

# Imminent Changes to Local Governance: How Can Our Voices Be Heard?

Notes from Brighton & Hove Compass Coffee Morning  
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**Dr Matthew Fright, Senior Researcher, Institute for Government,  
devolution team**

**Councillor John Hewitt, Cabinet Adviser for Devolution and Local  
Government Reorganisation, B&H Council**

*What are the local government reforms currently under way in Sussex and will we the citizens have a greater or lesser voice once these are implemented?* These were the questions that brought a keenly interested and lively audience to the Cornerstone Community Centre in search of answers.

**Matthew Fright** kicked off: devolution and local government re-organisation in Sussex are distinct albeit related processes. Matthew focused on the devolution aspect. The government is pursuing English devolution because it believes decentralisation will encourage economic growth and shift the conversation from the current parent-child dynamic between centre and periphery, as outlined in [The Devolution White Paper of December 2024](#). The non-party political Institute for Government believes there is a good case for devolution because it can drive innovation with decisions taken locally and greater policy coordination. Devolution began in the urban north, creating a greater sense of civic identity and more opportunities for citizens' engagement, with each devolved area negotiating its own deal with the centre.

The current round of devolution includes ourselves, namely, the unitary authority of Brighton and Hove and the county councils of East and West Sussex that will join together to make a new English region, presided over by a directly elected Mayor, composed of between three-five unitary authorities, each region with an optimum population of half a million. Andy Burnham compared the Mayor's role to the captain of a local football team encouraging conversation and collaboration. But does Sussex have a sufficient sense of common identity to make this work? Interestingly, 90% of journeys that start in Sussex and end in Sussex. Nevertheless, it will be a challenge to introduce devolution simultaneously with the abolition of the two tier system (district/borough councils and two county councils) with new unitary authorities that must get up and running while at the same time contributing to running the new region. And what will happen should a regional Reform mayor be elected a year from now? 'Compromise and conversation' will be required to make things work.

**John Hewitt** emphasised his keenness to engage with local community groups and emphasised how creating a Sussex region means more power at the local level about how

money is spent. He then outlined the processes relating (1) to the creation of a Sussex mayoral authority, and (2) for the reorganisation of local government in Sussex into unitary authorities. Government deadlines meant a very limited timescale for local consultation on the initial submission (on 21<sup>st</sup> March) on local government reorganisation, and there was a similarly fast timetable (13<sup>th</sup> April) for the Government-led consultation on the creation of the mayoral authority in Sussex. The challenge is ensuring the coastal, rural and urban areas of Sussex with their different opportunities and challenges are all optimally represented. In B&H for example, 17% of the population live in one of the most deprived areas in England and there a high percentage of children in care with 74 per 10,000 children and young people in care compared to the Southeast of 57 per 10,000.

For the reorganisation of Sussex local government into unitary authorities, central government feedback to the initial submissions is expected soon. The submissions will be finalised over the summer, with public engagement as part of this, the final deadline being 26th September. For the setting up of the Sussex mayoralty, elections are expected to take place in May 2026. The mayoral authority will initially be formed of representatives from the two County Councils and B&H City Council, while the new unitary authorities are being set up. More details are available on the [B&H Council website](#). It is expected that there will minimal increase to the geographical size of B&H, other than tackling anomalies such as only half of Saltdean currently in B&H.

**Janet Hewson** (Chair) gave a brief update on Compass' national policy on devolution that is focussing on three areas: *Money* - including fiscal devolution, longer funding cycles, reforming the current competitive approach to funding allocation, allowing local authorities to set a range of local levies; establishing a *constitutional basis* for local government authorities; and greater *democracy and participation* in local government.

## **Discussion**

Two major themes emerged: financial consequences and possibilities for greater democratic participation in devolved governance. In response to questions about finances and cost, Matthew Fright said there will be no additional central financing to devolved areas and neither is the centre helping finance the process itself. In the longer term there may be some efficiency gains e.g. through joined up public transport services. As for the consultation process to date, several participants were dissatisfied with the process. There were only 500 responses to the Council's questionnaire. 'Most of my neighbours' don't know it happened', said one. John Hewitt pointed out how B&H Council was constrained by the government's tight deadline for submissions but it hopes to do more in relation to the final submission in September. Matthew pointed out that bearing in mind the time frame for the draft submission, B&H Council did well compared with some other councils. Various suggestions were made as to how to inform and consult more widely relating to the final submission in September (e.g. a citizens' jury, meetings with community groups etc) and following establishment of devolution using a greater range of more participatory methods for involving citizens in policy decisions and strengthening local democracy.