

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT JANUARY 2025

The new national government is certainly operating at pace. The run-up to Christmas saw both the publication of the new National Planning Policy Framework closely followed by a White Paper misleadingly entitled “English Devolution”. This White Paper proposes the abolition of Wealden and every other district council, and in the longer run all of our county councils. They will be replaced (unless there are special circumstances) by very large, c1.5m resident, authorities run by mayors, in conjunction with unelected commissioners appointed directly by said mayor, or if that isn't practicable, by new unitary authorities with a population of at least ½ million. The government is setting up a priority programme for its hoped for new authorities and wants to have the first of them elected in May 2026. This would result in postponement of the county council elections due in May this year until then or even, via a second postponement, until 2027 if more time is needed (which is highly likely).

The White Paper only offers “devolution” of powers and money to the existing and future authorities that align with its proposals. In other words, the “devolution” on offer is nothing of the sort as it is wholly dependent on significant centralisation taking place first. That's why I begin by saying that the White Paper's title is misleading.

By the time you receive this, the current leaderships of East & West Sussex County Councils and of Brighton & Hove City Council will have decided if they want to put their combined areas forward to join the priority programme. As I write all the signs are that they do want to do this. It appears they will also request the postponement of this year's County Council elections, a request the minister will almost certainly grant. This means the current minority ESCC administration will remain in power, with no electoral mandate, for as long as the process takes. I think this is profoundly undemocratic, as do many residents.

These new “devolved” authorities will combine all the current functions of county and district councils, so everything from social services, social care, education and road maintenance to planning, housing, and waste collection and disposal, will be dealt with by the same body. The District Councils' Network (which is a cross-party grouping of all our district councils) has pointed out that the new authorities that aren't based on major cities will be geographically vast and both physically, psychologically and spiritually remote from local communities. It goes on to say that rural communities may well lose access to place-based services if delivery is centralised in the way the government has proposed. A union of largely rural East Sussex and West Sussex with the urban City of Brighton & Hove within the proposed framework is likely to benefit the city at the expense of the countryside. Local democracy and local engagement with it will also be threatened, and disenchantment with our current electoral system increased, if local electoral connections are abolished as part of the new framework.

The current division of responsibilities between county and district seems owes more to history and political convenience than it does to efficiency and real devolution to local councils would be a thing to be welcomed alongside an informed debate about how services can best be delivered and by whom. A proper national conversation about how to establish the best methods of delivery to meet the needs of local residents is what is needed, not the imposition of top-down proposals which appear to be designed to ensure the party of current government retains some level of power even after it, inevitably, loses a future General Election.

Greg Collins

8th January 2025.