

15th January 2026

To: Alison McGovern MP, Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness
From: Cllr Sophie Cox, Leader, Worthing Borough Council

Dear Minister

Capacity to progress Local Government Reorganisation and local elections

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2025 regarding the local elections scheduled for 7 May 2026. 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.”

We remain fully committed to delivering the most effective local government reorganisation possible for Worthing and to ensure we are equipped to meet the ambitious timetable set by the Government.

We look forward to hearing from your department in March with a confirmed footprint for new unitary councils in Sussex. Since we received confirmation that Sussex would be on the Devolution Priority Programme and also undertake Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), leaders across West Sussex have been working closely together with our Chief Executives and other senior corporate management members to focus on the work needed to prepare for the next stage of this process.

As you will be aware, Local Government Reorganisation represents the most significant transformation of services in a generation. The work required to disaggregate and re-aggregate services, staff and assets in order to establish a safe, legal and effective unitary authority by

2028 is substantial, particularly alongside the continued delivery of day-to-day services.

Adur and Worthing Councils operate a shared service model with a single officer corps, and Worthing is currently in receipt of Exceptional Funding Support due to ongoing housing pressures. Proceeding with elections in 2026 would require a sustained period of senior leadership and corporate focus, which could reduce the capacity available for critical LGR planning and delivery at a crucial point in the reorganisation process.

With ministerial decisions on future unitary footprints expected in March 2026, the following months will require intensive work to establish governance arrangements, transition plans, and staff and stakeholder engagement. Entering a pre-election period at that point may present additional challenges in maintaining focus during a particularly critical phase of reorganisation.

In preparing this response, Worthing Borough Council held an Extraordinary Full Council meeting on 13 January, during which I heard views from councillors across the chamber as well as representations from members of the public.

There was a wide-ranging and lengthy debate, with different views shared across different political groups - with a strength of feeling about the importance of having elections regardless of capacity concerns, that capacity will always be a concern whether elections go ahead or not and the risk of democratic loss with the extension of mandates for councillors whose terms end in May 2026. The views expressed are set out in more detail in the Addendum to this letter, below.

The Chair of our Joint Audit and Governance Committee noted that Local Government Reorganisation and its transition was added to the Corporate Risk Register on 1 February 2025 and has remained in a high-risk category, with a likely or very likely risk. He further noted the substantial pressure placed on resources in carrying out elections for a local authority that is on the verge of ceasing to exist, and which is already facing multiple resource and capacity challenges.

We have also sought and carefully considered professional advice from our shared Head of Paid Service on the operational and governance implications of the proposed reorganisation timetable.

It is important to acknowledge that this has been a challenging issue for many elected members. Elections are a fundamental and valued part of our democratic system, and any consideration of postponement has been approached with seriousness and care.

Since receiving your letter on 18 December, this matter has been considered in detail, reflecting both the strength of feeling locally and the scale of the change being undertaken and what would be in the best interests of all residents in Worthing.

I am also aware that this would not be a precedent to set regarding elections postponement and that this has taken place many times before under different governments of other parties and

that during exceptional circumstances such as LGR - elections have been postponed to enable reorganisation to happen first.

Taking into account the professional advice received, and noting that all other councils across Sussex with elections scheduled for May 2026 have indicated an intention to seek postponement, we have considered the extent to which a change to the electoral timetable might affect capacity and stability during this transition period.

We are also mindful of the potential risks of instability during the formative stages of new governance arrangements, when fundamental and irreversible decisions relating to assets, constitutions and service models will need to be taken.

We remain deeply committed to local democracy. However, if elections proceed in May 2026, those elected would likely serve a truncated term of less than two years, with Shadow Authority elections for the new Unitary in May 2027. There is a risk that such a short electoral cycle could create uncertainty for residents during a period of structural change. Aligning the next election with the establishment of the Shadow Authority would provide greater clarity and a full-term mandate for those elected to shape the new arrangements.

There are also financial considerations, particularly for a council such as Worthing that is in receipt of Exceptional Funding Support. The likely postponement of West Sussex County Council and Adur District Council elections creates the possibility that any election held in 2026 would be a standalone poll for Worthing, with the full cost falling on local taxpayers and this extra funding required would be unbudgeted.

We are also mindful of the need to remain aligned with Adur District Council, with whom we share officer capacity, and note that Adur, Hastings and Crawley have indicated similar positions in seeking postponement. Holding elections solely in Worthing could risk voter confusion and divert capacity at a time when neighbouring councils are focused on reorganisation. While we plan and budget for democratic processes, we also have a responsibility to ensure best value. The costs associated with a standalone election for a shortened mandate would need to be carefully weighed against competing pressures during the transition period.

We recognise that any decision on the 2026 elections is a matter for the Secretary of State. Our intention in setting out these considerations is to support an informed assessment of how the electoral timetable aligns with the practical realities of delivering Local Government Reorganisation at pace.

In response to your specific question regarding whether postponement could release essential capacity, Worthing Borough Council held an Extraordinary Meeting to consider this request.

The debate was supported by a factual report from the Chief Executive, which set out the impact on essential capacity if elections were or were not postponed. The result of the meeting is set out in the addendum below.

It is therefore our view that a postponement of the elections due in May 2026 would free up the essential capacity needed to deliver an effective reorganisation process here in Worthing.

Whilst understanding the change in planned mayoral elections from 2026 to 2028 for Sussex, we would ask that there is no further delay to the timetables already set out. If the 2026 elections are postponed to support the LGR process, we seek assurance that the unitary elections planned for 2027 are not altered or postponed, in order to maintain confidence in this process.

We trust these reflections will be helpful, and we remain fully committed to working constructively with the Government to deliver sustainable and effective local government reorganisation for Worthing and the wider area.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sophie Cox', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Cllr Sophie Cox

Leader of Worthing Borough Council

Addendum - Extraordinary Full Council meeting on 13th January 2026

On 13 January, an Extraordinary Full Council meeting was held at Worthing Town Hall following a member request for a public meeting to consider the matters raised by the Ministerial letter dated 18 December 2025.

A number of related public questions had been submitted in advance and were answered by the Leader on the night of the meeting. A summary of these questions is given below.

A summary of public questions

The main topics of concern from the members of public at the meeting were about the democratic implications of postponing scheduled local elections. A recurring theme was the perceived erosion of residents' voting rights and democratic legitimacy if councillors remain in office without a renewed mandate.

Members of the public questioned whether hoping existing councillors would simply stay on was realistic or appropriate, noting that representation without re-election could weaken public trust and have the potential to leave residents governed by individuals they no longer support.

There was also detailed discussion about the practical and financial consequences of elections not taking place. They highlighted the likelihood that some councillors would step down at the natural end of their terms, potentially triggering by-elections.

Another topic mentioned was the balance between capacity considerations and democratic responsibility. There were points made that capacity is an issue at any time of the year and for a variety of topics and this was setting a precedent to not hold elections on these grounds.

Finally, the meeting drew comparisons with national politics, referencing the Prime Minister's emphasis on governing with a clear democratic mandate. This prompted questions about whether it is acceptable for local councillors to operate for an extended period - potentially up to two years - without such a mandate if elections are delayed.

The Leader responded to comments that decisions on postponement of elections during a period of reorganisation had happened many times before and was an exceptional circumstance.

She also made the point that the decision was for the Secretary of State to make and that leaders of councils currently going through Local Government Reorganisation were being asked to consider the Minister's question about essential capacity and whether that could be released to support local government reorganisation.

The Leader also noted that mandates for existing councillors had been extended previously in exceptional circumstances such as this and these were put in place through Parliament.

Other members emphasised during the discussion that the issue should not be framed as a symbolic or ideological debate about democracy, but as a practical assessment of the council's ability to deliver local government reorganisation safely and effectively.

And that the task at hand was to provide a measured, evidence-based input to inform the Leader's formal response to the government.

The point was made that a specific test being applied was to focus on organisational capacity, resource constraints, and the operational overlap between running elections and managing the reorganisation transition.

Public Questions - summary

Residents challenged the justification for extending councillors' terms without a renewed mandate, questioning the legality of the move and describing it as a denial of their democratic right to vote. Several questioners expressed fear of a "democratic deficit," asking how the Council could rightfully exercise authority or ensure alignment with public priorities for two years without the consent of the electorate. Specific practical concerns were also raised that the delay might actually waste resources - that if councillors step down at the end of their natural terms, the resulting fragmented by-elections could be more costly and inefficient than the planned election.

Member Questions

Questions from the Worthing Community Independents and answers from the Leader:

Q1. *A very recent national poll has Labour on 15% and Reform on 31%. After nearly 2 years of this Labour Government, are you worried that you will lose your Council to Reform if the elections go ahead in May?*

A. The question we are being asked to consider is not based on party political chances, and it is wrong to frame it that way. The issue of whether elections proceed in May is about local government reorganisation and the practical implications of asking residents to elect a council that may not exist in its current form shortly afterwards.

National polling figures change and they are not a basis on which I am prepared to make decisions about local democracy in Worthing. This council has always taken decisions in the interests of residents, not on the basis of electoral calculations or fear of any particular party from national polling.

If elections were to go ahead, we would contest them on our record and our values, as we always have. But the decision before us is about stability, clarity, and value for money during a period of change — not about who might win or lose politically - and the same could also be said of those who are asking for them to go ahead.

Local government reorganisation must be approached responsibly and transparently. It should not be distorted by national polling, and it should not be reduced to speculation about who would come out better politically.

Q2. *Under “governance” [in the committee report], your risk assessment states that “a change to elected members may have implications for alignment with Council priorities, strategy and or policy which may have indirect consequences on partners, stakeholders and communities.”*

Do you believe that partners, stakeholders and communities are sufficiently supportive of this administration’s priorities, strategy and policy that they would see this year’s elections as a risk, or might they see it as an opportunity?

A. The risk identified is not about whether partners or communities support one political administration over another. It is about the practical implications of Local Government Reorganisation, and the need for continuity, clarity and decision-making capacity while we deliver what the Government has asked of us at a considerably ambitious pace.

Elections are, of course, an important part of democracy. But the issue here is timing. During a tightly constrained, Government-led reorganisation process, unmanaged change - of any political colour - can have indirect consequences for delivery, partnership working and value for money. That is the risk being acknowledged, and it is entirely separate from political advantage for one party over another - postponement has been requested across Sussex by all parties from the Greens to Conservatives as well leading to the fact this is not a party political request.

Questions from the Worthing Green Party and answers from the Leader:

Q1. *The council undertook to be part of the Government’s ‘fast-track’ Priority Programme for Devolution and simultaneous Local Government Reform (LGR) about a year ago. It knew the timeframes and commitments set by the Government were ‘ambitious’. Presumably it made some sort of assessment that there was capacity to deliver its part of LGR as well as fulfilling its democratic obligation to the residents of Worthing to hold borough elections in 2026. So what was the original assessment, has anything substantially changed, and if so what are the details of that?*

A. When the Council agreed to join the Government’s fast-track Devolution Priority Programme, we did so recognising that the timetable was ambitious but based on the information available at the time.

There has been a change in ministerial teams, and we have seen that the recognition of the ambitious timetable has seen recent shifts in dates for the mayoral elections also and consideration that this once in a generation process needs to be carried out with as much resource as possible.

We believe that is why the government has now asked councils to share what their capacity constraints look like to ensure reorganisation is as successful as possible.

Q2. *A standard council term runs for four years, providing a realistic period for a new administration to deliver on its manifesto commitments. At the end of that term, the electorate can assess its performance and vote accordingly. This ability to hold elected representatives to account is fundamental to our democratic system.*

This Labour administration will have been in power in Worthing for four years in May 2026. Does the Leader believe that the residents of Worthing have the right to hold her administration to account at that point? If not, why not?

A. Of course residents have the right to hold this administration to account - that is not in dispute here and never has been.

The issue is not whether accountability matters, of course it does, but whether holding elections at this specific point in time, during a fast-tracked reorganisation, would meaningfully serve that purpose.

Where the Government is asking councils to redesign local government structures, transfer powers and abolish existing authorities within a short timeframe. This is about timing and capacity context, not denying accountability. Residents will have the opportunity to hold elected representatives to account through elections to the new structures - in a way that is clear, stable and for full terms to the new unitary councils.

Amendment and Decision of Members at the Extraordinary Meeting

During debate on the question of whether postponement of elections would release essential capacity an amendment was proposed and seconded which asked the Leader to include in their response to the Minister, the view that 'elections should continue irrespective of essential capacity'. There were many views across the chamber, including that cost and resources should not be a consideration in the postponement of elections and that if there was insufficient capacity and insufficient resource then the Government should be providing additional cost and resource to those councils due to hold elections in 2026.

Other Members agreed with the matters referenced within the Leader's letter above. A recorded vote was taken on the amendment with a count of 13 members for the amendment, 18 members against the amendment and 1 abstention, therefore the amendment was not supported.

The meeting continued and the following resolution proposed by the Leader was made by Members of Full Council:-

- Members of Worthing Borough Council consider that postponing election could release

essential capacity to deliver Local Government Reorganisation.

- To note that the views of Members will be noted by the Leader in their response to the Minister together with the Leader's view as requested by the Ministerial Letter.
- To further note that any decision to postpone elections in May 2026 is one for the Minister who has the legislative power and authority to make such a decision.

The resolution went to a recorded vote with a count of 15 for the resolution, 9 against the resolution and 7 abstentions.