits to these areas are huge.
- 32.8 Cllr Fishleigh asked a question about the different levels of council tax across the areas in the proposal where some pay higher council tax to support the parish councils. Jess Gibbons said that council tax harmonisation means that council tax will be frozen in those areas currently paying a higher rate until all areas are at the same level.
- 32.9 Mary Davies from the Older Peoples' Council asked if they will be consulted on the EIA that is being prepared and that mitigations including local access points for essential services, accessible transport and non-digital routes for engagement are essential as it is already difficult for older people in the city and they feel pessimistic that more can be achieved on a larger footprint.
- 32.10 Cllr Shanks said that the council should stop at this point and wait because people don't want reorganisation and there are more pressing issues that need sorting out first like Adult Social Care. Cllr Sankey said LGR is a positive move and gives the council the chance to shape the future of Sussex. Areas that are not in the priority programme have a deadline for their proposal at the end of the year and they will lose their say in how this process is carried out if they disengage.
- 32.11 Cllr Mackey asked about the risks of the proposal impacting on vulnerable groups such as SEND. Rachel Kelly said that this will be built into the planning.
- 32.12 RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

### **33 THE KING ALFRED LEISURE CENTRE REGENERATION PROJECT**

- 33.1 Cllr Robins introduced the King Alfred Leisure Centre Regeneration Project. Key points included: Alliance Leisure were appointed as the delivery partner and giving the council access to the UK Leisure Framework which offers the best range of leisure-oriented consultants and contractors; the designs attached are the concept designs up to RIBA stage 2; the financial implications suggest a higher capital receipt for the part of the site to be disposed of for a residential-led development site and the figures reflect updated revenue estimates from the new facility which are also higher. However, the total capital

cost has increased partly due to inflation in the construction sector, partly due to a much greater contingency allowance, and partly due to an enhanced specification that will deliver a larger and better equipped facility than the one proposed to Cabinet in July 2024; overall, the annual revenue costs to the council are significantly reduced. They are asking Cabinet for approval to proceed to the next stage.

- 33.2 Mark Healy presented to the committee, the headline points being that increased project costs are now £65m which includes almost £10m for inflation and contingency, the size of the fitness suite has been increased; there will be a family entertainment zone (e.g. soft play) and leisure water. The scope of the project has also been expanded to include a new regenerated public realm with a plaza and underground car park. The site conditions are challenging due to elevation level changes. They have had 2 independent assessments for the land valuation and revenue projections. They are adhering to the commitment to keep the old King Alfred centre open while the new facility is built and will be demolishing the site between the two areas. The current car park will not be available while the new facility is being built, which will be a revenue loss to the council.
- 33.3 Cllr Cattell asked why the existing building could not be used for the new facility and why they are not including a 50m pool. Mark Healy explained that structural engineers concluded that refurbishment of the existing building wasn't cost effective: the building wasn't purpose built or designed, the sports halls built over the swimming pool are the wrong size and shape, there is a poor use of space which adds to running costs. The new design takes in modern standards and expectations of the users. Sustainability is also a key theme. In relation to the 50m pool, the majority of swimmers want smaller pools which was the steer from users and from leisure experts and governing bodies including Swim England and Sport England.
- 33.4 Cllr Loughran asked about financial modelling and the ticketing system, whether there will be different charges for residents and non-residents. She also asked about the cycle parking as it is a bit small. James Hengeveld said they will liaise with the new leisure operator about ticketing. The underground car park is bigger than the building itself and includes specific secure cycle parking
- 33.5 Cllr Lyons asked for a specific breakdown of the increase in costs considering money is tight, and how many property units will be in the residential build. Cllr Taylor said that if we want a vibrant city we need to invest. There are a few key large projects going on in the city that do have high costs such as Madeira Terraces in the east and the King Alfred in the west, that are vital for the services, infrastructure and facilities that the city needs. The increased cost is due to the changed scope of the project, contingency and inflation.
- 33.6 Cllr Sykes asked questions about the cost change, the total floor area and grant money from Homes England. Sam Smith said that they are not agreeing the price at this point and it will be brought back to Cabinet before entering into consultation and that Homes England have made it clear they are happy to fund the scheme.
- 33.7 Cllr Fishleigh asked about the costs as the budget is not looking good and they should tighten their belts and finish projects that have already been started such as Black Rock. If costs have increased by 30% they should go back to the drawing board. She also said

that Peacehaven doesn't have a swimming pool and it seems the investment is going west. Cllr Robins said the next project in the Sports Facilities Investment Plan is looking to the east to provide something similar.

- 33.8 Cllr Fowler asked about disabled access and whether there will be diving boards and table tennis. Mark Healy said that they are engaging with disabled groups in the design and the team have best practice in accessibility. The sports hall is a 6 court hall, larger than the 5 court hall in the current facility, and can accommodate table tennis easily. The hall design will also take account of the needs of other activities with more challenging requirements like roller hockey and roller derby.
- 33.9 Mary Davies from the Older Peoples' Council asked whether they would be consulted on the EIA and disability access points. Sam Smith said he would be very happy to.
- 33.10 Cllr Evans spoke on behalf of a resident who was asking about badminton and table tennis and whether sharing the same space in the sports hall would cause issues. Mark Healy said the sports hall will be multiple use but how it is managed is down to the operator. The future operator may look to sometimes schedule table tennis on one side of the hall and badminton on the other, and the size and shape of the hall enables that to be done safely and efficiently

**33.11 RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

Additional information provided following the committee from Mark Healy:

A question was raised in the meeting about the square meterage of the new design proposal. Officers agreed to provide that information after the meeting.

The paper presented to Cabinet in July 2024 featured outline design proposals produced by the architects Faulkner Brown, who were part of the team that developed the business case. The total gross internal floor area (GIFA) for their proposed design for the King Alfred site, including plant, is 5,725m<sup>2</sup>. With the proposed car parking added, the overall GIFA increases 8,665m<sup>2</sup>.

For the current proposed design developed by architects GT3 the GIFA, including plant, is 6,530m<sup>2</sup>. With the new proposed car park added, this increases to 10,230m<sup>2</sup>.

Compared to the current King Alfred facility, the proposed new design has many improvements, including:

- a much larger fitness suite (gym), with 140-150 stations
- a larger main pool (8 lanes compared to 6)
- a larger teaching pool
- a family entertainment zone (soft play etc)
- a much larger cafeteria with sea views.

**34 GENERAL FUND BUDGET PLANNING & RESOURCE UPDATE: 2026- 27 TO 2029-30**

- 34.1 Cllr Taylor presented to the committee. It is very early on in the budgeting process for next year. Key points included: the overall General Fund increases from £264m to £281m and there are levels of financial pressure across different services; the cost and demand from Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Home to School Transport, and temporary accommodation and rough sleepers, which has the largest cost. Although there is an overall increase in cash funding, the severe pressures have resulted in a shortfall of £40m. The council has very low reserves in comparison to other local authorities. In-year pressures relate to forecast pressures for next year and if they are not mitigated, it will have an impact on future years. There is a plan to deliver temporary accommodation more innovatively to reduce this impact, but the council has a duty to accommodate families who are homeless; housing benefit does not cover all temporary accommodation costs and the council picks up the shortfall. Budget proposals are being drafted at the moment, and they will come back to scrutiny later in the year.
- 34.2 Cllr Sykes asked about developments with temporary accommodation, about the MHCLG Fair Funding Review and how the reserves comparison with other local authorities was calculated. Cllr Taylor said that there is a large amount of work going on to proactively support families and prevent them from having to go into temporary accommodation. The council is using interventions such as block booking, and utilising vacancies in existing stock, such as the LPS Blocks. They are looking into turning buildings or bits of land into accommodation or to invest in in-house accommodation or sell commercial assets to buy accommodation. John Hooton said that the calculation for the reserves looks at both general and earmarked reserves. Essentially, the council has very limited reserves. Other councils have large amounts set aside which makes them more financially stable.
- 34.3 Cllr Loughran asked how to engage with residents and businesses to tackle the shortfall as there might be opportunities for pairing up particularly with businesses or community wealth building models. Should the council be buying more properties? Cllr Loughran asked for an explanation of the revised business rates model. Cllr Taylor said that public engagement with the budget setting process is never high, although the online tool deployed last year did attract some interest. When engaging with stakeholders, they are encouraged to think about how they can help the council to unlock solutions. There is an argument to buy more property for housing as it would result in lower costs and the council would own an asset. John Hooton explained that as part of the changes to local government funding, the government is re-baselining where the council is in terms of the amount paid by businesses and the proportion that is kept by the council.
- 34.4 Cllr Sykes asked where the £125,000 for the redevelopment of Palmeira Square came from considering there is a condition mentioned in the report not to add capital projects that have not already been planned for. Cllr Taylor said he would need to check the timing of that decision.
- 34.5 RESOLVED – that the report be noted.

Additional information provided following the committee from John Hooton:

The £125,000 investment in Palmeira Square came from the existing parks capital programme, so it did not result in additional spend over and above the approved programme. There was no budget 'decision' on this as such as it came from an existing budget, but I note that the initiative was announced in August.

**35 SOLID FUEL BURNING**

- 35.1 Cllr Rowkins presented to the committee. Key points included: an explanation of the PM2.5 particulates and how they can cause serious health conditions; that each additional microgram correlates to 1% increase in mortality rates; the communications campaign had shown that people didn't realise solid fuel burning was such a big health problem; that the Smoke Control Areas have not been enforced or publicised in the past; the enforcement pilot took an informative approach rather than punitive where letters were sent rather than fines; they launched the website where the public could view the results of the air monitoring network; the trends are fairly high across the city with amounts being much higher during the heating season; the graph shows that the readings exceed WHO guidance which is significant. There is an increasing number of fuel burners in densely populated areas; solid fuel can be used if the appliance is approved but even DEFRA approved appliances still produce particulates – more work is needed to address this.
- 35.2 Katy Harker, Consultant in Public Health, presented to the committee. Key points included: Poor air quality is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK, and long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases as well as lung cancer. In Brighton and Hove, 1 in 20 deaths in those aged 30 years or over are estimated to be attributable to particulate air pollution. Short-term exposure can exacerbate asthma, and hospital admission rates for asthma attacks among those under 19 in the city are worse than national and regional averages as well as those of statistical neighbours and are showing a worsening trend. More affluent areas tend to have a higher number of wood burners, although the impact is greater on more deprived areas who tend to have more underlying health conditions and live closer to roads, which compounds the issue.
- 35.3 Cllr Lyons asked what the plan is for this coming winter, whether they will put out warning signs about buying unapproved logs, are any more monitors going to be put in the city; and whether people can buy their own monitors. Cllr Rowkins said that an awareness campaign is the very least we should be doing; the burning of elm logs has been a problem and the message should change to "don't burn any logs", as stated in the addendum, new pollution sensors for Moving Traffic Enforcement will come and additional automatic analysers (air quality monitoring stations) started in Q1 of 2025; and that residents can buy monitors to install in their home but they won't be able to add to the council data as they are not checked for data quality assurance.



- 35.4 Cllr Cattell asked about burning pellets, whether a wood burning stove could be adapted to be DEFRA approved and whether particulates come from tyres. Cllr Rowkins said tyre and brakes produce particulates, but the 20mph city centre speed limit means this is not significant. Samuel Rouse said that pellet-fed burners are normally used for commercial purposes and are low for particulates but will let them out when being refuelled. He is not aware whether appliances can be adapted.
- 35.5 Cllr Sykes was in favour of maintaining the current awareness campaign and extending the Smoke Control Area.
- 35.6 Cllr Loughran agreed with Cllr Sykes and asked whether the council would engage with retailers of wood burners to ensure consumers are getting the right advice. She was surprised to hear that DEFRA approved appliances are not environmentally friendly either. Timothy Start said that other cities have the Burn Right Initiative that provides up to date information on wood burning and there seems to be a desire in the city for this. Burn right is an acceptance of solid fuel burning but there is still a risk that smoke will be emitted. The best case scenario is to discourage solid fuel burning where population density is highest or adjacent to high rise flats. DEFRA approved appliances can be enforced within a Smoke Control Area.
- 35.7 Cllr Evans asked about the difference between DEFRA approved and DEFRA exempt, how they had been notified of residents who they sent letters to and that the borders of the current Smoke Control Areas don't make sense and have left out the more affluent areas; there is a need to fill in those gaps and expand into Hove. Cllr Rowkins said the borders were done in the 70s and now looked arbitrary, that those residents who received a letter had been reported by other residents following the awareness campaign and that the correct term to use is DEFRA exempt.
- 35.8 Cllr Winder asked how long it would take to set up the expanded scheme including time for consultation. Cllr Rowkins said they have to go via DEFRA and apply for the power to declare Smoke Control Areas and the public consultation must run for at least 4 weeks; so they could be in place by next winter.
- 35.9 Cllr Evans summarised the steer from the committee for future actions to be taken:
- extend the Smoke Control Areas
  - Continue the awareness campaign
  - Continue the enforcement initiatives and establish further initiatives
- 35.10 RESOLVED** – that Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee agree the steer for further actions and agree to note the report.

Additional information provided following the committee from Samuel Rouse:

To add to the answers given to Cllrs questions at the committee;

- Old stoves can not be retrofitted to make them exempt appliances or eco-stove standard. The current market includes exempt appliances and approved fuels. Low smoke fuels are authorised for specific stoves.

- For a bus worth £300K, 2015 to 2024, it was worth investing in upgraded exhaust after treatment that includes selective catalytic reduction, add-blue urea, with advanced diesel particulate filters. Most vehicles on the road are now ultra-low, or zero. The cleanest stoves are “low emission” and this is the most polluting category in 2025.
- Stoves rely on combustion chamber efficiency, air control valves and soot sweeps, there is no exhaust pipe after treatment such as catalysts or filtration. Installed stoves last decades, and easily two or three times longer than almost all buses & cars, so a new one installed now has likely legacy for future generations around 2050. Domestic burning amongst high population density is unlikely to be socially acceptable after 2030.
- In addition to air pollution monitoring installed 2024 and 2025 (to date) air pollution sensors will be used to monitor Moving Traffic Enforcement such as the Western Road, Red Route and some school streets. The council does not provide an on-demand monitoring service.
- Citizen science can help with engagement and awareness raising. BHCC can not instruct or assist the public with their DIY monitoring. One-off sensors should not be compared with other settings and cities for example Brighton roadside with a Paris Park. An amateur tendency is to compare short term peaks with annual air quality objectives which is not like for like. Whilst pollution has acute health burdens and triggers hospital admissions, annual air quality target levels (concentrations in air) relate to long term human dose and exposure to pollution.
- Authority monitors and contracts have regard to quality assurance and quality control of scientific data, that includes validation and verification. This is possible with co-located monitors, more than one monitoring method and a network of sensors instead of one stand-alone monitor.
- Ideally there would be funding for independent audits of monitoring data. Our priority is to sustain data stream from connected council monitoring assets. Monitoring verifies a computer based dispersion model that is a detailed air quality assessment with pollution concentrations mapped everywhere in the city.

## **36 HOUSING SAFETY AND QUALITY COMPLIANCE UPDATE**

- 36.1 Cllr Williams presented to the committee. Key points included: significant progress has been made; the paper includes a root cause analysis to understand how the council got into this position and lessons to be learned; there is an improvement plan to ensure that the council becomes compliant and then continues to remain compliant in the future. Council stock was developed during a time when regulations were less stringent, the properties are now old, underinvested and were not designed or maintained to fulfil modern day expectations and standards.
- 36.2 Martin Reid said it was important to learn from this experience and that positive progress has been made; the council is now compliant with fire risk assessments, have reduced remediation actions, increased resources to have the right capacity and skills in

the team; struggled with water risk assessments but are now at 81%, electrical safety is now 87% and smoke detection is at 98.9%. They are aiming to be 100% compliant but the last few percentage points are the hardest to achieve are due to difficulty in accessing the last few properties. The repairs backlog remains an area of concern; there were 6578 repairs that were over 28 days overdue; however, this is now below 3000. The action plan will have a phased approach and aims for continuous improvement for residents and regulations.

- 36.3 Cllr Sykes asked whether the fire risk assessments had been shared with the residents, how many fire risk elements were serious breaches and about the cost for fire-doors. Martin Reid said the fire risk assessments will be going online but there are a lot of them to get through; that they triage them to make sure there are no intolerable risks, and those would be actioned straight away, but the majority are things like fire action notices, fire doors compartmentation and electrical safety. The cost of fire doors comes from a tendering process and they consider whether it is appropriate to charge the leaseholder or not depending on the situation.
- 36.4 Cllr Cattell asked about black mould and similar issues. Cllr Williams said the council is declaring a war on mould and damp this winter and have set up a full specialist team specifically for these kinds of complaints, which they will do a members' workshop on very soon.
- 36.5 Cllr Fowler asked about carbon monoxide detectors. Martin Reid said they were at 99.7% and there are plans to get them hard wired into the buildings so residents don't have to worry about relying on batteries.

**36.6 RESOLVED** – that the report be noted.

The Chair closed the meeting at 20.05.

The meeting concluded at 8.05pm

Signed

Chair

Dated this

day of