

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The UK Govt has decided that Sussex which has District, Borough and County Councils will reorganise to have Unitary Authorities. This means that the current District, Borough, and County Councils will cease to exist with all services then being provided by one Unitary for a given area.

Several proposals for the new Unitary areas within Sussex have been submitted to the Government with a decision on these areas expected in Spring 2026.

One example of these proposals is to have one unitary Council for West Sussex, one for East Sussex and one for Brighton & Hove. (B&H is currently a City Council). Other proposals from Brighton & Hove are to merge with coastal strip Parishes and to change some mid Sussex boundaries.

Devolution

This means having a Mayoral authority such as exists already in London and Manchester with the Mayor responsible for strategic planning that crosses unitary borders, e.g East Sussex, West Sussex, Brighton. The Mayor will work with representative of the Unitary authorities to agree on strategy, and to receive and distribute funds from central government.

The timetable for change

Elections for the new Mayors was to have been in May 2026. The Mayor would then begin to build the government strategies and structures to be ready for the new unitary authority elections in 2027 and formally to come into being in 2028. The Govt has now proposed that the elections for the County and District elections may also be postponed. At the time of writing it is unclear what the election dates may be. May 2027 perhaps. This would be contrary to democratic principles but possibly necessary practically for County Elections.

Borough Councils (Hastings and Eastbourne) will also cease to exist in 2028 (but effectively in 2027). They could choose to become Town Councils at that point, if not their residents would be represented directly by the unitary.

What does this mean for Catsfield, and other Parishes?

Legislation going through parliament does not clarify what the role of Parish Councils will be in the new structure but it is likely to remain broadly the same, possibly with Parish Councils taking on the responsibility for more local services. We will continue to maintain the recreation ground, streetlights and other services in Catsfield, we could take on more on our own or in partnership with other Parishes (e.g. Library services). We won't know what this looks like until the Unitary is in place.

The services currently provided by the District Councils (Local Housing, Planning, Bin emptying etc) will move to the new unitary, as will services provided by the County Council e.g. Highways. The new unitary Council will decide if all or some of the services that are non-statutory will continue.

There are currently approximately 300 District and County Councillors representing Rother residents (Catsfield has 1 District and 1 County Cllr representing us). In the new authority there will be around 100 unitary Councillors covering the Rother Area. The concern is that our representation will reduce and it may be harder to contact or influence Councillors or Officers of the new unitary, because of the centralisation of control and the reduction in the number of Councillors representing us. This applies to individuals and to Parish Councils.

What is being done about this?

It is difficult to act without knowing what the legislation will be or when the new unitary Council takes office or what the structures will be. In the meantime, we can begin to assess how Parish Councils and residents could best have a voice in the future, what the key areas of engagement need to be and if/how we may fit into the new unitary structure.

Parish and Town Councils in Rother are members of the Rother Association of Local Councils (RALC). RALC has set up a working group to understand how such a reorganisation has worked for other parts of the Country (e.g. Cornwall, North Yorkshire) and how we may best be able to be represented at and engage with the new Unitary and Mayoral authorities. (in addition to access through elected Councillors). It is unlikely that individual Parish or Town Councils will have a great influence, but we may through District associations or County association, or possibly a new Community Boards or similar, be able to have a stronger voice. This is work in progress. RALC is also reaching out to other district associations in Lewes and Wealden to work with us to produce an East Sussex view. We are also working closely with RDC who are very supportive of our aims.

What can Catsfield do?

The bigger picture on Local Government Review is being addressed as noted above via our district association. On a more specific and urgent point, planning for housing will impact us because of both National Policy and Local Planning. The current primary authority for planning is Rother District Council (RDC). We do not yet know where planning authority will fall in the new unitary structure. There is also huge pressure from central govt to build more houses (a clear policy driven by this Labour Government), a new National Planning Policy Framework is coming soon, and because of the National policy our targets for development in Catsfield have increased significantly to 88 new homes (about double) since the last RDC local plan with far less opportunity to argue against those targets.

The new RDC local plan will be out for consultation in January 2026. It has higher housing targets and areas outlined for development in that plan are at Brooks Field, Behind the White Hart and Behind the Post Office. The local plan will be the relevant planning document that is passed to the new unitary and they will operate using that plan.

We can all comment on the consultation. We can also separately state our preferences for housing types and locations in our Parish, and state what is important to us, by producing a Parish Priority Statement. (see separate article on that). We hope you will take part and give us your views on that when we (The Parish Council) also consult in January. This will clearly ask you to state your priorities for Catsfield. That will be consolidated and delivered to RDC, before their local plan is finalised. It is a statutory document that RDC must consider when setting the Local Plan, but they are not obliged to adopt our stated priorities. It can however only help.

Another view on housing, rather than large estates indicated in the local plan, is to build community led affordable houses, in smaller groups for housing for local people. That is often said but without much belief in the "local" definition. There are however means to develop smaller sites for affordable housing that can be restricted for use to people with links to Catsfield. The Parish Council is exploring this avenue to assess if, with partners, this could be viably delivered. More information to be provided when we know more. We will always consult first.