



Adur District Council
% Worthing Town Hall
Chapel Road
Worthing
West Sussex, BN11 1HA
www.adur-worthing.gov.uk

15th January 2026

To: Alison McGovern MP, Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness
From: Cllr Jeremy Gardner, Leader, Adur District Council

Dear Minister

Capacity to progress Local Government Reorganisation and local elections

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2025 regarding local government reorganisation and council elections.

The Government is committed to local government reorganisation and in West Sussex all council leaders have been working together to develop options for new unitary authorities to replace existing councils. I am aware the Government will respond with a view on the size and shape of new councils in March. That will be followed by intensified work to ensure local government reorganisation progresses and brings benefits to local residents.

This is a once in 50 years opportunity to reshape and improve local government with the potential to create councils that can better work with communities to transform services, improve lives and support business. The successful development of new unitary authorities depends on the work and the contribution of senior officers and councillors from councils such as Adur.

You specifically invited me as follows:

“to set out your views on the postponement of your local election and if you consider this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation in your area and so allow reorganisation to progress effectively.”

My assessment is that, in Adur’s circumstances, it would. This letter sets out the factors informing that judgement.

In preparing this response, I have consulted with councillors, listened to the professional advice of our Head of Paid Service regarding the operational implications of the proposed local government reorganisation timetable, and considered the programme for reorganisation which is being developed by West Sussex council leaders. An addendum gives the views of council opposition groups.

Releasing capacity for successful reorganisation

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) requires work to disaggregate and re-aggregate services, staff, and assets to create a safe, legal new unitary authority. This is a significant workload, coming as it does on top of the challenges of day to day service and project delivery. This is particularly the case for Adur District Council where service and management staffing levels are lean. Our Joint Audit & Governance Committee has already flagged capacity constraints across our organisation.

Proceeding with elections in 2026 would require significant senior leadership time, during the election campaign and following the election, drawing capacity away from critical LGR planning.

Postponement would allow us to direct this essential capacity towards the complex legal, constitutional and transformational work required for a successful transition. This requires decisions regarding assets, constitutions, and service models. With the Ministerial decision on the size and geography of the local unitary authority expected in March 2026, the following months will require significant and immediate efforts to establish new governance arrangements, transition plans and undertake vital staff and stakeholder engagement.

Strategic continuity and stability in governance

Election postponement would ensure that the leadership driving the transition remains focused and stable until the shadow unitary authority is established next year.

As leader of Adur District Council I am also concerned that the interests of Adur residents and businesses will not be well-served if elections take place in Adur while they will not in other districts which will be replaced by the new unitary. Councillors and officers from those districts will have more capacity to contribute to initial preparation for the unitary authority, to the possible disadvantage of Adur.

Democratic clarity

Elections are a fundamental cornerstone of local democracy. They provide residents with a direct and meaningful way to influence decision-making and hold their local representatives accountable.

This must be balanced with recognition that if elections proceeded in May 2026, successful candidates would be in place for less than two years and for just one year before elections for all seats on the shadow unitary authority council. With that election, residents will be voting to give a meaningful, full-term mandate as opposed to election to a council facing abolition.

Responsible financial stewardship

While we budget for democracy, we have a duty to ensure Best Value in the use of public funds. Incurring the significantly higher costs of a standalone election for 50% of council seats when 100% of unitary authority seats across Adur will be subject to election next year would be questionable. Added to this, postponement of County Council elections this year would take away election cost-sharing and increase the burden on Adur District Council.

Conclusion

Postponement of the Adur District Council May 2026 elections would release essential capacity to support progress towards local government reorganisation. It would safeguard operational capacity, ensure strategic stability, responsible financial stewardship, and avoid an election for councillors for less than two years rather than a full term.

The decision on postponement will be made by the Secretary of State. It is my view that the benefits to Adur of a successful transition to a new council, bringing together services and serving the community, outweigh the benefits of scheduled elections in May for councillors in the final period of Adur District Council.

I trust these views will be helpful as you consider whether to make an order to postpone elections, and we in Adur remain fully committed to working with the Government to deliver sustainable local government for our area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeremy Gardner".

Jeremy Gardner

Leader Adur District Council

Direct Email: jeremy.gardner@adur.gov.uk

Addendum

The views of council minority groups

Leaders of council opposition groups were asked their views. In response some emphasised the importance of maintaining regular electoral cycles and public confidence in democratic processes. Others focused on the practical implications for delivering reorganisation within the government timetable. I have considered these views carefully.

The main opposition, **Conservative**, group noted the question asked must be based on an understanding of council capacity. As an opposition group they were not in a position to comment on capacity.

Shoreham Beach Residents independent councillors recognise: "It's likely that cancelling elections could increase officer "capacity" to deliver LGR within timeframes. However, if it's a case of democracy vs devolution, then democracy wins hands-down.

As council taxpayers, our residents have a right to elect members within pre-agreed timescales - these shouldn't be regarded as "moveable" for political expediency. We firmly believe that the elections should go ahead, to ensure that ADC's membership has a democratic mandate to deliver the biggest shake-up in local government for more than 50 years. Postponing elections removes that mandate and undermines public confidence in the democratic process."

Lancing and Sompting Independents: "We are of the view that elections should go ahead in May. We believe that morally this is the correct thing to do, we firmly believe that postponing the elections will further erode trust in politics and politicians and we don't agree that democracy should suffer just because it may place some additional pressure on officers."

The leader of the **Green Party Group** on Adur District Council wrote: "I am opposed to the proposed postponement of local elections, due to be held on 7th May 2026. Postponement is being considered due to the likely impact on council capacity of the 'Local Government Reorganisation' (LGR) process, which, it is said, might be relieved by the postponement of elections.

In my view, it is inevitable that Council capacity will be impacted across the board by LGR which entails a substantial overhaul of local organisation and services. This really goes without saying and will be true for each and every element of the Council's operations.

However, I also think that there is a reasonable expectation on officers and elected members that 'normal business' carries on despite the demands of the LGR process.

The residents of Adur should expect the normal and predictable operations of the Council to remain in place and to be unaffected by LGR. This will include practical services, such as refuse collection, housing benefit provision and planning decision-making, but also includes the normal democratic processes which underpin those services.

Those processes entail an opportunity, every two years, for residents to express a democratic view about the manner in which their Council operates and the level of representation they receive. Furthermore, councillors have a fixed four year term after which residents are given the opportunity to re-elect those representatives or choose new representation.

These democratic processes are part of the routine and predictable 'normal business' of the Council, resources and personnel are in place to allow those processes to proceed, and they form part of the reasonable expectation of 'business as usual' by the residents of Adur.

It would be as contrary to the interests of Adur residents to postpone these elections, as it would be to postpone bin collections or planning committees due to the pressures of LGR.

Furthermore, I am concerned that, in a time of significant change to local institutions, there is an additional danger of democratic deficit if Adur residents are represented by Councillors who have completed their term of office and no longer have an electoral mandate, yet continue to have a role in Council decision-making. This undermines the basic principles of democracy at a time when those principles are under significant threat and is, in my view, a highly concerning development."

Views expressed to me by Members of the Public

Although the fact of the Minister's letter was widely publicised and has been featured in national and local news sources, at the time of sending this letter to the Minister, I have received very few comments from residents of Adur. These comments have raised similar questions, relating to; the statutory power relied upon to postpone the election; who is to make the decision to postpone; when will local elections be postponed to; what is the justification for making the postponement; and has the government taken any legal advice on the postponement of elections.

Whilst I am aware that any legal advice taken on postponement is a question for the Minister, and I will respond to the public questions received prior to this letter, it would be remiss of me not to share the resident concerns I have received with the Minister.