

Brighton & Hove City Council's Interim Plan for Local Government Reorganisation

21 March 2025

Summary

On 5 February 2025 the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all East Sussex authorities and Brighton and Hove City Council inviting us to work with other Leaders across Sussex to develop proposals for Local Government Reorganisation of two-tier areas.

Brighton and Hove City Council supports local government reform to create unitary authorities where currently two-tier authorities exist.

This paper sets out our response to the Minister's invitation. We include our plans to engage further with our neighbouring Councils across Sussex, our residents, communities and key stakeholders on options. Our plan includes how we will build and review the data and evidence on the impact of Local Government Reform on the priorities for our City and the wider Sussex area, including financial sustainability, service delivery and equality.

Brighton & Hove City Council is the only Unitary Authority in Sussex and delivers more than 700 services to people living and working in the city. We are ambitious for the future of our city and are committed to making it "A Better Brighton & Hove for all". Our Council Plan is key to delivering our priorities by 2027 and beyond. Our top priorities are tackling inequalities, the housing and homelessness crisis, and improving the look and feel of the city. We are proud to have continued to balance our budgets through austerity and this period of declining local government finance.

We believe that our current council size is broadly set up appropriately for Brighton & Hove and we do not feel the need to pursue local government organisation arbitrarily. Notwithstanding this, we recognise that there would be benefit in reorganisation if it supports greater efficiency, effectiveness and resilience for the City and we are open to change where the evidence and data supports this. We are keen to explore options that will help us address the critical challenges facing our city, such as homelessness, housing affordability and inequality.

Brighton and Hove sits within Sussex where the differences between rural, urban and coastal areas form the strengths of the future Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Combined County Authority. We believe, and over the coming months will test our assumptions against the data and evidence and the views of our residents, stakeholders and partners, that any Sussex and Brighton MCCA must represent these different but complementary areas. We are of the view that potentially creating five unitaries

authorities across Sussex, with Brighton and Hove on our existing footprint or growing to form one of these new authorities, would ensure the different voices of Sussex are heard at the MCCA table, while ensuring the Unitary authorities are financially viable, efficient and hold local identity. We have seen through our own services and from other smaller unitaries the benefits of big county services being delivered on smaller footprints leading to positive outcomes for residents through the interconnection of universal services with specialist areas.

In this paper we share the findings of our initial engagement with the residents and communities of Brighton and Hove City where we set out four options for Brighton and Hove: remain as we are; grow towards the east; grow towards the west or grow towards the north. We set out our plan to test these options and assumptions further over the next six months in advance of final proposals being submitted on 26 September.

Brighton and Hove City – our unique character

Brighton & Hove is a cosmopolitan, dynamic city by the sea, located on the edge of the South Downs National Park. This inspiring place to live, work and visit is home to over 280,000 people and attracts 10 million visitors each year. The city's success is a result of continually adapting innovating and growing while maintaining its independent spirit and distinct identity.

Economic Strength

As a city, Brighton & Hove is in a strong economic position, punching well above our weight for our size and performing well by traditional economic measures. External research has shown that we have some of the best conditions for investment of anywhere outside of London.¹ We are proudly ranked as the 5th best city in which to live and work, and the 5th best city in which to start a business.²

Cultural and Creative Hub

Brighton & Hove is an internationally recognised cultural offer and are a hotspot for creative talent and technological innovation. City landmarks include the iconic Royal Pavilion, the Palace Pier, and The Lanes shopping area. With an abundance of bars, restaurants, independent shops and attractions.

Festivals and Events

Our city's cultural offering is huge - the Brighton Festival of performing arts has been held in the city for 50 years and boasts the biggest fringe festival in England. Annual major sporting events include the Brighton Marathon, the biggest outside London. We are home to a Premier League football team, Brighton & Hove Albion, who play at the

¹ [BRIGHTON & HOVE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE](#) pg 7

² [BRIGHTON & HOVE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE](#) pg.7

state-of-the-art Brighton Community Stadium, which also hosts the club's Women's Super League team and international games.

Educational Excellence

Our city's two top-flight universities attract students from around the world. The University of Sussex is ranked 25th in the index for the best universities in the UK and Brighton University is leading the way in the fields of advanced engineering and design. Brighton, Hove & Sussex Sixth Form College (BHASVIC) which is also located in the city – is in the top 10 Further Education colleges nationally and rated the No1 non-selective college in the country, drawing students from across Sussex.

Natural Beauty and Green Spaces

Key to the success of Brighton & Hove – both historically and in the present day – is its outstanding environment. We are ideally situated between the coast and the South Downs. Both are areas of outstanding natural beauty, and we are proud to be recognised as a UNESCO World Biosphere Region, known as The Living Coast. Our famous seafront promenades and undercliff walks provides 13km of off-road walking for residents and visitors. In the city centre, there is a green space or park in easy reach wherever you go in the city. We have approximately 147 parks including heritage parks, playing fields and green spaces. Of our major parks, 7 have been awarded Green Flags by the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign.

Diversity and Inclusion

Brighton & Hove is a diverse and unique city. We are unofficially referred to as the LGBTQIA+ capital of Britain and we are proud to host the UK's biggest Pride Festival. More than 20% of the city's population were born outside the UK, and we have a higher migrant population than elsewhere in the southeast – and much of England. As a City of Sanctuary, we are committed to being a welcoming place of safety, acceptance and freedom of expression for all – and to offer sanctuary for people fleeing violence and persecution.

Challenges

While there is much to celebrate, Brighton & Hove faces significant challenges. The national housing crisis is severely impacting the city, with 7,500 households currently on the Housing Register, including 1,800 people currently living in temporary or emergency accommodation.

We are a city of deep inequalities, with areas of significant deprivation. Out of 317 authorities, Brighton & Hove is ranked 131 most deprived authority in England (2019 IMD). 15 neighbourhoods (9%) are in the 10% most deprived lower super output areas in England.

Healthy life expectancy shows that Brighton & Hove women can expect to live 25% of their life in poor health (23% in England), while males in Brighton & Hove can expect 22% of their life to be lived in poor health (20% in England). In addition, there are

significant health inequalities across our population. For example, there is a gap in life expectancy of 10 years in men and six years in women between the most and least disadvantaged areas in the city. Local data highlights relatively good health and wellbeing in younger children. However, we have high rates of smoking, substance misuse and mental health needs in young people.

Looking Forward: Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

To address these challenges and build on our success, devolution and LGR present promising routes for further development. By gaining greater control over local resources and decision-making for the region, Brighton & Hove can tailor solutions to its unique needs and aspirations. This approach we believe will empower the city to enhance public services, drive economic growth, and reduce inequalities, ensuring a brighter future for all residents.

An evidence-based approach to LGR to support devolution

Our approach to options development is evidence based. We have mapped out the type of data and evidence we will need to test our proposals and assumptions including the detailed work we will undertake between now and submitting a final proposal in September.

Please see a monthly high-level programme plan outline below:

Table 1: High Level Programme Plan

Date and Task	Summary
March/April 25 - Data Collection and Analysis	Collect financial, service performance, socio-demographic, and geographical data. Share reports with the Devolution and LGR programme board.
April 25 - Evaluation Criteria	Define evaluation criteria, assess reports, and develop reorganisation scenarios.
May 25 - Develop and Test Scenarios	Create and test multiple reorganisation scenarios using financial models and simulations. Refine scenarios based on feedback.
June 25 - Evaluate against Criteria	Develop scoring system, perform cost-benefit analysis, assess risks, and conduct sensitivity analysis.
July 25 - Review Proposal	Validate data, conduct peer reviews, and finalise submission documents.
August 25 - Refine Proposal	Review and refine proposals, ensure alignment with government criteria, submit for internal approval, and plan for transition.
September 25 - Submit Proposal	Prepare comprehensive documentation, submit final proposals to government, and prepare for implementation.

Local Government Reorganisation Options to be considered

In relation to size and geography, for Sussex and Brighton & Hove, we feel it is important to consider:

Rural, coastal and urban needs

Rural areas face challenges such as low internet and mobile coverage, limited transport and access to services, youth migration, and an ageing population. Urban areas, on the other hand, deal with limited access to green spaces, affordable housing issues, congestion, air pollution, and other environmental and infrastructure problems. Coastal areas have tourism, low wage economies, hidden inequality and deprivation. To address these diverse needs, we need to ensure that unitary authorities reflect the unique characteristics of rural, coastal and urban areas, promoting balanced growth and improving the quality of life for all residents. We believe, and over the coming months will test our assumptions against the data and evidence and the views of our residents, stakeholders and partners, that any Sussex and Brighton MCCA must represent these different but complementary areas.

Equality of representation

The government has stated that it is supportive of places having Mayors because they have a mandate to take big decisions affecting more people, as well as the convening power to tackle shared problems, and are accountable to the local electorate for the decisions they take. It is important to ensure that new unitaries make the most of the strategic capacity and capability that the new Mayoral institution can bring, to deliver for local communities. To achieve this, we believe that it is vital that there is equal representation of areas across Sussex, both rural and urban.

Number of unitaries for Sussex

We are currently of the view that potentially creating five unitary authorities across Sussex, with Brighton and Hove on our existing footprint or growing to form one of these authorities, would ensure the different voices of Sussex are heard at the MCCA table, while ensuring the Unitary authorities are financially viable, efficient and hold local identity inclusive of rural, coastal and urban identity.

We have seen through our own services and from other smaller unitaries the benefits of big county services being delivered on smaller footprints leading to positive outcomes for residents through the interconnection of universal services with specialist areas. A five-unitary model in Sussex could broadly lead to the creation of five council areas with populations in the region of c300,000 to c400,000 (with Brighton and Hove being 280,000 if we were to remain as we are).

We remain open to options other than the five unitaries while we consider the evidence and test our assumptions. Our aim by the September deadline is to advance a single consensus proposal or a small number of alternative options for Sussex for Government to consider.

At this early stage of the process, we appreciate that other councils will submit different configurations, but we are committed to working with all neighbouring authorities to achieve consensus. There is recent precedent for this. In September 2024, the three Upper Tier authorities (UTAs) in Sussex (Brighton & Hove City Council, East Sussex County Council and West Sussex County Council) submitted expressions of interest to government on devolution, but with different views on the preferred geography. When the Government published the English Devolution White Paper and invited areas to express interest in being on the priority programme, the Leaders and CEOs of the three UTAs worked together to reach consensus on submitting a proposal for devolution for the whole of Sussex. This led to all three councils taking reports to Cabinet on 9 January setting out Mayoral devolution for Sussex as the preferred option. To support the application, officers in the policy, legal, and communications teams at all three councils worked closely together to ensure aligned stakeholder and communications plans were developed and implemented.

Since the announcement that Sussex and Brighton have been successful in our application to the priority programme, we have continued to work together and are committed to doing so going forward to ensure we achieve dual delivery of successful local government reorganisation and the implementation of devolution at the same time.

Working together to develop proposals

Our approach to both devolution and LGR is to be as open and transparent as possible. We have continued to regularly communicate with key City stakeholders and meet with our Sussex partners including all Sussex Councils. We have regularly briefed Councillors, staff and Unions. We will continue to do this over the next six months as we engage more deeply on the options we are proposing for Brighton and Hove City and Sussex on LGR.

Between 24 February and 10 March, we conducted local engagement using our engagement platform “Your Voice” engaging residents, council staff and wider stakeholders across Brighton & Hove. A total of 597 respondents took part in the survey, offering a range of views on local government reorganisation. A summary of the engagement is indicated in the table below.

Table 2: Summary of engagement feedback

Questions	Summary Responses
What are your thoughts on local government reorganisation and how it relates to Brighton & Hove?	Respondents had mixed opinions on local government reorganisation for Brighton & Hove. Many opposed changes due to fears of losing local identity, reduced accountability, and negative impacts on services, while others supported reorganisation for potential efficiency and financial savings. There was interest in expanding boundaries to nearby areas but not merging with East or West Sussex, as this could dilute Brighton's progressive values. Overall, the predominant sentiment was caution and a desire to maintain Brighton & Hove's distinctiveness and autonomy.

What are your thoughts on potential changes to local government in Sussex?	Responses to potential local government changes in Sussex are mixed. Many fear that merging Brighton & Hove with other areas could dilute its unique character, reduce tailored services, and lead to less local accountability. Some see benefits in efficiency and cost savings through reduced duplication and economies of scale. There is a call for more detailed information on the proposals, with concerns about job losses and increased workloads for council employees. Overall, while some support reorganisation for efficiency, there is significant apprehension about losing local identity and representation, and a demand for more transparency.
What impacts, if any, do you think local government reorganisation in Sussex could have?	Respondents had mixed feelings about local government reorganisation in Sussex. Many feared job losses, reduced local accountability, and Brighton & Hove losing its unique identity to larger areas. Concerns about increased bureaucracy and costs were also common. On the positive side, some anticipated improved efficiency, better service delivery, and cost savings, with hopes for more integrated services and strategic planning. However, uncertainty due to a lack of detailed information was prevalent. Overall, there was tension between the potential for streamlined services and the risk of losing local identity and accountability.
Should Brighton & Hove stay the same or be changed?	Most respondents believe Brighton & Hove should remain unchanged, emphasizing its unique identity and specific needs. Many are concerned about losing local identity and potential negative impacts on service delivery if merged with other areas. Some are open to minor expansions to nearby areas like Saltdean or Peacehaven. A smaller group supports combining with other councils for shared expertise and economies of scale, but many want more information on the benefits and drawbacks before deciding. Concerns about financial implications and maintaining quality services were also highlighted.
Should Brighton & Hove combine with areas east of the city?	Many respondents oppose combining Brighton & Hove with areas east of the city due to different needs, identities, and concerns about transport infrastructure and service quality. Saltdean's unification under one authority is widely supported, and some see benefits in including Peacehaven and Newhaven for economic reasons. There is strong sentiment for careful consideration with local input and a clear understanding of benefits and drawbacks. Some are open to the idea if it improves services or saves costs. Overall, responses reflect opposition, conditional support, and calls for more information before deciding.
Should Brighton & Hove combine with areas west of the city?	Respondents are divided on combining Brighton & Hove with areas west of the city, with many opposing the idea due to concerns about losing local identity and distinct character. Some suggest including Shoreham-by-Sea due to its proximity and connections, but there is less support for including Worthing. While some are open to the idea for improved services or economic benefits, others feel more information is needed. Overall, there is a clear split in opinion, with many preferring to maintain current boundaries.
Should Brighton & Hove combine with areas north of the city?	A significant majority of respondents oppose combining Brighton & Hove with areas north of the city due to differing identities, demographics, and needs. Many view the South Downs as a natural boundary, with northern areas seen as too rural or distinct. Concerns include administrative challenges and dilution of local identity. A minority see potential economic and infrastructure benefits, particularly with Crawley and the Gatwick corridor, but even they prefer careful consideration of specific areas and potential impacts on services and community identity.

Communications and Engagement Plan March – September 2025

As we develop the final proposal, we will aim to create a mutual understanding and shared vision for Brighton and Hove that aligns with the needs and aspirations of our communities.

The engagement plan below outlines how we'll work with communities and stakeholders to prepare a formal proposal to government as part of Sussex-wide plans for local government reorganisation.

Participants	How we will engage	Methods of communication
Councillors in Brighton & Hove	Regular updates, briefings and focus groups to ensure alignment with council priorities, using their local knowledge to involve less heard from residents and businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing sessions • One-on-one meetings • Council committees • Email updates
Council Staff	Internal engagement with staff and Trade Union colleagues to ensure awareness and implementation of initiatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff newsletters • Internal workshops • Intranet updates • CLT supporting in-person meetings • Printed materials • Frontline service newsletter • Online meetings with Senior Leadership and Administration
Sussex Council Leaders, CEOs, and MPs	Collaborative working to build strong partnerships and develop shared goals for Sussex-wide policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership forums • Joint strategy meetings • Formal email correspondence
Wider Stakeholders and Partners	High-level engagement to align regional priorities and influence decision-making through partnership forums and round table discussions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder forums • Networking events • Partnership meetings • Online consultations • Formal email correspondence
Communities (Residents, Businesses, and Interest Groups)	Transparent, accessible and proactive engagement to encourage participation and collaboration including roadshows, themed focus groups and digital channels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public meetings and consultations • Social media and online platforms • Surveys and feedback forms • Council website updates • Media press releases • Community events

Conclusion

Brighton and Hove City is unique, with distinct strengths and challenges. As we consider local government reorganisation (LGR) within Sussex, it is crucial to address the diverse needs of rural, coastal, and urban areas, ensuring equality of representation and an appropriate number of unitary authorities. Our approach will be evidence-based, developing and testing scenarios for LGR, including the potential creation of five unitary authorities.

Our initial findings from local consultations have been shared, and these will be reviewed alongside our data and evidence. We have outlined how we will continue to develop our proposals, maintaining a comprehensive communications and engagement plan that involves various stakeholders, both internal and external.

In the coming months, we will further refine and test our proposals, with the aim of creating an inclusive, efficient, and representative governance structure that meets the needs of all residents in Brighton and Hove and the region of Sussex. We are committed to ensuring that our approach is thorough and inclusive.

