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East Sussex
Insights pack

01

Introduction

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an analysis of the population characteristics across East Sussex, with a focus on local authority level insights that inform service planning, policy development, and transformation in the context of local government reorganisation.

The findings are designed to inform strategic planning, policy development, and service transformation as East Sussex County Council explores a transition to a single-tier unitary authority.

East Sussex Overview

Ageing Population

- East Sussex has one of the oldest populations in England, with 26.5% aged 65+ and 1 in 20 residents over 85.
- Rother leads with 32.5% aged 65+, while Hastings has the youngest demographic profile.

Health and Social Care Demand

- High levels of frailty, disability (20.3%), and mental health needs.
- Adult social care demand is significant, with 10,195 people in receipt of long-term support (2024).

Economic Disparities

- GVA per hour varies widely from £31.40 in Hastings to £33.90 in Wealden.
- Highlights the need for place-based economic strategies.

Housing and Temporary Accommodation

- Over 1,100 households are in temporary accommodation across the county with Eastbourne and Hastings under acute pressure.
- Housing affordability and quality remain persistent challenges.

Transport and Access

- Rural isolation and high car dependency (e.g., 88% car ownership in Wealden) indicates limited access to services.

Diversity and Inclusion

- While the county is predominantly White British (88.3%), diversity is increasing among younger populations, especially in Eastbourne.
- Hastings has the highest proportion of LGB+ residents (4.6%).

Strategic Implications for LGR

1. Demographic and Geographic Complexity

- East Sussex has a significantly older population, with high concentrations of residents aged 65 and over, and 85 and over.

- Rural geography and economic disparities are likely to increase the cost and complexity of delivering services across the county.

2. Need for Locally Responsive Integration

- Population needs vary widely, from ageing and isolated communities in Rother and Wealden to younger, more diverse, and deprived populations in Hastings and Eastbourne.

- A future governance model must integrate services like housing, social care, and transport while remaining responsive to local differences.

3. Financial Sustainability and Disparity

- Financial viability varies across districts and boroughs. Wealden maintains strong reserves, while Hastings and Eastbourne face significant financial pressures.

- A unitary authority must manage these disparities transparently to ensure fair resource distribution and avoid perceptions of inequity.

4. Trade-Offs in a Constrained Budget Environment

- Budget constraints will likely force difficult decisions, especially around discretionary services.

- Non-statutory services such as leisure, culture, green spaces, and community assets are often the first to face cuts, despite their role in prevention and wellbeing.

- Reducing these services could lead to long-term costs, particularly for vulnerable populations.

5. Preserving Local Identity and Engagement

- Strong local identities and civic participation are deeply rooted in districts such as Lewes and Wealden.

- A larger governance structure risks diluting this engagement unless mechanisms are built in to preserve local voice and accountability.

02

Council Demographic Insights

East Sussex County Council

Demography

Older population:
26.5% aged 65+ (vs. 18.7% in England),
1 in 20 residents are over 85

Mixed place:
7 years variation in life expectancy between most and least deprived areas and ESCC is largest employer

Infrastructure is limited as access to town centres within 30 minutes is not possible for 24% of residents
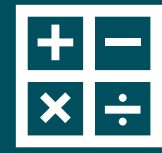
Service Delivery Challenges

Adult Social Care:
High service demand (5,329 requests per 100,000); carers report strong access to information (71.8%)

Health Needs:
20.3% of residents identify as disabled plus elevated frailty and mental health challenges in parts of the county

Education & Children's Services: Below national average attainment at Key Stages 2 and 4; rising complexity in SEND provision

Opportunities

Enhance engagement:
A single unitary model means engagement county-wide with more residents

Joined up prevention:
Creating holistic pathways for residents to improve preventative work at scale

Whole system approach to housing and social care:
Opportunity to create a single aligned strategy to support residents in most need

Challenges

Increasing complexity of demands amongst both adult and children's services requiring multidisciplinary responses

Recruitment challenges: growing difficulties in recruiting and retaining talent across adult social care, children's services, and education

Engagement deficit can reduce trust in decision-making, and make it more difficult to co-design services or implement reforms

Eastbourne Borough Council

Demography

Diverse population: 28% of primary pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds

Aging population: leading to an expected 6.8% decline in working age residents by 2037

Seasonal population shifts: Eastbourne can expect a 30% seasonal increase as a result of tourism

Service Delivery Challenges

Housing challenges: 359 households in temporary accommodation

Mental health condition score of **92.5%** (below England average of 100)

Frailty score of **112.5 –** symptomatic of an aging population

Opportunities

Leverage diversity to enhance inclusive service design

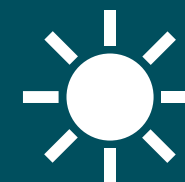**Invest in youth employment and vocational training**

Strengthen partnerships with education and health providers

Challenges

Housing affordability and quality remain persistent challenges

Seasonal economy creates **service delivery fluctuations**

Need for culturally competent services and engagement

Lewes District Council

Demography

Balanced age profile with pockets of affluence and deprivation with a mix of urban and rural communities
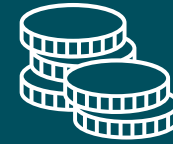
Environmentally conscious population: with strong civic engagement and active voluntary and community sector

Highest rate of frailty in county (121.2)

Service Delivery Challenges

Financially solvent according to general fund reserves of 2023 unaudited accounts

Planning appeals: 36.6% major planning applications overturned on appeal

Strong performance in **environmental health** and **air quality**

Opportunities

Position as a **leader in green infrastructure** and sustainability

Improve planning consistency through **clear policy standardisation**

Build on civic engagement for co-designed services

Challenges

Addressing **inequalities** between urban and rural areas

Balancing **growth** with **environmental protection**

Tourism, culture and place-based services **vulnerable** under a larger authority

Wealden District Council

Demography

75% of Wealden residents are homeowners, with low ethnic diversity (3.4%)

High car dependency as primary mode of transport (>5% using public transport for commuting)

Strong community identity in market towns and village but lack of affinity with Wealden as a local identity

Service Delivery Challenges

Best performing district in waste recycling (48.2%)

Rural isolation impacts access to services

Growth in both children and working age populations

Opportunities

Scale **best practices in waste and environmental services**

Expand digital and mobile service delivery models and **invest in aging infrastructure and transport**

Opportunity to **explore devolved decision making** to ward councillors

Challenges

Rurality increases cost and complexity of service delivery

Risk of digital exclusion among older residents when compounded with rural isolation

Need for tailored health and social care models

Rother District Council

Demography

Highest proportion of over-85s in the UK - 4.9% in 2022, projected to rise to 7.8% by 2037

Reducing working age residents due to younger people leaving for employment opportunities outside the district

Fragmented sense of identity due to different urban/rural needs

Service Delivery Challenges

Housing challenges: 160 households in temporary accommodation

Reaching isolated areas of deprivation in rural communities

Strong community networks: but limited transport infrastructure

Opportunities

Improve rural transport and community outreach

Potential regeneration and collaboration legacy of Levelling up Programme, Fund, and Plan for Neighbourhoods

Maintain and enhance strong social capital VCSE

Challenges

Infrastructure gaps in housing

Health Needs: Risk of social isolation and unmet care needs

Address skills and lack of quality employment across district

Hastings Borough Council

Demography

Youngest and most deprived population in East Sussex, **Baird Ward contains LSOAs among most deprived 1% in England**

Working age decline: Projected decline by 8-12% by 2041

Children and young people expected to decline by 5.6%

Service Delivery Challenges

Poorer health outcomes: especially in mental health and child wellbeing

Housing challenges: **532 households** in temporary accommodation

Lowest recycling rates and highest residual waste

Opportunities

Targeted regeneration and **levelling up investment**

Expand mental health and youth services as part of a single social care and prevention strategy

Strengthen housing support and community safety in most deprived areas

Challenges

Persistent deprivation and health inequalities

Landslide challenges: appropriate budgetary planning for slope stabilisation projects

Balancing **regeneration** with affordability and inclusion

2.2 Themes from CEX and Leader meetings

Summary of themes (1)

1. Strategic vision and local identity

Common Themes:

Strong Local Identities: Each area has a distinct sense of place—Hastings with its cultural vibrancy and deprivation challenges, Wealden with its rural patchwork and community cohesion, and Eastbourne with its tourism economy.

- **Fear of Losing Local Character**: Councillors expressed concern that a larger unitary authority could dilute local distinctiveness and responsiveness.

2. Localism and community engagement

Common Themes:

- **Need for Neighbourhood-Level Delivery:** There is strong consensus that services must remain locally accessible, especially in rural and coastal areas.
- **Community Infrastructure:** Councils like Wealden and Hastings highlighted the importance of community centres, local forums, and embedded officers.

Risks:

- Loss of local contact points (e.g. wardens, contact centres)
- Reduced visibility and influence of smaller or rural communities

3. Housing and homelessness

Common Themes:

- **Temporary Accommodation Crisis**: Hastings, Eastbourne, and Rother are under severe pressure, with TA consuming large portions of budgets.
- **Council-Led Housebuilding**: Lewes and Wealden are actively building or acquiring homes and fear this momentum could be lost in a larger structure.

Opportunities:

- A unitary model could enable **strategic housing planning** and **shared expertise** across districts.

4 .Financial sustainability and risk

Common Themes:

- **Divergent Financial Health**: Wealden has strong reserves; Hastings and Eastbourne face potential insolvency within 2–3 years.
- **Concerns Over Resource Redistribution**: Wealthier or more stable councils fear their funds will be used to plug deficits elsewhere.

Risks:

- "County takeover" narrative, especially in Wealden and Hastings
- Loss of control over locally generated developer contributions (e.g. S106, CIL)

Summary of themes (2)

5. Service Delivery and Transformation

Opportunities:

- **Planning**: Shared planning services could address recruitment challenges and delays.
- **Waste**: Already shared in some areas (e.g. Wealden, Rother, Hastings), seen as scalable.
- **Housing + Social Care Integration**: Seen as a major opportunity for better outcomes.

Risks:

- **Loss of Non-Statutory Services**: Leisure, play, culture, and green spaces are at risk of being deprioritised.
- **Staff Morale and Retention**: Concerns about TUPE, job losses, and cultural clashes.

6. Governance and representation

- **Democratic Deficit**: Fewer councillors could mean less access and weaker representation, especially in rural areas.
- **Professionalisation of Councillors**: Calls for better pay, training, and expectations to attract diverse, capable representatives.

Suggestions:

- Area committees or neighbourhood boards
- Embedding community engagement into the structure (e.g. local forums, participatory budgeting)

7 . Engagement and Public Perception

Common Themes:

- **Low Public Awareness**: Most residents don't understand LGR or its implications.
- **Mistrust of County Council**: Particularly strong in Hastings and Wealden, where "county takeover" fears are prominent.
- **Need for Transparent, Inclusive Design**: Councillors want to co-design the new authority, not be absorbed into it.

8. Political Dynamics and Alternative Models
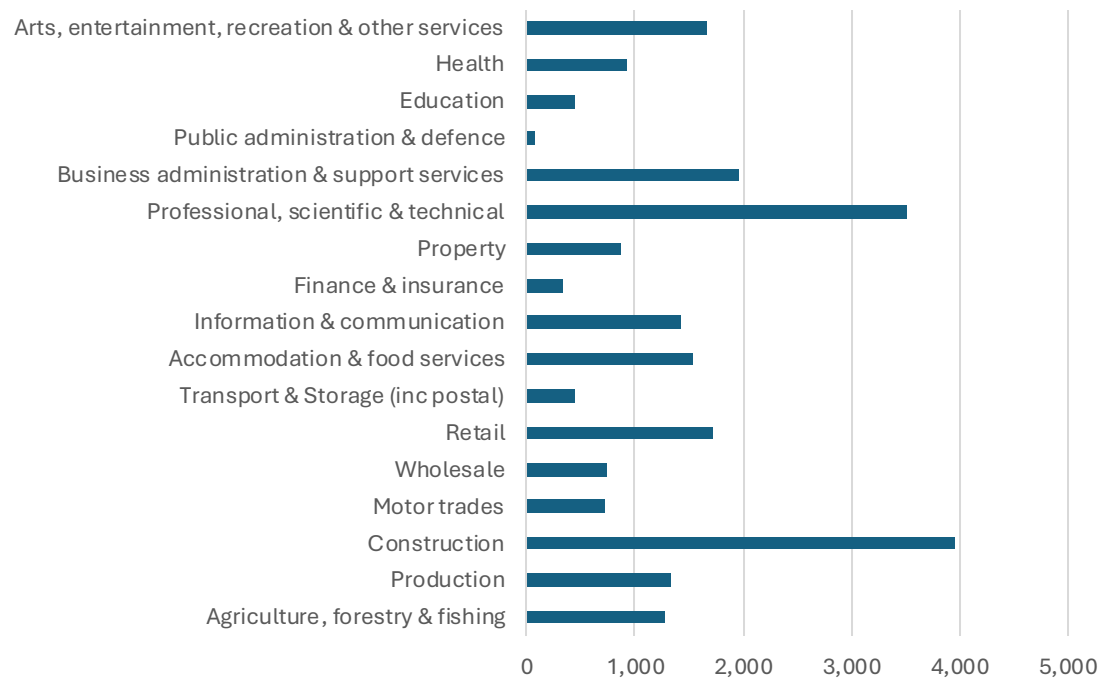
Common Themes:

- **Tensions Around the East Sussex Model: Hastings and Wealden expressed interest in exploring alternatives (e.g. federated or coastal models).**
- **Perceived Predetermination: Some councillors felt the process was being driven by a pre-agreed agenda (e.g. "Lewis-County pact").**
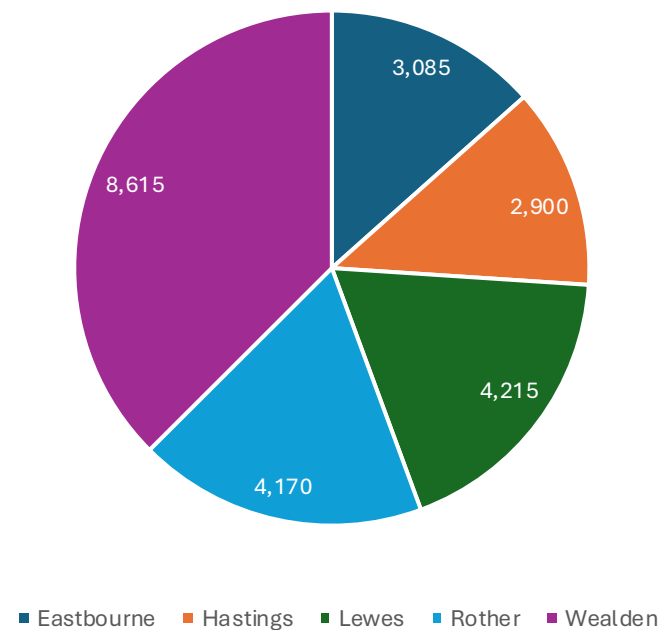
3 Appendices: Data Sources

The figures presented in this report are based on the most recent publicly available data, including mid-2023 population estimates and area measurements from the 2021 Census. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, these figures are subject to change as new data becomes available or as methodologies are updated by official statistical agencies.

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Businesses in East Sussex

Number of Businesses in East Sussex by Sector

Horizontal bar chart, sectors from top to bottom:
- Arts, entertainment, recreation & other services: ~1,650
- Health: ~950
- Education: ~500
- Public administration & defence: ~100
- Business administration & support services: ~1,950
- Professional, scientific & technical: ~3,500
- Property: ~900
- Finance & insurance: ~400
- Information & communication: ~1,400
- Accommodation & food services: ~1,550
- Transport & Storage (inc postal): ~500
- Retail: ~1,700
- Wholesale: ~750
- Motor trades: ~750
- Construction: ~3,950
- Production: ~1,350
- Agriculture, forestry & fishing: ~1,300

X-axis: 0 to 5,000

Number of Businesses by District

Pie chart:
- Eastbourne: 3,085
- Hastings: 2,900
- Lewes: 4,215
- Rother: 4,170
- Wealden: 8,615

Legend: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden
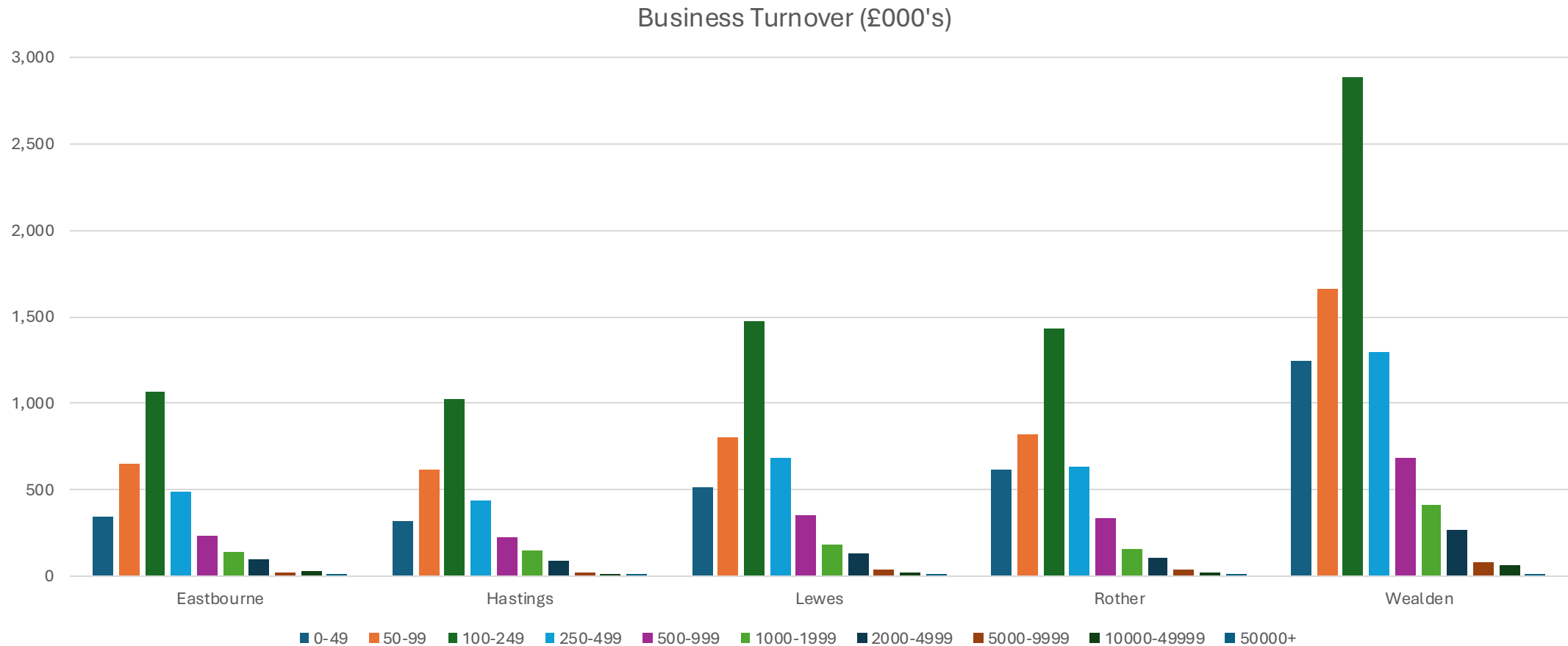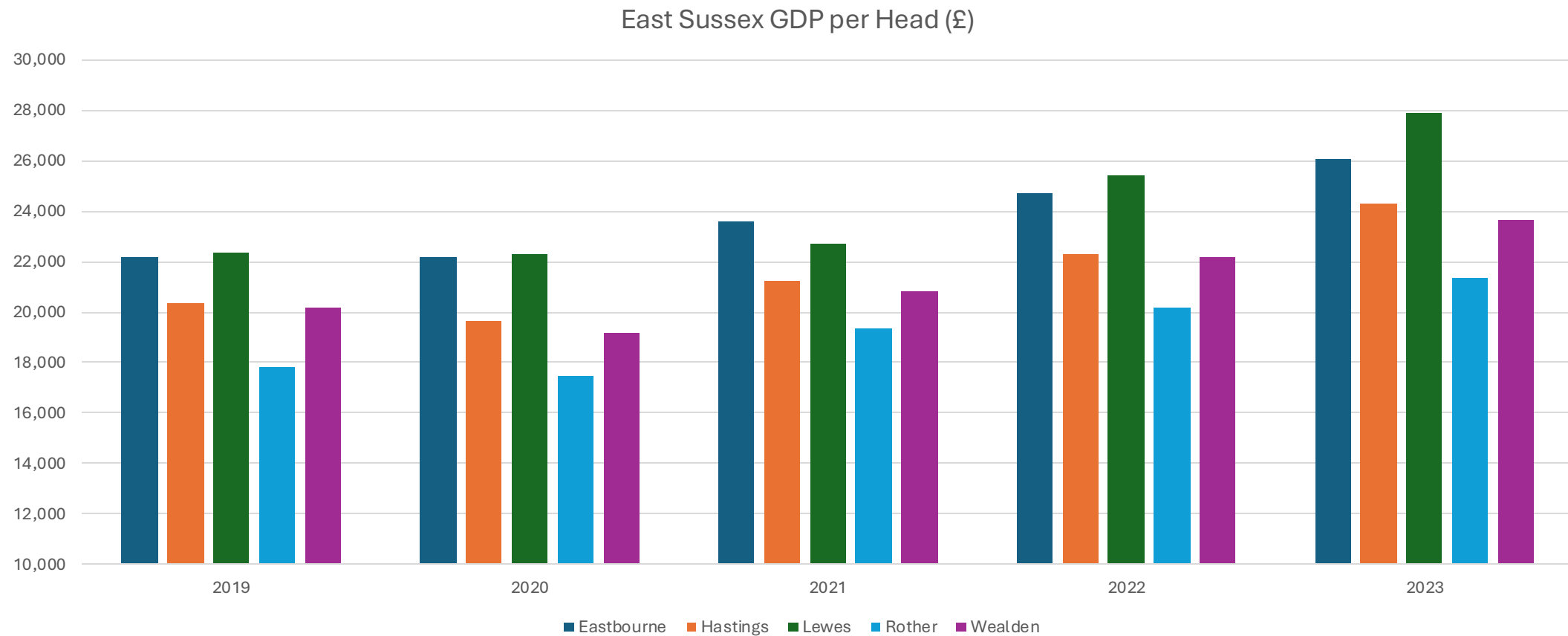
Source: UK business: activity, size and location - Office for National Statistics

Businesses in East Sussex

Business Turnover (£000's)

Legend: 0-49 | 50-99 | 100-249 | 250-499 | 500-999 | 1000-1999 | 2000-4999 | 5000-9999 | 10000-49999 | 50000+

Source: UK business: activity, size and location - Office for National Statistics
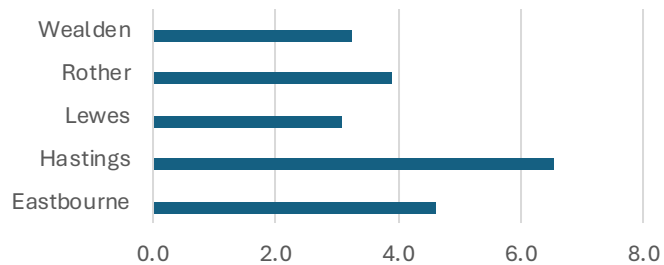
East Sussex GDP

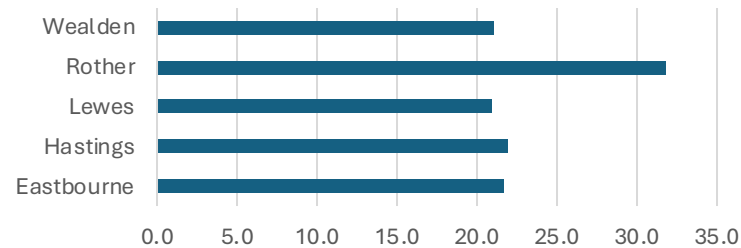East Sussex GDP per Head (£)

Source: Regional economic activity by gross domestic product, UK: 1998 to 2023
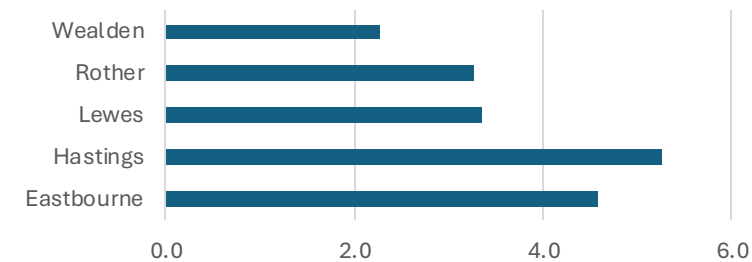
Labour Market Indicators

Unemployment rate age 16 and older January 2024 to December 2024 %

Economic inactivity rate age 16 to 64 January 2024 to December 2024 %
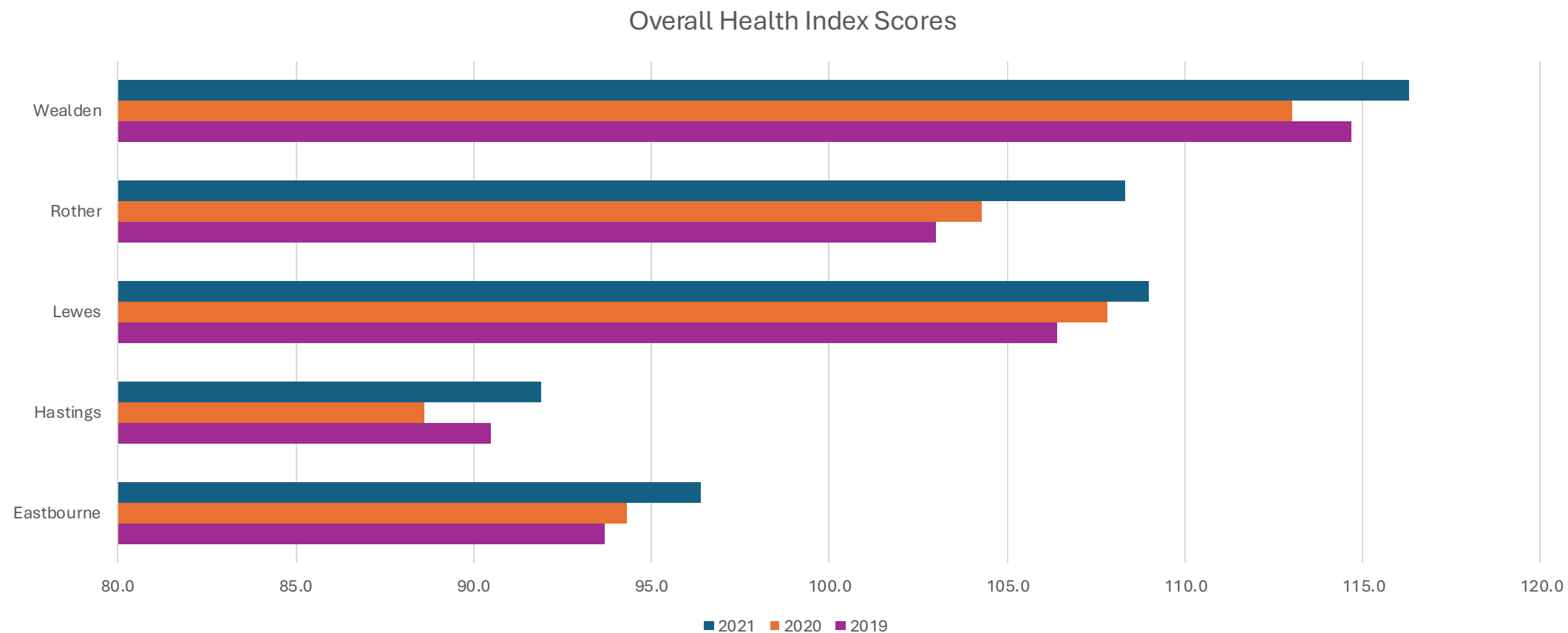

Claimant Count proportion January 2024 to December 2024 %
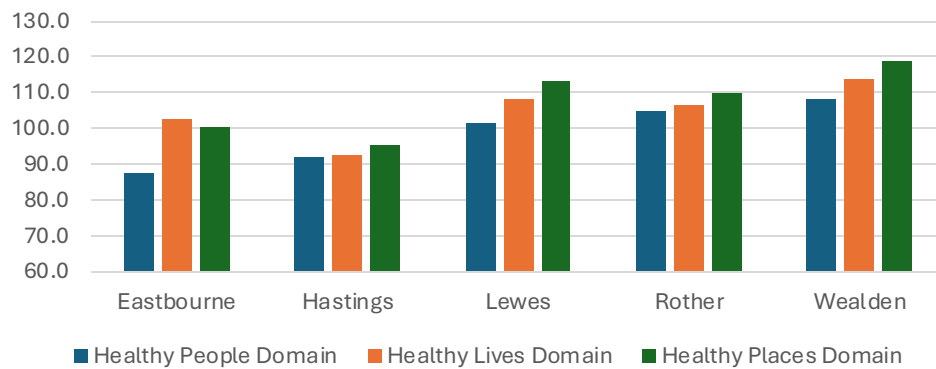

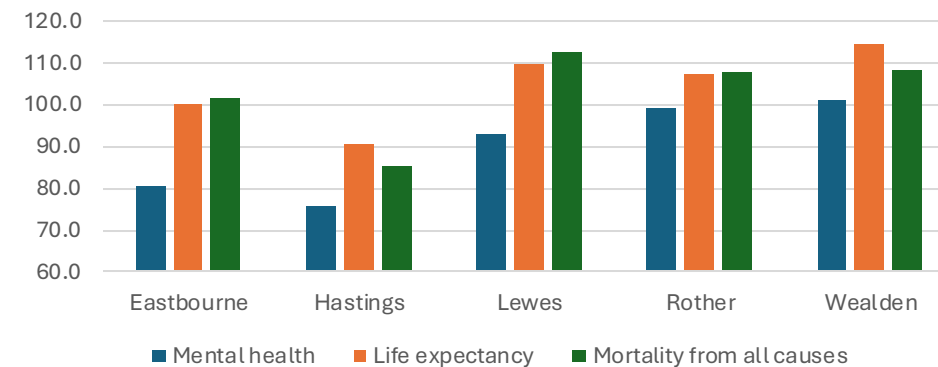Source: ONS, Employment and Labour Market

Health Index Scores

Overall Health Index Scores

Legend: ■ 2021 ■ 2020 ■ 2019

Source: Health in England: 2015 to 2021

Detailed Health Index Scores

Place-based Health

Legend: Healthy People Domain, Healthy Lives Domain, Healthy Places Domain
Categories: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden

Mental Health & Mortality

Legend: Mental health, Life expectancy, Mortality from all causes
Categories: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden

Physical Health & Lifestyle

Legend: Smoking, Overweight and obesity in adults, Overweight and obesity in children
Categories: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden

Environment

Legend: Access to green space, Air pollution
Categories: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden
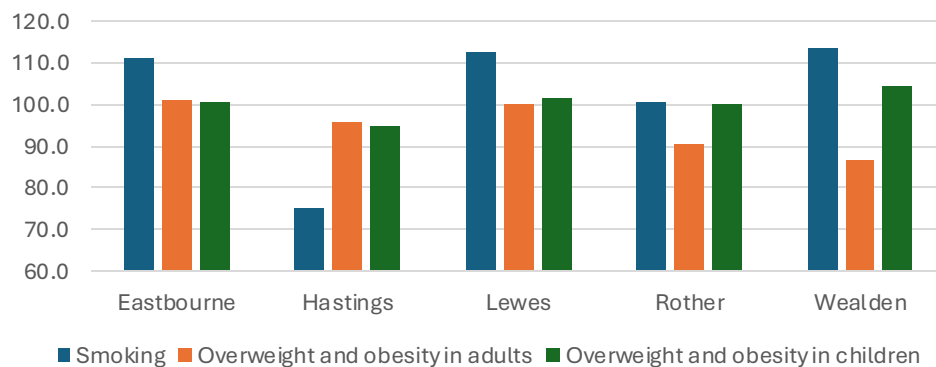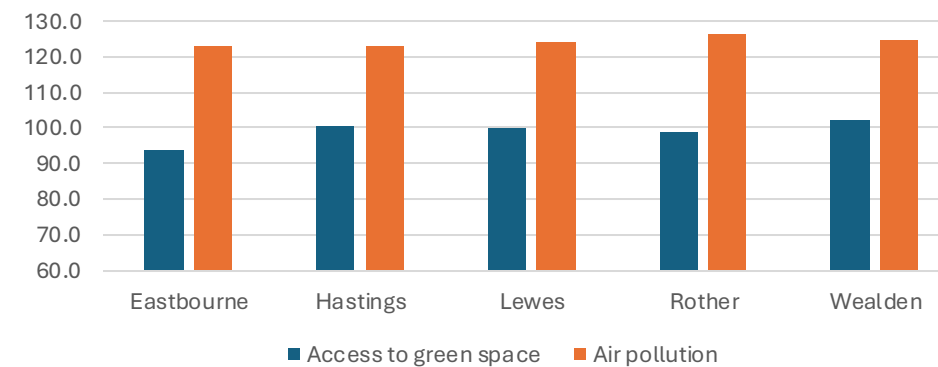
Source: Health in England: 2015 to 2021

Temporary Accommodation

Number of Households in Temporary Accommodation

Legend: Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother, Wealden

- Eastbourne: 313
- Hastings: 567
- Lewes: 75
- Rother: 182
- Wealden: 72
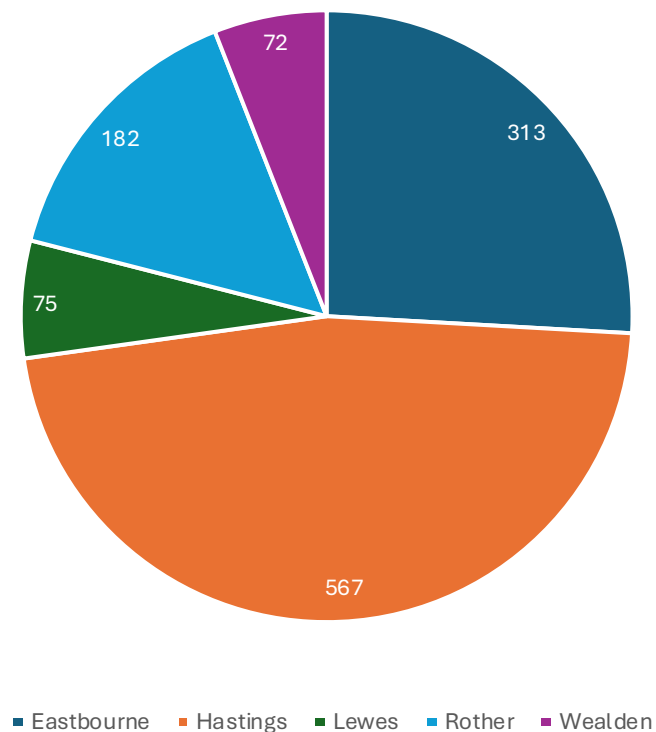
Source: Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2025

Population Profile

Population breakdown by age

Population Density (people/km^2)
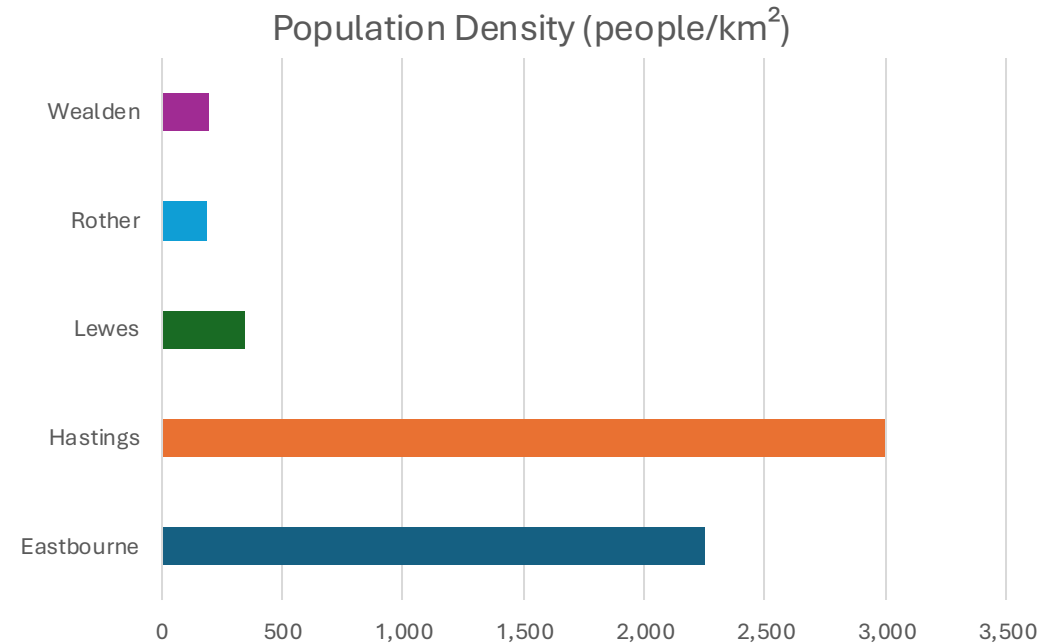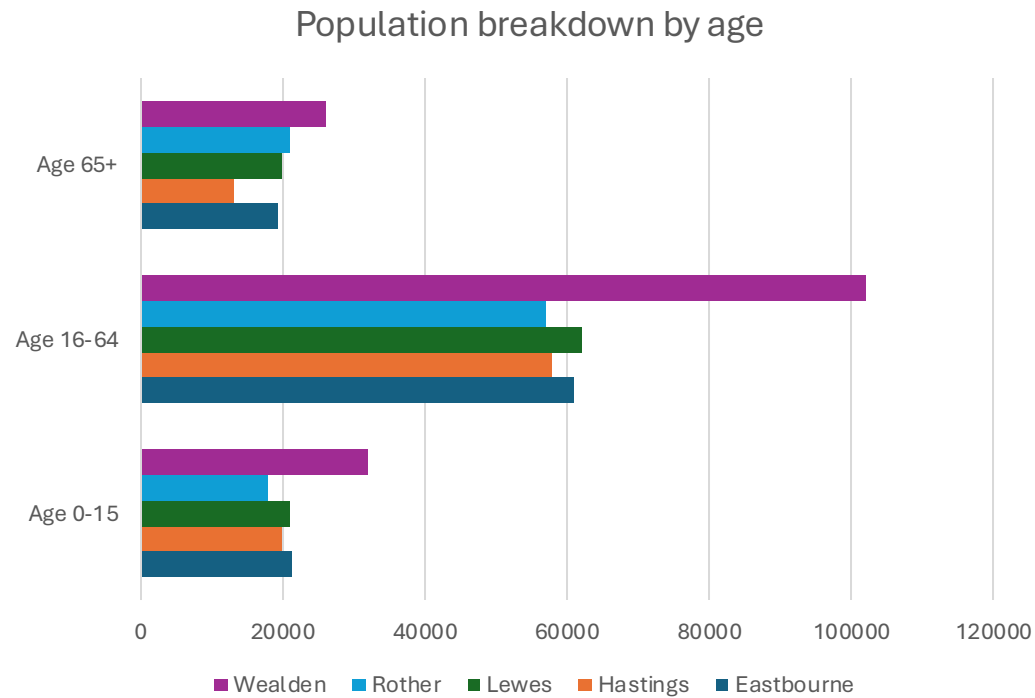
Source: Population profiles for local authorities in England

District Performance: Planning

Planning Performance

- Planning Percentage of major planning applications decided on time (%)
- Planning Percentage of non-major planning applications decided on time (%)

Planning Performance

- Planning Percentage of major planning applications overturned on appeal (%)
- Planning Percentage of non-major planning applications overturned on appeal (%)

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?

District Performance: Waste

Waste Performance

- Waste Household waste recycling rate (%)
- Waste Recycling contamination rate (%)

District	Waste Household waste recycling rate (%)	Waste Recycling contamination rate (%)
Eastbourne	37.5	8.7
Lewes	42.2	2.3
Wealden	48.2	4.7
Hastings	30.1	6.6
Rother	46.8	4.3

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?

District Performance: Council Tax & NNDR

Council tax & NNDR collection rates (%)

Legend:
- ■ Council tax collection rates (in year) 2023-24
- ■ Nondomestic rates collection rates (in year) 2023-24

Council tax revenue per dwelling 2023-24

District	Revenue
England median (Districts)	£1,716.89
Rother	£1,978.20
Hastings	£1,418.95
Wealden	£2,245.30
Lewes	£1,985.17
Eastbourne	£1,684.04

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?
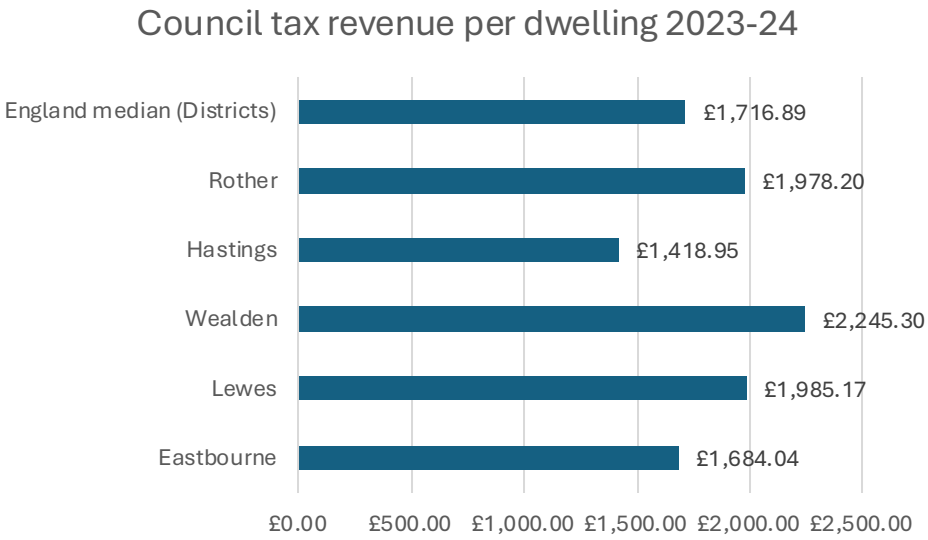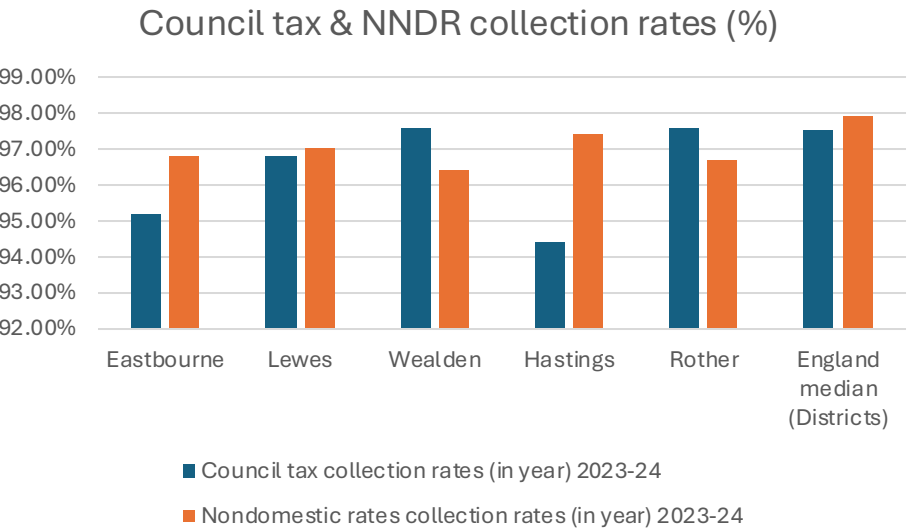
Council Spending Power

Debt servicing as percentage of core spending power 2023-24

Council	Percentage
England median (Districts)	11.00%
East Sussex CC	2.71%
Rother	9.30%
Hastings	24.80%
Wealden	4.70%
Lewes	23.10%
Eastbourne	38.40%

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?

Council Spending Power

Non-Ringfenced Reserves as Percentage of Service Spend

Council	Non-ringfenced reserves as percentage of service spend 2023-24
England median (Districts)	124.00%
East Sussex CC	12.32%
Rother	49.50%
Hastings	163.60%
Wealden	283.70%
Lewes	56.30%
Eastbourne	27.20%

■ Non-ringfenced reserves as percentage of service spend 2023-24

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?

Council Spending Power

Non-Ringfenced Reserves as Percentage of Net Revenue Expenditure

Council	Non-ringfenced reserves as percentage of net revenue expenditure 2023-24
England median (Districts)	135.70%
East Sussex CC	11.24%
Rother	49.50%
Hastings	189.30%
Wealden	324.80%
Lewes	52.70%
Eastbourne	29.30%

■ Non-ringfenced reserves as percentage of net revenue expenditure 2023-24

Source: https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?