

District and Borough Model Proposal for East Sussex

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Why a District and Borough Model?

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to address the complicated and confusing two-tier model of local government that leaves residents feeling disconnected and isolated from the key decisions made by distant and unaccountable officers and politicians.

The government's proposed reorganisation of local government aims to simplify and increase the democratic accountability of local government, providing a single tier 'unitary' model that ensures that residents feel better connected whilst also saving expensive duplication of management and officer time.

The commonsense way to address these requests by national government is this District and Borough model. Local councils will be embedded in their communities, directly accountable, nimble and reactive to local concerns, while also able to work collaboratively on larger-scale services.

Sweeping Away East Sussex County Council

The District and Borough model abolishes the County Council and returns most local decision-making to the five districts and boroughs: Hastings, Rother, Eastbourne, Lewes and Wealden.

Key impacts include:

- A single tier streamlined local government structure.
- Immediate £1.35m annual savings by removing county councillors and CEO office, resulting in millions reinvested locally over 5 years.
- Zero disturbance to vital services residents rely on.
- Local control over finance: moving from 12% to 80% oversight of council tax spending at the local level.

Tried and Tested

Cross-boundary collaboration is already working locally. Hastings, Rother and Wealden jointly provide waste collection services under a District and Borough board. This has delivered an excellent service, better value for money, and flexibility for local differences. This proven approach could also be applied to Adult Social Care and Children's Services, delivering savings and local adaptations unlike other models.

A Celebration of Where We Live

Residents identify most strongly with their towns — Hastings, Eastbourne, Hailsham, Battle — rather than 'East Sussex'. The D&B model reduces Hastings councillors from 40 to 32 (1 per 3,000 residents), compared to just 16 under a County model (1 per 6,000). This anchors democracy locally without the need for

new parish or neighbourhood councils, ensuring representation remains accessible, accountable and affordable.

Council Tax: Increased Local Control

Currently, local councils control just 12% of council tax raised; the remainder is managed by the County Council based in Lewes. Under the D&B model, councils will oversee 82% of spending. Residents will be able to hold councillors and officers directly to account through accessible local offices and transparent spending reports.

Executive Summary

This business plan sets out an alternative model for local government reorganisation in East Sussex. It proposes a phased transition from the two-tier system to a District and Borough-led single-tier model, retaining statutory officers to safeguard services, consolidating administrative structures, reducing duplication, and improving accountability.

The model is low-cost, high-impact, legally viable under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, and rooted in proven inter-authority collaboration and extensive consultation.

Core Principles

- Streamlined governance: abolishing County Council, replaced by a Main Board of district/borough leaders.
- Service continuity: retaining statutory officers, frontline staff, and core systems during transition.
- Local control of budgets: shifting decision-making from 12% to 82% locally.
- Efficiency and savings: reducing duplication, consolidating contracts and management.
- Legal compliance: aligned with the 2007 Act.

Key Benefits

Immediate savings of £5m by Year 5, stronger accountability, and minimal disruption.

Community Engagement

Over 5,500 survey responses (East Sussex-wide) and 805 Hastings-specific responses informed the model. 66% of Hastings respondents supported a non-County model. Themes: support for cost savings, improved access, accountability; concerns about local identity; requests for transparency and ongoing consultation.

Governance Reform

The County Council is replaced by:

- A Main Board of District/Borough leaders.
- Five Departmental Boards (ASC, CSC, Business Services, Community/Transport/Economy, Public Health) with rotating lead authorities.
- Neighbourhood consultation led by local councillors.
- Built-in review points every 18 months.

Service Continuity

All statutory officers, staff, and core systems will be retained for the first two years to safeguard service delivery, with reviews running alongside business as usual.

Access to Local Services and Accountability

All local council offices will be retained and strengthened as one-stop hubs. No need for new satellite offices. This ensures residents can engage with services and representatives in their towns.

Context: East Sussex Today

Population 555,500, rising to 600,300 by 2038, with an ageing profile (26.5% aged 65+).

Hastings has highest deprivation. Life expectancy above average elsewhere, but social isolation high. Housing affordability and homelessness are acute challenges. Economy worth £9.9bn, with strong tourism but high unemployment in Hastings (5.7%). Two-thirds of the county is under environmental protection.

Local Control of Budgets

Council tax oversight increases from 11.8% to 82%. Residents will see quarterly public financial reports and access portals for real-time tracking.

Implementation Phasing

Phase 1 (Year 1): Establish boards, abolish county councillors (savings £1m), delete Chief Exec posts (£350k), retain statutory officers.

Phase 2 (Years 2–3): Consolidate contracts, merge support services.

Phase 3 (Years 3–4): Shift 80% of council tax budgets to local boards.

Phase 4 (Years 4–5): Optimise services, consolidate estates, repurpose assets.

Phase 5 (Year 5+): Embed governance model, complete consolidation, rolling reviews.

Financial Case

Immediate savings: £1.35m per year.

By 2030: £21.35m annual savings from overhead reduction, service consolidation, contract efficiencies.

Transformation costs (~£235k/year for 3 years) funded from 10% of savings.

Risk Management

Risks include governance disagreements, underperformance, service disruption, and ICT issues. Mitigation includes rotating board chairs, conservative savings estimates, phased transitions, and retention of core systems.

Benefits

- Local control: tax oversight from 12% to 82%.
- Cost savings: £21.35m annually by 2030, £1.5m immediate.
- Service protection through phased change.
- Democratic accountability via local offices.
- Civic identity preserved.
- Strategic readiness for Sussex Mayoral Authority.
- Legally compliant and community-focused.

Options Considered

Models assessed: Status Quo, County Unitary, Two Unitaries, B&H Expansion, District & Borough.

Scoring (out of 30):

- Status Quo: 12
- County Unitary: 21
- Two Unitaries: 19
- B&H Expansion: 12
- District & Borough: 25

Comparative Financial Analysis

Status Quo: £0 savings, -£85m deficit by 2032/33.

County Unitary: £20m savings p.a. by 2030, +£25m net benefit, medium risk.

Two Unitaries: -£426m net cost, very high risk.

District & Borough: £21.35m p.a. by 2030, +£26.35m net benefit, low risk, pragmatic transition.

Conclusion

The District and Borough Model is the only credible, low-risk pathway. It retains identity and culture, delivers savings, improves democracy, and protects vital services. It is tried, tested, and supported by residents — a high reward, low risk reform.