

# Rother District Council – All Colleague Briefing January 2025



# Agenda

- Welcome and Aims
- Updates
  - Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation
  - Budget 2025/26
  - Accommodation Review
- Feedback, Questions & Answers
- Close
  
- How we will run this session

# Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

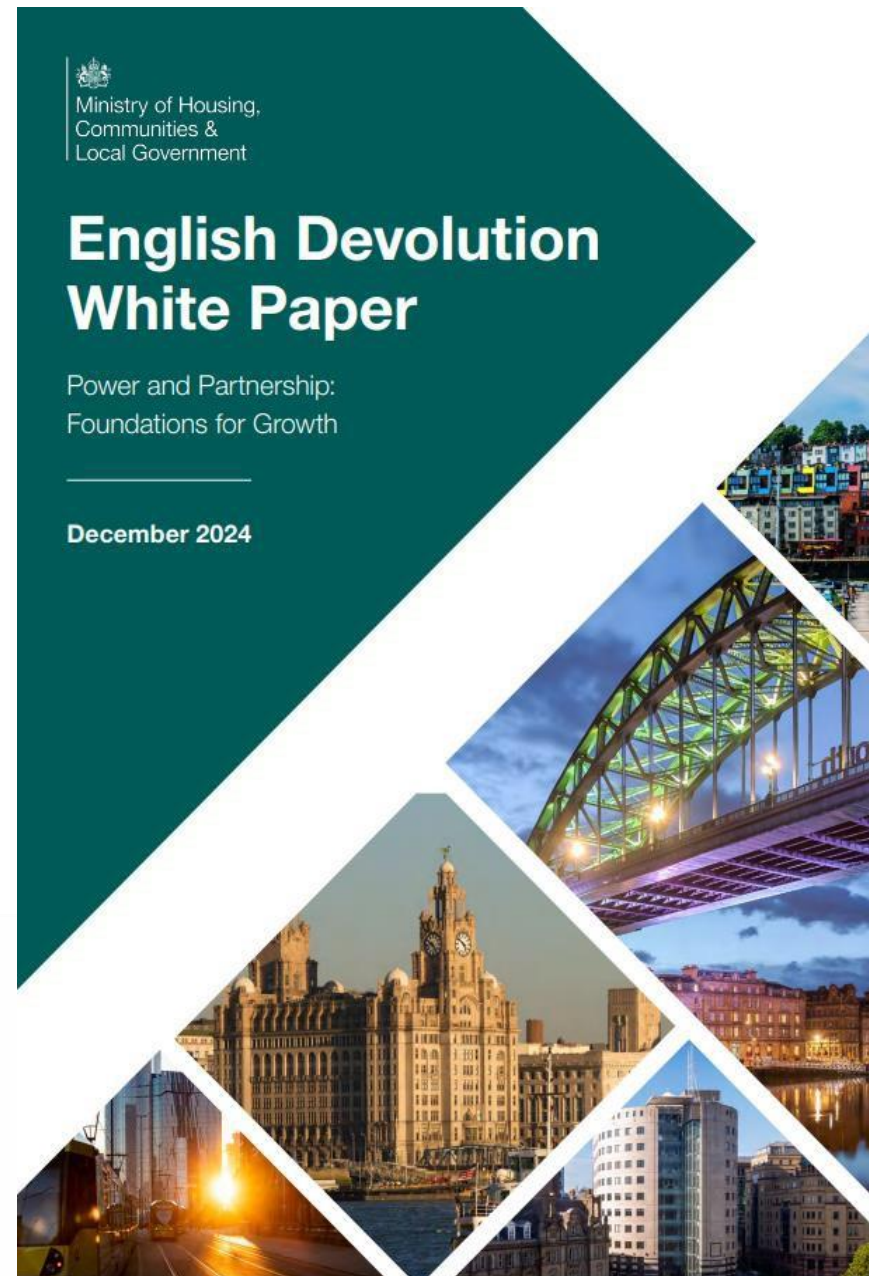
# Devolution

**Strategic Authorities** Mayors and councils working together across the country, covering populations of at least 1.5 million

**Preference for Mayors** Ambition for all areas to move to a mayoral model, who would deal with the government on major projects and funding

**Set powers and funding** focused on driving growth

**Combined authorities** already exist in some parts of the country- for Sussex this means combining West Sussex County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council, and East Sussex County Council



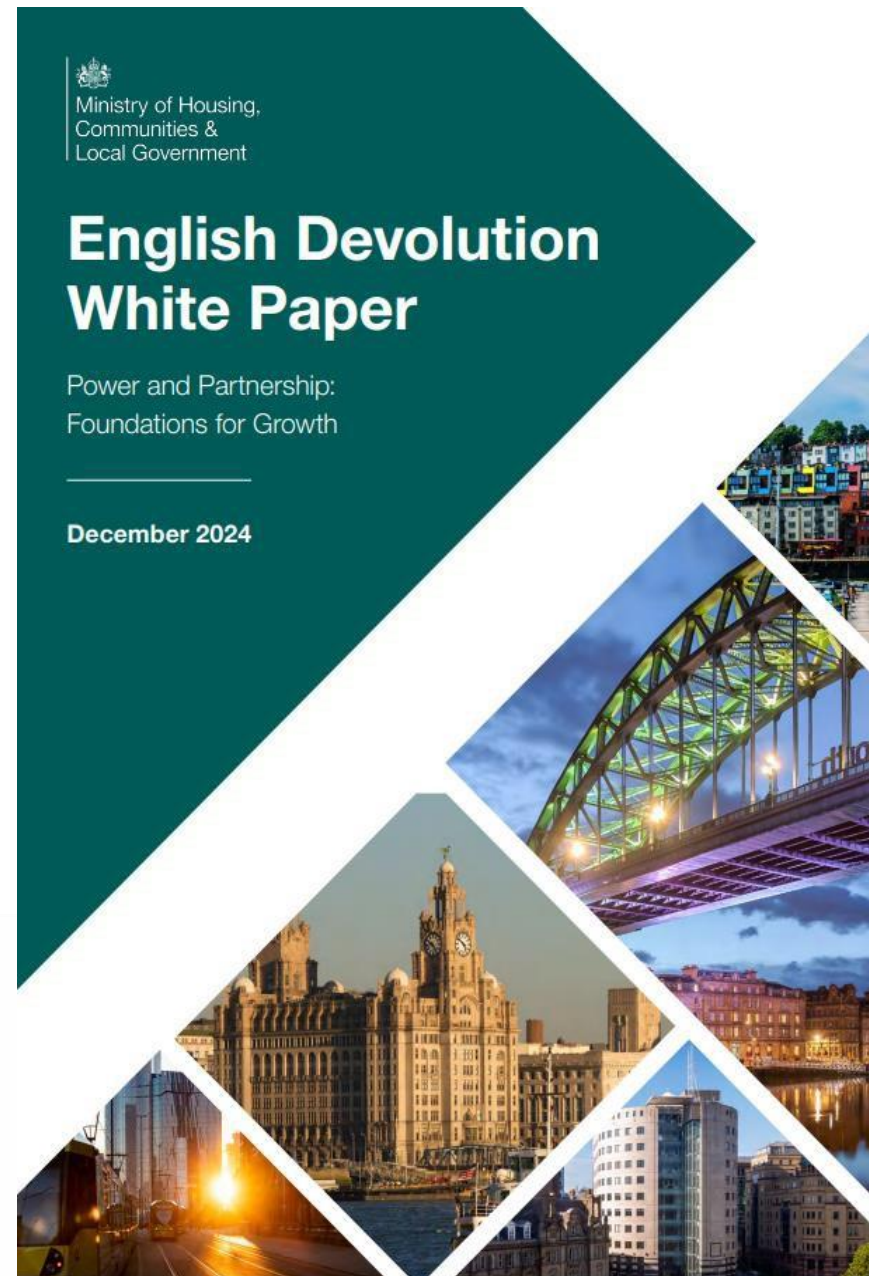


# Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The Government's White Paper also sets out its intention to reform and strengthen local government

This includes asking areas with two-tier local government (including East Sussex) to identify how they might move to **unitary government**.

The government has not published its final criteria for this, but it suggests new unitary councils should cover areas with not less than **500,000 people**. (The population of East Sussex is 560,000).

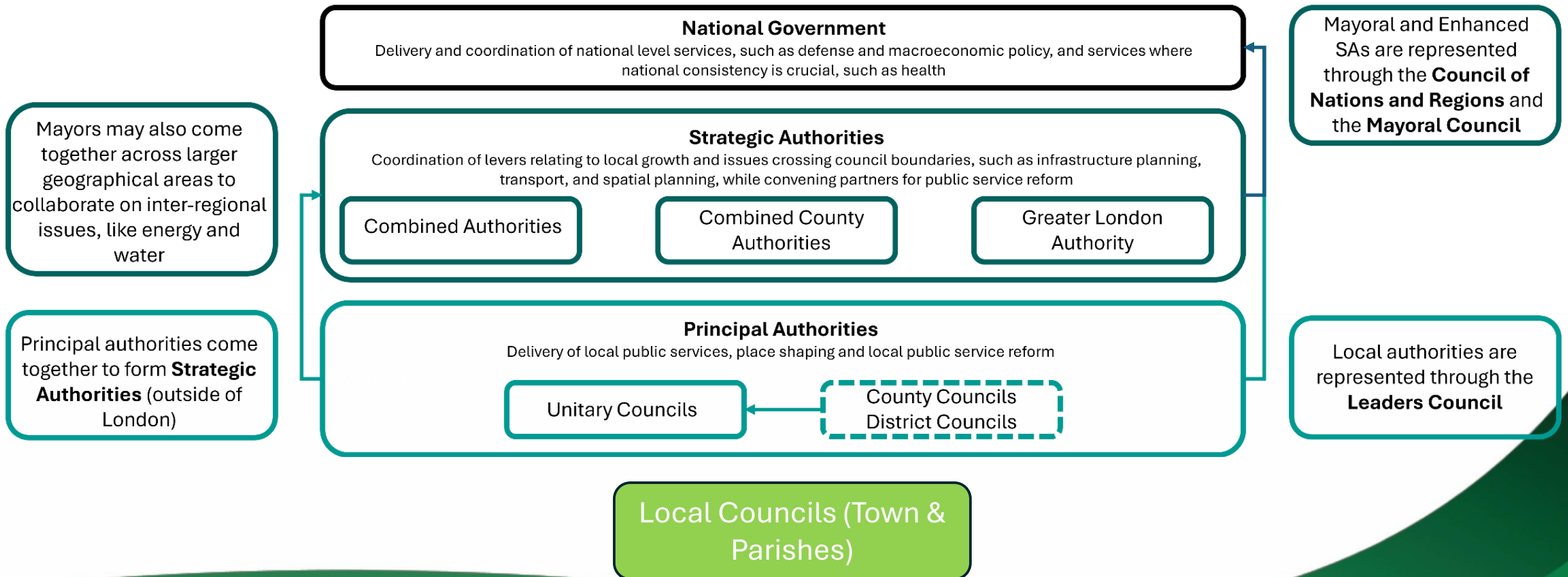


# Proposed Tiers of Government

## Policymaking and coordination

## Tiers of government

## Representation



# English Devolution White Paper (1)



Published on 16 December 2024

- Delivering Government agenda for economic growth, housing, reform
- Further devolution of power to local areas – building on existing metropolitan mayor, unitary authority models
- Improving accountability, delivering a local authority system that is close enough to communities to reflect them...
- ...but of sufficient size to deliver improved efficiency and robust enough to withstand financial shocks

# English Devolution White Paper (2)



- Creation of **strategic authorities**, generally covering areas wider than current counties (population c. 1.5 m plus), ideally led by an elected Mayor
- Responsible for major infrastructure, transport, strategic planning, skills, economic development, crime prevention, health
- Abolition of 2-tier local authority areas. Creation of **unitary authorities** (population c. 500k plus) delivered through local government reorganisation
- To be delivered in phases
- Sussex very likely to be on the Devolution Priority Programme (fast-track)



# Devolution/LGR Timetable

Devolution	LGR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government is clear it wants to move quickly – incentives to go early (offers of support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government to set out terms for unitarisation in <b>January 2025</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deadline of <b>10 January 2025</b> for authorities to opt into the Devolution Priority Programme – cancellation of May 2025 County elections?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interim proposals submitted <b>March 2025</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government will announce those areas on the DPP by <b>end of January</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Final proposals by <b>September 2025</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commits to Mayoral devolution and elections in <b>May 2026</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New unitaries to be in place by <b>April 2027 or 2028</b></li> </ul>

# East Sussex County Council position



On 9 January, ESCC wrote to the Minister of State for Local Government and Devolution to:

- **Request a place on the Devolution Priority Programme**, based on a proposal for a new combined authority for the Sussex area covering the areas of the three upper tier authorities (ESCC, WSCC, and B&HCC)
- Confirm their commitment to developing a proposal for **unitary government in East Sussex** –favouring current boundary to create a ‘continuing authority’
- Invite the Government to **postpone elections in May 2025**, for a year, to enable the proposals for Local Government Reorganisation to be developed and the early implementation of the proposed devolution arrangements
  - HBC, LDC, WDC and EBC objecting to cancellation of elections – RDC is not objecting.

# Considerations for Rother

- Impact on colleagues – greater uncertainty, opportunities, morale, recruitment, communication and engagement
- Resourcing – requirement to support delivery of LGR
- Financial – impact on savings plans
- Impact on our residents - need to ensure focus on service delivery is maintained during transition
- Decision making – prioritise Council Plan, capital programme, Fit for the Future
- Local Plan – we crack on. Greater cooperation across East Sussex. Some strategic planning at Strategic Authority level.

# Key Messages

- There is now an inevitability to Devo and LGR, and this is moving at pace
- Shape of new unitary authorities across Sussex still to be determined - will be statutory consultation. Local identity is important.
- Recognise that this creates uncertainty- at the earliest a new unitary authority would be in place April 2027
- Experience from elsewhere indicates that it will take a further 2-3 years after 'go live' for the new organisation to bring new teams together, harmonise contracts, etc.
- The day-to-day business of the council continues
- Most roles will still be needed in any new authority

# Questions



## **Q: What are the staffing implications?**

**A:** Many roles won't change as the work will still be the same. So, for roles like an EHO or planning officer the caseload doesn't change, it just means you will be working for a different authority. The savings really come from senior management roles; you only need one CEO for example. Part of the process of setting up the new Council will be to identify roles that will transfer over to the new council and those that are at risk. The transfer list will be by far the majority of the existing workforce. Some local discretionary services could be devolved to Local Councils (most likely town councils), so in theory staff could be needed at town councils too.



# Questions



**Q: How have other [devolved] Councils managed the physical presence in respect of residents & staff? Of the new Councils [that have already devolved] do you have figures in respect of staff number changes/losses?**

**A:** In other areas with a new unitary council, area offices have been required. It's too early to say what that would look like for Rother. I don't have figures about job losses from elsewhere.

# Questions



**Q: What might the physical representation across the 3 areas of East Sussex, West Sussex & Brighton & Hove look like? Would we still all be working for the 'Rother' area of this new authority and therefore in essence do the same job from the same office, i.e. to what extent are our jobs protected?**

**A:** A new combined authority will be established called a Strategic Authority with an elected Mayor which will cover the whole of Sussex – as far as I am aware, it has not been agreed where it will be based. In terms of the new unitary authorities that sit beneath the Strategic Authority, proposals have not yet come forward. They could be based on the existing boundaries of the upper tier councils, or the boundaries could be changed. The government has said the desired size of the new unitaries is 500,000 population. This fits well for East Sussex (560,000) but it means Brighton & Hove is a bit small and West Sussex a bit big, so we could see boundary changes. Elsewhere in the country local offices have been retained to ensure accessibility. For most roles, the work will not change.

# Questions



**Q: I've noticed that the leaders of the other districts and boroughs in East Sussex have [signed a joint letter](#) regarding the potential cancellation of the county elections. What is RDC's stance on this?**

**A:** The Leader of Rother agreed with the Leader of East Sussex County Council that it did not make sense to hold elections this year. This was due to the cost of holding elections (over £1.5m across the county) and the need for stability to lead through this change. It should be noted that the government did not request the views of districts and boroughs on this issue. The request to cancel elections could only be made from upper tier authorities.



# Questions



**Q: What are the pros and cons of keeping or postponing the elections?**

**A:** Pros of having elections - it's ultimately more democratic. Cons – the cost and instability of new councillors having to drive through the creation of Strategic Authorities and LGR. There are also practicalities such as preparing for the Mayoral elections in 2026.

# Questions



**Q: If the Devolution Priority Programme is accepted, the timeframes appear to potentially clash with our own District elections, so would they be impacted?**

**A:** Yes, district elections would be impacted. If a new shadow authority is in place for 2027, we would not need district elections.



# Questions



**Q: How much say did RDC have in advance of ESCC/WSCC/B&HCC resolving at their Cabinets' to push ahead as part of the Priority Programme?**

**A:** The government wrote to upper tier authorities about whether they wished to join the Devolution Priority Programme, they did not seek the views of districts and boroughs. East Sussex County Council did engage with the district and boroughs across East Sussex to seek views but ultimately it was a decision for them.

# Questions



**Q: Does it mean that there will be just one authority in East Sussex (the merged districts and boroughs along with the current ESCC) that will also sit within a wider Sussex authority?**

**A:** We do not know if the existing East Sussex boundary will be the boundary of the new authority, although the size is about right. The government will write to upper tier and districts/boroughs at the end of January setting out what it expects from Local Government reorganisation. The government has already said that it expects councils to agree on proposals for LGR – they don't want competing bids on different boundaries, any new unitary authority would be part of the new Sussex Strategic Authority.

# Questions



**Q: What happens to the Budgetary Reserves that district councils have accumulated once the Unitary Authority is established?**

A: All the assets of Rother DC would transfer to the new authority (by statute) and that authority would be free to do what it liked. Technically, earmarked reserves are allocated to specific things, but new authority could "un-earmark" them and use as it pleased.



# Next steps

- The Government will announce those authorities on the Devolution Priority Programme by the end of January
- Rother will receive a letter end of January regarding LGR
- Continue to engage with County and other Districts/Boroughs to agree proposals for the new unitary authority
- We will continue to keep you updated via the CEX channel and will explore setting up a new page on Teams with resources and a glossary of terms

# Questions on Devo/LGR?



# Budget 2025/26

# Funding Squeezed

- Poor Government Settlement – funding cut of over 5% in real terms, after inflation
- Council tax still capped at 2.99% or £5 (whichever is higher) – DCN bid for £10 ignored
- Government has begun to move funding to social care authorities and from “richer” to more deprived areas
- Will move even more next year and in future – effect on us depends on transitional arrangements

# Budget Summary

- Poor Settlement – money re-allocated elsewhere – 3% cut in cash, more in real terms after inflation (over 5%)
- Council Tax Rises by maximum £6.11 (2.99%) to £210.65
- Budget deficit of nearly £1.5 million
- So we are using nearly £1.5 million from reserves – only £2.8m left

# Savings/Income Generation

- £1.176m savings/income generation
  - Planning fee increases – Householder application increase from £258 to £528
    - Raises over £400k
  - Car parks
    - De La Warr Pavilion (evenings)
    - New charges at Sidley/rural car parks – controversial!
    - Coach parking
  - Beach huts

# Growth

- Growth of £540k
  - Temporary Accommodation £260k
  - Loss of rental income upon lease renewal £108k
  - New Planning Posts
- Also funding for £1000 flat rate pay offer – from April not September
- Proposed move to NJC in 2026



# Public Consultation

- Closed 10 January
- By 8 January:
  - Over 1300 responses – a record
- Over 800 objections to charging at Northiam car park
- Majority oppose full 2.99% council tax increase

# Timetable

- 20th January – Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 3rd February – Cabinet
- 27th February – Full Council – includes Council Tax setting
- Mid- March – Bills sent out (2 weeks' notice of Direct Debit)

# Accommodation Review

# Requests from Staff

## 2 Working Parties set up

- Town Hall WP to ensure repairs made to the Villas – leaks, damp etc
- Staff group to discover views
  - Extra office space needed?
  - Size of rooms
  - Break out/lunch areas

# Proposals

- Capital budget
  - Repairs to roof and gutters – make waterproof
  - New break –out area – old IT room – including patio area
  - Extra office space
    - Larger rooms for team meetings
    - Smaller rooms for 121s or phone calls
  - New lift and entrance to Amherst to allow easy access to 3rd floor offices/meeting rooms

# Proposals (2)

- New room booking system introduced – will be extended to more offices/meeting rooms
- Parking – further 7 or 8 permanent spaces will be available when containers are delivered and in place
- Timescales – Villas work including breakout room should be ready by April



# Feedback, questions & answers