

## **Explaining the new Sussex mayor and local government reorganisation**

### **The bitesize view**

- A new mayor for all of Sussex will be elected in May 2026.
- They will have lots of new powers, including on transport and housing.
- There's a real risk that nature, climate and the countryside will be sidelined in favour of growth-at-all-costs.

### **What's changing in Sussex?**

Sussex is undergoing a major transformation in how decisions are made and services are delivered. As part of a national devolution programme, the UK Government has approved the creation of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) for Sussex — covering East Sussex, West Sussex, and Brighton & Hove.

This means that from May 2026, Sussex will elect its first-ever directly elected Mayor, who will lead this new strategic authority. Many parts of England already have a similar model.

Alongside the creation of the MCCA, the government has also proposed a reorganisation of local government in Sussex. This will see the current two-tier system of councils replaced with new unitary authorities.

### **What will the Sussex mayor do?**

The new Mayor of Sussex will have significant powers and responsibilities, including:

- Transport – improving public transport, roads, and connectivity across the region
- Housing – shaping housing strategy and investment, including affordable housing
- Economic Growth – attracting investment, supporting jobs and skills development
- Climate and Environment – leading on sustainability, nature protection, and climate resilience
- Public Health and Safety – coordinating services that affect wellbeing and community safety

These powers were previously split between local councils and central government.

Not all of these powers and duties have equal weight. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, the government paper which sets out the core competencies of the new mayor, lists ‘economic growth’ 54 times. ‘Climate’ is mentioned once, and nature is not mentioned at all.

### **Who will the mayor be and how will they be chosen?**

Elections will be held for the Sussex mayor in May 2026. Political parties have selected – or are currently selecting - their candidate, and there will likely be independent candidates too.

The elections are intended to be held using the Supplementary Vote system. This system enables voters to choose a first and second choice candidate. If no candidate gets over 50% of the vote, the top two candidates go into a run-off. If your favourite candidate gets through, your vote is counted for them in the run-off. If they didn’t, but your second choice did, your vote goes to them. The run-off candidate with the most votes is declared the winner.

This process aims to give the winning candidate a broader community backing, and to avoid a common complaint of First Past the Post (used in general elections): a winning candidate with only a small percentage of the total vote.

However, there is concern that the enabling legislation to introduce the SV system may not happen in time for the first round of mayoral elections in May 2026. In this case, elections would have to be held using First Past the Post. Some Sussex councillors and MPs, as well as local campaigners, are arguing that the mayoral elections should be delayed until the legislation is in place to hold them using the Supplementary Vote system.

### **What about these new unitary authorities?**

The government is *also* proposing a reorganisation of local government in Sussex. This will mean replacing the current two-tier system (county and district/borough councils) with new unitary authorities — single councils responsible for all local services.

Existing local authorities have submitted their preferred proposals to government. East Sussex and West Sussex County Councils have proposed a single unitary each, aligned with current boundaries, though the District Councils in West Sussex have opted for a two-unitary proposal. Brighton & Hove have put forward an alternative model of five unitaries (roughly two each for East and West Sussex, with Brighton & Hove expanding to cover the coastal strip towards Newhaven.)

The exact number and boundaries of these new councils will ultimately be decided by central government in spring 2026.

Shadow unitary councils will be formed in 2027, with full transition to the new system expected by April 2028.

### **What is the MCCA?**

The MCCA (Mayoral Combined County Authority) is a new strategic body that brings together Sussex's councils and is chaired by the Sussex Mayor. It will focus on big-picture issues like infrastructure, housing, and climate, coordinating services and funding across Sussex, while councils will continue to deliver day-to-day services like waste collection, schools, and social care.

Initially, the MCCA will be made up of the mayor plus representatives from the current upper-tier councils (East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council.) Once the new unitary authority councils are in place, their representatives will sit, alongside the mayor, on the MCCA instead.

The English Devolution & Community Empowerment Bill (2025) outlines how powers and funding will be transferred from central government to this new local authority. However, central government are not planning to provide additional funding to local authorities. The real change will be in who makes strategic decisions on spending. Under the new powers, these decisions will be made by the MCCA under the stewardship of the mayor, rather than Whitehall. But there is also a movement of decision-making 'upwards', away from the truly local. Power will lie with the more centralised MCCA, and its unitary members, rather than with the district and borough councils we have at present.

The role of parish and town councils in this new model is rather unclear. The government says it wants new unitaries to "hardwire local community engagement into their own structures, through approaches like neighbourhood Area Committees."

### **Why does this matter?**

These changes will affect how decisions are made about housing, transport, nature, and climate — issues that shape the future of Sussex and the countryside that we all love.

The new mayor will have welcome new powers to plan at a strategic level, looking across the whole of Sussex – something that's been missing for around fifteen years. They could play a powerful role in joining up public and sustainable transport – like rural buses – across Sussex too. If they are also real champions of social housing that meets

local needs, this could be a great opportunity to take a ‘big picture’ look at what needs to go where and allow for effective infrastructure investment.

They could also use their powers to champion the countryside, rural communities, protect green spaces, and ensure that development is sustainable and community-led. But will they?

CPRE Sussex is concerned that the powers of the Mayor and their Combined County Authority put the environment right at the bottom of the list. The government’s focus is on growth, particularly in terms of economy and housing, at the expense of all other priorities. We believe that growth should not be at any cost, especially the cost of nature and green spaces. The countryside is not a ‘blocker’ to economic growth – it is an asset for us all, and a vital, beautiful part of the world in which we live. With a significant part of Sussex’s economy dependent on agriculture and tourism, real growth should come about as part of sustainable development that will not destroy the Sussex countryside that we love, for generations to come.

As part of the Wildlife and Countryside Link coalition, CPRE has been urging the government to bring stronger duties on nature and climate into the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, which creates the new Mayoral authorities. This is crucial to ensure that the countryside does not get lost in the shuffle.

We also believe that the new local government structure has the real danger of taking decision-making away from the local people that those decisions affect. Sussex is a largely rural county, home to rural people with rural needs. There’s a real risk that if it’s done badly, the new MCCA and unitary authorities will see distant, largely urban, politicians taking decisions without regard to rural communities they don’t truly understand.

At CPRE Sussex, we believe this is a pivotal moment. The mayor must put the countryside and its communities at the heart of their vision. We are writing to all the mayoral candidates and asking them to make some key commitments to the countryside. You can read these below. The countryside is already in danger – we want to work with the new mayor, and councils, to save it.

### **Further reading**

[Read the countryside pledge that we are calling on mayoral candidates to commit to here.](#)

[Read the central government’s English Devolution White Paper here.](#)

[Read Brighton & Hove City Council’s local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read East Sussex County Council’s local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read West Sussex County Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Adur & Worthing Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Horsham District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Mid Sussex District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Chichester District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Crawley Borough Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Eastbourne and Lewes Councils' local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Hastings Borough Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Rother District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Wealden District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)

[Read Arun District Council's local government reorganisation papers here.](#)