

One East Sussex

Business Case for Local Government Reorganisation in East Sussex



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Submitted by: East Sussex Working Group

(Eastbourne Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, Hastings Borough Council, Lewes District Council, Rother District Council)

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1 Foreword

East Sussex stands at a decisive moment. As leaders of this diverse and dynamic county, we are united in our commitment to delivering a local democratic institution that is fit for the future and what our residents, businesses and communities need. This business case sets out our shared vision for achieving the exemplar unitary council that will help us to meet the challenges of today while unlocking the opportunities of tomorrow.

Our ambition is clear - to create a governance and delivery model that is fit for the 21st century. One that delivers high-quality, integrated public services, ensures financial resilience, and empowers local communities. In return, we expect the Government to deliver on its commitment to devolve power and funding, as well as follow through on commitments for national policy and funding reform on social care, homelessness and SEND, so that we can fully deliver on our ambitions to transform public services and boost economic prosperity.

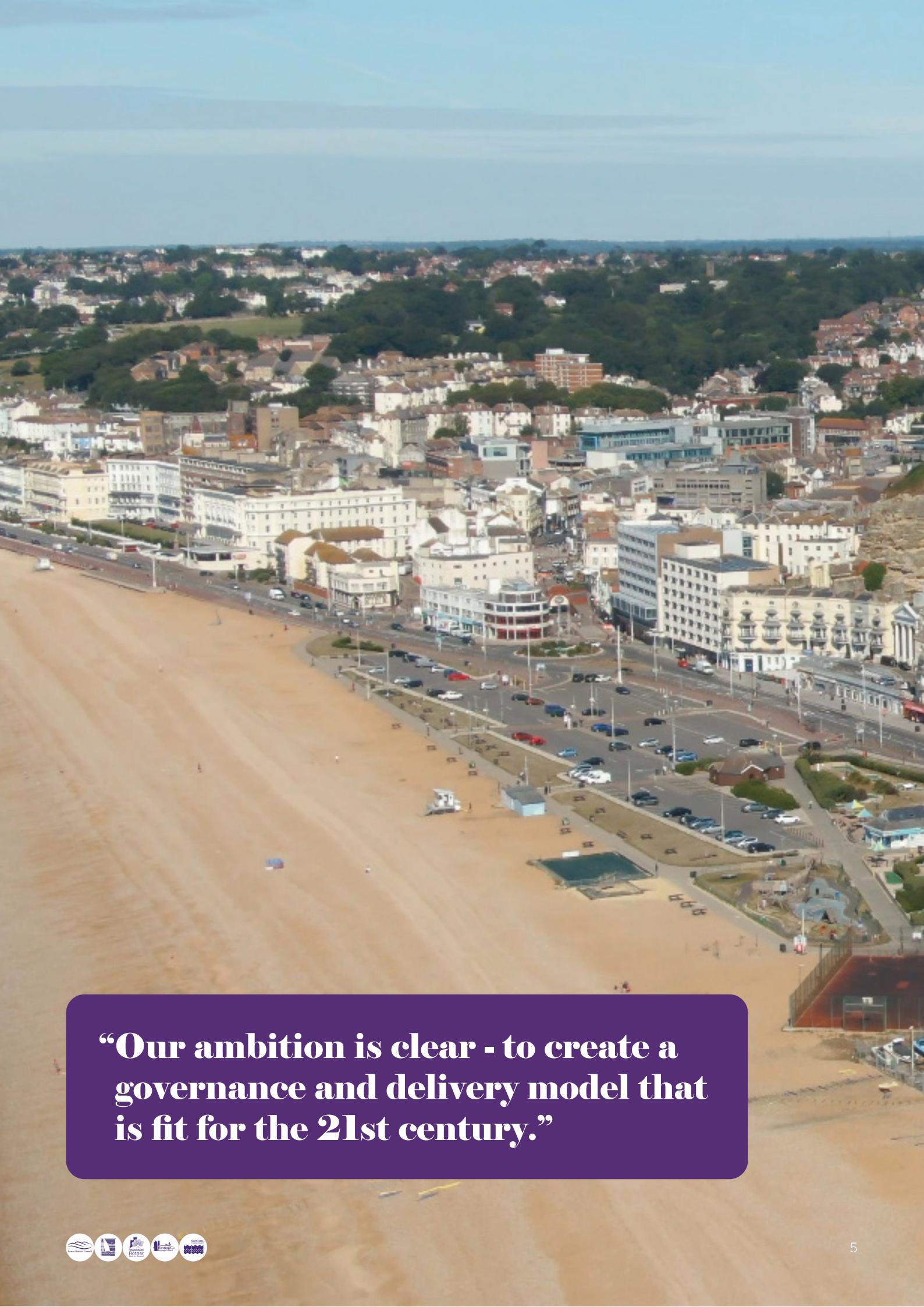
The financial pressures facing local government should not be underestimated. This proposal is designed to support the long-term sustainability of public services in East Sussex, by reducing duplication, improving efficiency, and creating a more resilient organisation capable of adapting to future challenges. But no one should be under any illusions that sustainability would be secured by reorganisation alone. At best, it would push the financial cliff edge off by a few years, in the absence of a long-term sustainable needs-based funding settlement from Government.

This proposal is rooted in evidence, shaped by engagement, and aligned with the Government's criteria for reorganisation. It supports the wider devolution agenda and the emerging Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for Sussex. Through this alignment, East Sussex is well positioned to use our existing strong partnerships to play a leading role in driving regional growth, innovation, and inclusion; from strategic housing and infrastructure to skills, climate action, and economic development.

We are proud of East Sussex's unique identity, from its vibrant coastal towns to its rural heartlands, cultural heritage, and natural beauty. This business case is not about erasing that identity but strengthening it. Our model will ensure and enhance local voice and accountability, while enabling us to speak with one voice on the issues that matter most.

Cllr Zoe Nicholson, Leader of Lewes District Council
Cllr Stephen Holt, Leader of Eastbourne Borough Council
Cllr Doug Oliver, Leader of Rother District Council
Cllr Glenn Haffenden, Leader of Hastings Borough Council
Cllr Keith Glazier, Leader of East Sussex County Council





“Our ambition is clear - to create a governance and delivery model that is fit for the 21st century.”

Our vision for East Sussex

The Leaders of the East Sussex councils have worked collaboratively throughout the development of this business case and the submitting councils are committed to a shared vision for a single unitary council for the area. This vision sees an efficient and effective council which will serve East Sussex in a comprehensive and inclusive manner.

Building on a well-established history of close collaborative working, we recognise the economies of scale that a unitary council could bring and the stronger capacity it could have to withstand shocks in the system. The risks that adult social care, children's services and homelessness in particular can produce, through changes in demand levels that are very much outside of the council's control, are very much recognised. It is seen that a council of this size would be better placed to manage those risks and ensure ongoing resilience, whilst also joining up services more effectively, such as homelessness, to deliver better, more coordinated services for local people. By contrast, other options that were considered, specifically proposals from Brighton & Hove City Council, that would involve changing existing district boundaries, were felt to have disadvantages including substantial additional costs from disaggregating services that would greatly diminish or possibly even negate any savings from reorganisation. Disaggregation within a district boundary could result in disproportionate financial cost and risk to an even greater extent than with disaggregation of county services, with no evidence shared to date that would demonstrate that there would be any advantages to offset the risks.

Leaders also recognise the value that a new unitary council could offer in terms of providing a stronger and more unified voice to help attract investment and promote economic growth, building on a history of collaboration with each other, business leaders, housing providers, educational institutions and others. To that end, discussions are also progressing with West Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council to establish a new Sussex Mayoral Strategic Authority to which central government could devolve more powers and funding to accelerate infrastructure delivery, tackle climate change and develop the skilled workforce needed to deliver more homes, create skilled jobs and generate growth that all residents can benefit from.

However, the Leaders acknowledge that a single unitary would bring with it risk of remoteness for local residents, a concern that came through strongly in resident feedback. To counter this there will be focus on maintaining a strong sense of local community and local voice across the area. It is understood that there are significant differences across the county that can only be catered for within a new single authority if there is a strong emphasis on listening to local people, hearing local voices and an acknowledgment of the diversity and difference which makes the area so rich and vibrant.



“This vision sees an efficient and effective council which will serve East Sussex in a comprehensive and inclusive manner.”

Although it is understood that there is to be further guidance from Government on the matter of community engagement and empowerment, local representation and community-based approaches are considered by all Leaders to be of paramount importance to a successful future council. To this end, it is expected that how the local voice is heard will be a central feature of the planning of the new authority which will need further input from local people to be effectively co-designed.

Further to this, the Leaders see a vision for the future of the county which makes best use of technology and transformation to bring services closer to people. Digital solutions which are properly joined up and work for local people will be a strong feature of the new council, with the potential for every town and parish council to have access to the information they need electronically to be able to assist their local residents at point of contact. This would provide a network of ‘front desks’ across the county.

Finally, the Leaders shared vision is for a council that fulfils the potential of East Sussex as a strong, coherent whole. Through its increased, combined economic power, and in strong collaboration with the new Mayoral Strategic Authority, it will be able to help develop stronger local supply chains to support and enhance the economic wellbeing of the area.

2 Executive Summary

East Sussex is a unique place, known for its vibrant cultural heritage, spectacular countryside and coastal landscapes, and diverse local economy. The county has a distinctive blend of urban and rural characteristics which offer many opportunities and is highly valued by residents, businesses and visitors. However, it also presents practical challenges for the delivery of public services and tackling inequality, with sparsely populated areas more expensive to deliver services to and more likely to be affected by physical and digital isolation. East Sussex has a vibrant economy, supporting almost a quarter of a million jobs and generating economic output of around £9.9 billion, with growing specialist strengths in advanced manufacturing and digital technology. But relatively low productivity and infrastructure gaps are holding back achievement of its full economic potential.

It is this context that led to the six councils in East Sussex to be an early mover in responding to the Government's invitation to consider reorganisation. The councils already have a rich history of collaboration with each other as well as with partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors, to deliver high-quality public services and promote economic growth. Staff across each of the six councils have a high-level of job satisfaction and enjoy working in their current environment. They are widely committed to continuing to serve the people of East Sussex.

While the current six authorities are performing well and have a track record of achieving efficiencies through collaboration, there is a collective aspiration to deliver even more and even better for residents. Moreover, when faced with acute pressures in services such as social care, homelessness and SEND, there is also a sense that some councils may be approaching the limits of what can be achieved under their current structures, particularly in the absence of sustainable policy and funding solutions at a national level.



While local government reorganisation cannot and should not be relied on as a panacea for mounting public service challenges, the move to a unitary could offer a number of benefits consistent with the key principles set out when East Sussex councils submitted their Interim Plan to Government in March 2025:

- Achieving better value-for-money through economies of scale
- Delivering better outcomes for residents by freeing up more funding for frontline services through reduced management and overhead costs
- Tackling inequalities through scaled-up reform that shifts investment towards prevention and early intervention
- Addressing shared workforce shortages and challenges as well as developing a talent pipeline for the future
- Enhancing attractiveness to investors by providing a unified voice
- Establishing greater strategic presence and influence within Southeast England
- Creating the opportunity to secure more devolved powers and funding to unlock economic growth, deliver housing and infrastructure and tackle climate change, working with neighbouring areas

This business case sets out the preferred model for LGR for the ceremonial area of East Sussex and Brighton & Hove. This is the creation of One East Sussex - a single unitary authority covering the existing East Sussex County boundary, with Brighton & Hove City Council remaining as a separate unitary authority. This model has been developed collaboratively by all six East Sussex councils and is grounded in extensive engagement, robust financial modelling, and alignment with national policy objectives.

The preferred option also received the highest support from residents and stakeholders from across East Sussex, who recognised the potential for economies of scale to deliver better value, greater purchasing power in service contracts, reduced duplication and greater consistency in service delivery across the county. Nevertheless, there were also a number of significant reservations expressed, including the potential loss of local influence, the fear their area would be 'forgotten' in a single county-wide organisation and that local needs might either not be as well understood or harder to respond to in a bigger organisation.

It should also be noted that alternate proposals from Brighton & Hove City Council to extend into the boundary of Lewes District Council have been in development as part of a parallel process. While councils in East Sussex have engaged in discussions and been open in sharing data where it has been available, information on the detailed proposals being developed by Brighton & Hove City Council have been limited so a more comprehensive analysis has not been possible. Preliminary consultation on what has been known of the extension proposals were consulted on and were categorically opposed by Lewes residents surveyed. Strong representations opposing the aforementioned extension proposals have also been made by Newhaven, Peacehaven and Telscombe town councils, and Iford, Kingston, Rodmell and Piddington Parish Councils. Additionally, there was a joint representation from the parish councils of the Lower Ouse. Broadly these all made the case that no credible evidence had been produced to demonstrate that residents and businesses of those areas would be better off in an entirely new geography rather than continuing to work within existing networks and partnerships. Indeed, losing the areas covered in the proposed boundary changes would reduce the diversity of East Sussex's economic mix, strip the county of its largest industrial cluster, diminish tax revenues, and weaken local supply chains .

The current proposal responds to the government's invitation for reorganisation and reflects our shared ambition to deliver high-quality, integrated public services, improve financial resilience, and strengthen local voice. On that basis, the preferred model offers the greatest value for money, delivering a forecast net benefit of £25 million by 2032/33 through consolidation, transformation, and increased income. It avoids the high disaggregation costs and duplication associated with alternative models and provides a platform for long-term reform and innovation. The intention is to design a new unitary that can, over time, increase investment in universal services, prevention and early intervention; make greater use of digital and technological innovation to deliver services that better reflect how residents live their lives and how businesses operate; and generate more economic prosperity.

However, it does not resolve the underlying structural deficit (the gap between projected income and spending needs), which is forecast to reach £226 million by 2032/33. Additional funding and policy reform will be required to ensure sustainability.

Alternative options, including splitting East Sussex into two unitary authorities and boundary expansion by Brighton & Hove City Council were assessed but found to be less effective. The two-unitary model is not financially viable, with a projected cumulative deficit of £619 million by 2032/33. The Brighton & Hove City Council expansion variants offer only marginal population gains at disproportionate cost and risk to the proposed East Sussex unitary.

This business case is not a final blueprint but a platform for constructive dialogue with government. It reflects a clear consensus across East Sussex and a commitment to co-designing a future model that delivers for residents, communities, and the wider region.



3 Context: The invitation from Government

This business case has been developed in response to the formal invitation issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 5 February 2025, and the subsequent request from the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution for a detailed proposal. It builds on the interim plan submitted in March 2025 and incorporates feedback received from the Government in May 2025.

The purpose of this submission is to present a clear, evidence-based case for how local government reorganisation should be done in East Sussex. It sets out the rationale for reorganisation, the options considered, and the only viable model of a single unitary authority for East Sussex. It also outlines the methodology used to assess the proposal and seeks feedback from government to inform the next stage of development.

This business case is intended to:

- Respond to the Minister's request for a formal proposal following the interim plan.
- Provide a structured and evidence-led assessment of the case for change.
- Set out the only viable option of a single unitary authority for East Sussex, based on existing county boundaries.
- Demonstrate how the proposal meets the six government criteria for LGR
- Seek feedback from MHCLG on the direction of travel, methodology, and assumptions to support further refinement.

As mentioned, this is not a final blueprint. It is a submission designed to support constructive dialogue with government and partners. It reflects the current position of the submitting councils and is subject to further development through engagement, consultation, and technical analysis once the geographic boundaries are set.

3.1 Options Considered

In line with government guidance and the statutory invitation issued in February 2025, this business case considers a range of structural options for local government reorganisation. These options have been assessed against the six government criteria and reflect both local priorities and the wider regional context, including the proposed Sussex and Brighton MSA.

In response to the Government's request of East Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council to submit plans for local government reorganisation, the preferred option is a single unitary authority for East Sussex and a single unitary authority for Brighton and Hove.

The following options have been considered for East Sussex only, with consideration for options proposed by Brighton and Hove City Council to expand its existing boundary:



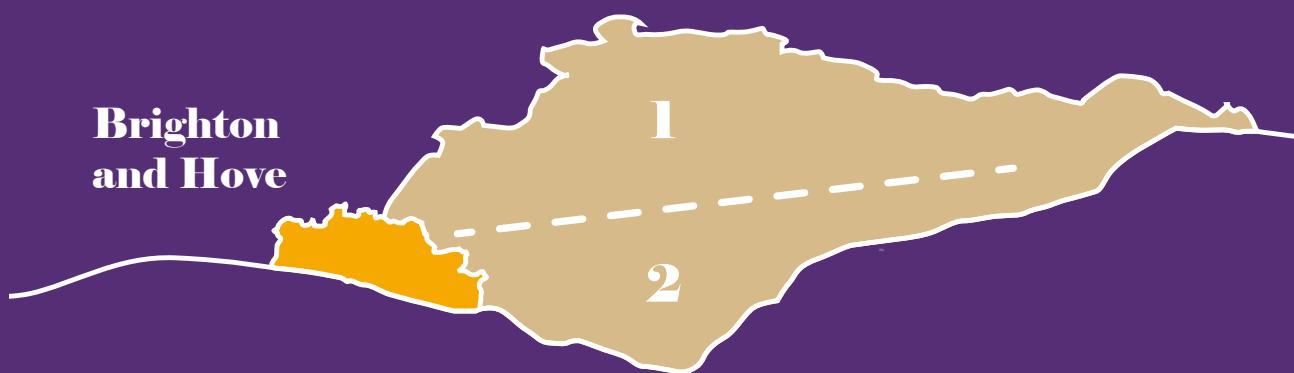
3.1.1 Option 1: 'One East Sussex' A Single Unitary Authority within the existing boundaries of East Sussex County Council



This is the only viable model and has been jointly developed by East Sussex County Council and the five district and borough councils of East Sussex. It proposes the creation of a single unitary authority covering the existing East Sussex County Council boundary, with a population of approximately 555,500; whilst Brighton & Hove unitary council remains as is. The East Sussex model:

- Aligns with existing service delivery footprints (e.g. social care, education, public health).
- Minimises disruption to statutory services and partnerships.
- Builds on established collaboration across the six councils.
- Meets the government's population guidance and maintains a coherent geographic identity.
- Creates operational savings as a single authority and avoids the substantial costs of disaggregation.

3.1.2 Option 2: Two Unitary Authorities within the existing boundaries of East Sussex County Council



This model proposes the creation of two new unitary authorities based on East Sussex's existing district boundaries, with Brighton & Hove maintaining their current boundary. The exact boundaries for this model have not been geographically modelled due to the need for boundary changes, however a full financial model has been developed. This model introduces significant risks related to service disaggregation, particularly in social care and education. It also creates population asymmetry and may reduce strategic capacity.

3.1.3 Option 3: Brighton & Hove Boundary Expansion (Four Variants)



Brighton & Hove City Council has recently consulted on a potential boundary change with four variants that would involve absorbing parts of Lewes District into an expanded unitary authority. For baselining and comparison, Brighton & Hove's current population based on its existing footprint is approximately 277,965.

These options, first presented in July 2025, include:

- 1** Brighton & Hove plus East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, and Peacehaven (approximately 301,130 population).
- 2** Brighton & Hove plus East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven and Newhaven (approximately 313,955 population).
- 3** Brighton & Hove plus East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven and Kingston (approximately 303,117 population).
- 4** Brighton & Hove plus East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven, Newhaven and Kingston (approximately 315,942 population).

These proposals would require boundary changes and have implications for the East Sussex footprint. In his letter of invitation to the Leaders of two-tier councils and unitary council in East Sussex to develop proposals for reorganisation, dated 5 February 2025, the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution stated clearly that: “boundary changes are possible, but existing district areas should usually be the building blocks for proposals. More complex boundary changes will be considered only if there is strong justification in the final bid.” This guidance was subsequently confirmed in the summary of feedback on interim plans that MHCLG published as a policy paper on 3 June 2025. While East Sussex councils are committed to evaluating all relevant proposals in good faith, these options were introduced at a relatively late stage in the process. As such, it has not been possible to apply the same level of detailed analysis and scrutiny to each of these variants as has been applied to Options 1 and 2.

It is important to note that the marginal population increase achieved through these proposals ranging from approximately 23,000 to 38,000 additional residents comes at a disproportionately high cost in terms of service disaggregation, governance disruption, and financial transition. In particular, the splitting of existing social care, education, and housing delivery lines would introduce significant operational complexity and risk, especially for vulnerable residents. The financial cost of disaggregating systems, staff, contracts, and assets would be substantial, and would likely outweigh the limited strategic benefit of modest population growth.

East Sussex has a highly constrained land supply, particularly in industrial floorspace, and already leans heavily towards the healthcare, education, and retail sectors. Losing the areas covered in the proposed boundary changes would reduce the diversity of East Sussex’s economic mix, strip the county of its largest industrial cluster, diminish tax revenues, and weaken local supply chains. Newhaven, Peacehaven, East Saltdean, Telscombe Cliffs, and Kingston together make an outsized contribution to East Sussex, providing nearly 7% of its population and GVA, nearly 10% of its industrial floorspace, almost 10,000 jobs and over 1,000 businesses. Newhaven anchors the county’s scarce industrial and logistics base, Kingston contributes high-level human capital, and Peacehaven supplies a significant labour force. Significant investment has been made in these areas over recent years, including nearly £40m in Newhaven alone. Alongside this, concerted effort has been invested in building effective relationships with numerous partners in the area, such as the Newhaven Port Authority. Retaining these areas is therefore critical to East Sussex’s economic resilience and future growth capacity.

This proposed reconfiguration would fragment the East Sussex geography, undermine existing partnerships, and complicate alignment with the emerging MSA.

3.2 Approach to this business case

This business case is structured around the six criteria set out in the statutory invitation and the December 2024 English Devolution White Paper:

1. Right size and scale
2. High-quality and sustainable services
3. Financial sustainability
4. Local collaboration and consensus
5. Support for devolution
6. Community engagement and empowerment

The methodology used to assess these criteria includes:

- Data collation: financial, demographic, and service performance data.
- Stakeholder engagement: interviews, workshops, and thematic analysis.
- Options appraisal: a scoring matrix aligned to the six criteria.
- Financial modelling: baseline and reorganisation scenarios, including savings and transition costs.
- Risk analysis: transition risks, service disruption, and political feasibility.

3.3 Next Steps

We are seeking feedback from MHCLG on the following:

- The strength of the case for a single unitary authority.
- The robustness of the methodology and assumptions.
- The alignment with national policy and devolution objectives.
- The proposed approach to local engagement, governance, and implementation.

We welcome the opportunity to refine this proposal in partnership with government and to co-design a model that delivers for residents, communities and the wider region.

4 Government Criteria & Methodology

The Government has set out six core criteria for assessing local government reorganisation proposals. These criteria are not only technical benchmarks but also reflect the broader ambitions of the December 2024 Devolution White Paper, which emphasises the need for simplified governance, stronger local leadership, and institutions capable of delivering integrated, sustainable public services. The East Sussex proposal has been developed with these objectives at its core and in direct response to the feedback received from MHCLG in May 2025.

This section sets out a detailed explanation of the criteria used for assessing each of the unitary options for East Sussex. It also outlines the methodology used to assess the options and develop the preferred proposal, ensuring that the process has been robust, evidence-led, and transparent.

4.1 The Six Government Criteria

4.1.1 Right Size and Scale

The Government expects new unitary authorities to be of sufficient size to deliver services efficiently, achieve economies of scale, and withstand financial and operational shocks. At the same time, they must retain a coherent geographic identity and be capable of engaging meaningfully with local communities. Size and scale directly affect an authority's ability to plan strategically, manage risk, and deliver services cost-effectively. Authorities that are too small may lack resilience and capacity, while those that are too large may struggle with local responsiveness.

The proposed single authority would serve a population of approximately 550,000, which is within the optimal range identified. This model avoids the inefficiencies and high disaggregation costs associated with smaller unitary options, while remaining locally recognisable and governable.

4.1.2 High-Quality and Sustainable Services

Reorganisation must lead to improved or at least maintained service quality across all service areas. It should avoid fragmentation, support integration, and enable long-term sustainability. Publicly delivered services such as social care, education, housing, and public health are increasingly interdependent. Fragmented governance and delivery can lead to duplication, inefficiency, and poorer outcomes for residents. This business case will assess how each option supports integrated service delivery, continuity of care, and opportunities for transformation.

A single authority would allow for integrated planning and delivery across adult social care, housing, education, and public health. This would reduce duplication and enable consistent service standards across the county and support a shift towards prevention and early intervention, particularly in areas such as social care and homelessness.

4.1.3 Financial Sustainability

Proposals must demonstrate a credible path to long-term financial resilience, including the ability to manage transition costs and deliver ongoing savings. Local government faces significant financial pressures meaning that any new structure must be able to balance budgets, invest in transformation, and protect frontline services.

Financial modelling shows that the single authority model offers the greatest potential for savings through back-office consolidation, shared procurement, and rationalised assets. The model avoids the high transition and disaggregation costs associated with multi-unitary options.

4.1.4 Local Collaboration and Consensus

There must be clear evidence of joint working, shared vision, and political and stakeholder support across the affected area. Successful reorganisation depends on trust, cooperation, and shared ownership. Collaboration reduces risk, builds legitimacy, and ensures that proposals reflect local priorities and are deliverable.

This proposal has been developed collaboratively by all six councils in East Sussex, with shared data, joint governance, and aligned objectives. There has been engagement across local partnerships and focus groups with cross-sections of residents in each district and borough in East Sussex, all of which has informed the design of the model and the proposed preferred option. While some differences of opinion remain, there is some consensus on the need for reorganisation and the benefits of a single authority.

4.1.5 Support for Devolution

The new structure should support the Government's wider devolution agenda and be capable of engaging with regional governance structures such as Mayoral Combined Authorities.

Devolution is central to the Government's strategy for growth and public service reform. Local authorities must be ready to take on new powers and responsibilities. The business case will demonstrate to what extent each option aligns with the proposed Sussex MSA, and supports regional coherence, and contributes East Sussex's ability to deliver devolved functions and attract investment.

The proposed single unitary model for East Sussex aligns with the emerging Sussex MSA provides a strong, coherent partner for regional governance, capable of engaging on strategic issues such as transport, housing, skills, and climate resilience.

4.1.6 Democratic Representation and Neighbourhood Governance

New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment. A recurrent theme during resident engagement about LGR in East Sussex was that larger governance structures could lead to a loss of local representation and control, making it harder for residents to have their voices heard. Those concerns were echoed in feedback from Leaders and other elected members who fear that fewer councillors and larger wards could reduce accessibility and local accountability.

As a result, careful thought is being given to the design of both democratic representation and neighbourhood governance so that they can be genuinely responsive to local needs, as well as support the demonstration of clear local

accountability. At this stage, it would not be appropriate to rush into determining the final options for either. Indeed, it is essential to consider the number of councillors and ward boundaries in tandem with neighbourhood governance, as the two need to be linked for councillors to be able to play their roles effectively and for communities to feel like they truly have a say. For example, more detailed thought needs to be given to how councillors involved in neighbourhood governance structures could have a role or a voice in the executive and scrutiny functions of the new unitary authority.

The six councils in East Sussex are agreed on principles that should underpin the development of final options for councillor representation and neighbourhood governance, set out in more detail later in this section.

Democratic representation

When councils in East Sussex submitted their interim plan in March 2025, they set out key principles to shape the work to develop a coherent new structure. Those principles signalled the importance of enhancing local democracy, local identity, transparency, accessibility, local decision making and accountability (including through scrutiny). Further consideration has since been given to shaping how democratic representation for a new unitary would be designed, with three additional principles emerging to act as tests for the future options:

1. Subsidiarity, so that appropriate decisions are taken as closely as possible to the people and communities affected;
2. Pluralist inclusive decision-making, reflecting the diversity of East Sussex's demography and geography; and
3. Local by design so that structures can secure the confidence of residents and do not feel imposed

Considerable work has already been undertaken in East Sussex to consider the practical considerations set out in the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) guidance. In addition, models in place across existing county unitary councils with similar geographic characteristics will be considered alongside outcomes from recent LGBCE reviews. As set out in the interim plan submitted to government, the ratios of 4,000 - 5,000 electors per councillor (similar to the models that are applied in North Yorkshire, Cornwall, Somerset and County Durham) are being carefully reviewed.

Bearing in mind the ambitious timescales set by Government and the current demands on the LGBCE, it is proposed that the initial council size for a new unitary authority in East Sussex is based on 2 councillors per county division for the anticipated election in May 2027. This equates to 100 councillors for the single unitary authority and would result in approximately 4179 electors per councillor. This is within the range set out in the Interim Proposal and in line with LGBCE guidance of between 30 to 100 councillors. It should be noted that the number of electors per councillor would increase with the Government's plan to extend the vote to 16 and 17 year-olds.

This would be followed, once the unitary council was established, by a more fundamental review when work on the decision-making arrangements for the new authority has been undertaken, to be formalised by a LGBCE review requested by the new authority. This would be consistent with the approach taken in recently unitarised areas. Such an approach would also be informed by the Government's intention, as set out in the English Devolution and Community Bill, to introduce

a requirement on councils to establish effective community governance, moving decision-making closer to residents. It is noted that the Government will undertake a review as to the best way to achieve its aims. While guidance on Government's intentions regarding localised representation and neighbourhood governance is awaited, the proposal for 100 councillors ensures that the new unitary will have sufficient capacity to adequately support Government ambitions, including through potentially newly established neighbourhood area committees.

It is recognised that a proposal for 100 councillors sits at the upper end of the expected range in the LGBCE guidance for council size. This reflects the varied nature of the county and a realistic appraisal of the roles and demands of elected councillors in East Sussex. In particular, it recognises the significant challenges involved in representing areas of the county with significant deprivation and where there is rising demand for services including SEND, adult social care, and housing and homelessness support.

The formal role of a councillor within the council has also been considered in putting forward this proposal. In taking on the responsibilities of the county, district and borough councils, the new unitary authority will have an executive with greater breadth of responsibility, will require enhanced scrutiny arrangements and involve councillors in regulatory functions including planning and licensing as well as aforementioned neighbourhood governance structures. Having 100 councillors will ensure that there is sufficient capacity for the discharge of the formal duties of the council without requiring a burdensome level of work and engagement from a smaller pool of elected members. Furthermore we would anticipate that there would be a heightened level of work required in the first term of the new unitary authority as it establishes itself and its own ways of working, meaning it would be prudent during that period to have a higher number of councillors than it will likely have following an LGBCE review.

Strong and well-established partnership working arrangements in East Sussex additionally necessitates councillor representation on a wide range of outside bodies. The councils that will form the new unitary currently have 327 member appointments to approximately 208 outside bodies. While currently some of these involve appointments from more than one of the councils that will make up the new unitary, the demand and need for representation is only expected to increase through the creation of the Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA), and the deepening integration of health and care and closer working across wider public services. This is all in the context of rising demand for services and strained public sector finances. Given the pressures and likely impacts on how services will be provided in the future it will be vital that community voices continue to be heard within larger local government structures and feed through to the Sussex MSA, and to ensure the needs and priorities of East Sussex residents remain at the forefront of decision making by the unitary and its partners.

Proposed councillor ratios

As previously noted, the primary concern of those residents who responded to the consultation relating to LGR in East Sussex was that it would result in reduced local representation and that their area would be forgotten. The proposed two councillors per electoral division would mean that residents and communities continue to have more than one elected local representative, ensuring that there is an appropriate level of local representation and a degree of continuity for them through the transition

period. More than one councillor per division will also allow for the increased level of casework to be shared and not fall on an individual, ensuring that councillors will continue to be effective by having the capacity to engage with community groups, local town and parish councils, and residents. This engagement is vital for councillors to have close ties with their communities and enables strong democratic representation for residents that ensures genuine neighbourhood empowerment can be delivered.

The proposal to double the number of councillors per existing county electoral division therefore offers the most effective and deliverable approach to ensuring the new unitary has adequate local representation and the capacity to manage the transition process. This approach is similar to that taken in other areas, such as Somerset, Dorset and Buckinghamshire, which had multiple Members elected to existing or only slightly adjusted former county divisions in their inaugural unitary elections. Doubling up on existing county divisions offers a deliverable approach which avoids significant disruption and risk at a time of heightened demand. This approach supports the ambitious transition timescales, is in line with Government requirements, acknowledges the volume pressure on the LGBCE due to multiple LGRs across the country, and ensures that fundamental decisions for the new authority are not made prior to the commencement of that authority.

Having regard to the most recent recommendations of the LGBCE in relation to a number of authorities and noting that the LGBCE are clear that there is no fixed electorate ratio and therefore may be outside this range, the proposed council interim size of 100 would not sit significantly above the expected number of councillors the unitary would have after a formal LGBCE electoral review had been carried out.

Neighbourhood governance

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill proposes to introduce a requirement on all local authorities in England to establish effective neighbourhood governance, with details of this obligation to be set out in regulations that will be made after the Bill is made an Act of Parliament. For councils in East Sussex, the matter of how best to ensure genuine and meaningful local influence over decisions in a bigger unitary authority is a priority due to the strength of feeling expressed about this issue during engagement about reorganisation, not just because it could become a statutory obligation.

Although more clarity on Government thinking in this area would be welcome following its intended review of good practice, any guidance must not be prescriptive, and no structures should be unilaterally imposed or abolished by central government. It should rest with the councils undergoing reorganisation to determine what would be most effective locally, recognising that neighbourhood governance structures need to be designed so they are valued by communities, not simply to function as a delivery mechanism for the new unitaries. Government signals about the potential role of town and parish councils in future neighbourhood governance have been ambiguous, but these should remain part of the suite of options available for consideration. This would be particularly important for areas like East Sussex which already have a number of local councils in operation.

The six councils in East Sussex have agreed the following principles to guide the assessment of future neighbourhood governance models:

- 1. Building on foundations:** There are a number of existing structures to enable resident and community engagement in place across East Sussex. Those that have

successful track records and local buy-in could potentially act as building blocks for a future model.

2. **Sustainability:** For any new model to work in practice and not just on paper, which is what residents rightly expect, significant investment of member and council staff time will be required. Ensuring that appropriate resourcing can be maintained over time will be critical.
3. **Fit for the future:** The new unitary will have a wider set of functions than any of the existing councils currently have so consideration needs to be given to how neighbourhood arrangements can meaningfully shape delivery and decisions about matters of community interest including regulatory functions e.g. planning.
4. **Fairness:** East Sussex has a mixture of sparsely populated rural areas, market towns and continuous urban development along the coastal strip, each of which comes with its own challenges and opportunities. As a result, it may be that there would be value in allowing some variation in the structures that are set up, but there would at the same time need to be transparency and consistency in how these bodies are able to interact with the new unitary and the level of influence they are offered.
5. **Collaborative leadership:** Many public service outcomes are not delivered by local government alone and rely on partnerships with other public sector organisations, some of which (health and police in particular) are considering their own service footprints at neighbourhood or community level. While strict alignment of geographies may not be possible or desirable, it would be helpful to ensure there is some degree of coherence across East Sussex, which could be particularly critical to unlocking the potential of public service reform to improve outcomes and drive out costs.

It is anticipated that the preferred models to maintain public accessibility and democratic accountability as well as find the appropriate balance between the two will be set out in the final proposal for LGR in East Sussex. These are intended to reflect fair representation ratios, investment in digital and in-person engagement tools, and options for embedding local accountability into the governance framework of the new authority.

Together, these measures are designed to ensure that the new unitary council not only maintains but enhances its role as a trusted, responsive, and locally rooted institution one that reflects the diversity of East Sussex's communities and empowers them to shape their future.

4.2 Methodology

The development of this business case has followed a structured, multi-stage methodology designed to ensure rigour, transparency, and alignment with government expectations. Each stage has been informed by the criteria set out in the statutory invitation and the December 2024 Devolution White Paper, as well as feedback received from MHCLG in May 2025. The approach has been collaborative, evidence-led, and designed to support robust decision-making.

4.2.1 Data Collation

Comprehensive data was gathered from all six councils, including:

- Financial data including budgets, reserves and liabilities

- Demographic trends and forecasts across the districts and boroughs, as well as in totality
- Service performance indicators such as corporate performance, social care, housing and education
- Organisational structures and workforce data
- Capital assets registers
- Contract registers

A consistent and comprehensive dataset was essential to ensure that all options could be assessed on a like-for-like basis. It enabled the identification of service pressures, financial risks, and opportunities for integration. The use of shared data also supported transparency and trust between partners, responding directly to government feedback encouraging the use of common assumptions and datasets across proposals.

4.2.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement activities were undertaken to ensure that the business case reflects the views and insights of those who deliver, use, and are affected by local government services. These activities included:

- A series of interviews with the leaders and chief executives of each of the councils to gather direct and thematic feedback
- Weekly engagement sessions and workshops with finance teams
- Resident focus groups in each of East Sussex's five districts and boroughs, collating feedback on local identity and preferred models for LGR
- Thematic analysis of feedback from residents, partners, elected members and the use of user voice groups across East Sussex

Stakeholder engagement ensured that the proposal was grounded in local feedback and informed by operational experience. It helped identify key themes such as the importance of local identity, concerns about service continuity, and support for integrated delivery. This engagement also demonstrated local collaboration and consensus, a key government criterion, and helped shape the governance and service design elements of the proposal. More detail on the feedback from resident engagement is set out in the appendix.

4.2.3 Financial Modelling

Financial modelling was undertaken to provide a robust assessment of the financial implications of reorganisation. This included:

- Establishing a baseline of current costs and revenues
- Estimating transition and implementation costs
- Projecting long-term savings from integration and rationalisation
- Modelling council tax harmonisation scenarios
- Assessing payback periods and sensitivity to inflation and demand pressures

Financial sustainability is a core government criterion. The modelling provided a clear picture of the financial risks and benefits associated with each option. It also allowed for scenario testing and stress-testing of assumptions, ensuring there is transparency of the implementation costs, payback and the long-term financial viability. It is critical to reinforce that there is not a single unitarisation option that would lead to long term financial stability in the absence of funding reform.

5 Context: East Sussex Today

East Sussex is a unique place, known for its vibrant cultural heritage, spectacular countryside and coastal landscapes and diverse local economy. The county covers a population of 550,000 people over a geographical area of 1,725 square kilometres (660 square miles), with population density concentrated in several urban centres, three of which (Eastbourne, Hastings, Bexhill-on-Sea) represent around 43% of our total population. Significant parts of the county are also encompassed by natural environments of national and international significance, including the ancient Ashdown Forest near Crowborough, the South Downs National Park, the High Weald National Landscape, the Pevensey Levels, and 70 miles of coastline.

This distinctive blend of urban and rural characteristics offers many opportunities for our county and is highly valued by residents, businesses and visitors. However, it also presents practical challenges for the ways in which we can deliver our services and address demands or inequalities, as sparsely populated areas are more expensive to deliver services to and more likely to be affected by physical and digital isolation.

These opportunities and challenges mean it is more important than ever that we ensure our services enable a brighter future for East Sussex. We want to make the most of our local economic, cultural and natural assets to drive sustainable growth and address inequalities across the county.

5.1 Population

The East Sussex population is projected to grow by nearly 45,000 in the next 15 years, from 555,500 in 2023 to 600,300 in 2038. Most of the population growth is of residents aged 65 and over.

East Sussex has one of the oldest populations in England and is distinctive in the southeast for the age of its population. In parts of the county, one in 20 residents is aged 85 or older - the group with the highest need for social care services. Across the whole population, more than 8,000 people are aged over 90 and 213 people are over a hundred years old.

High deprivation levels rank parts of the county alongside the London Borough of Newham or Blackburn. More than 78,000 people live in areas among England's most deprived. The government's figures show that East Sussex includes the highest proportion of fuel-poor households in the Southeast England.

Population forecasts show an increase in the older population across the county but a much slower growth rate in the working-age population; in Eastbourne and Hastings the working age population is expected to decline. This trend will affect the local labour market, tax base, and demand for services. Meanwhile, Wealden is experiencing growth in both children and working age populations, for which its transport, healthcare and water service infrastructure is inadequate.

Diversity is increasing in some areas, especially among younger residents. In Eastbourne, 28% of primary school pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds and Hastings has the highest proportion of LGBTQ+ residents at 4.6%. Despite these shifts, the county has 88.3% of the population identifying as White: British and Northern Irish.



5.2 Health and Wellbeing

There are good opportunities to live and age well in East Sussex, as reflected by the number of residents reporting a 'very good' or 'good' health status (34.4% and 42.7%, respectively. Life expectancy in the county has generally risen since the early 2000s and levels are above the national average. In 2023, women were expected to live until 83 years and men 79 years.

There are, however, indications that health and wellbeing levels vary significantly across East Sussex. While we can see higher indicators in Lewes and Wealden in terms of life expectancy and mortality rates, Hastings and Eastbourne score below the national average on mental health and frailty. Although East Sussex is overall ranked 93 out of 151 Upper Tier Local Authorities in the country on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation rank, there are significant areas of deprivation across the county. 22 out of the 329 areas measured are in the most deprived 10% nationally, with Hastings ranked as the 13th most deprived Lower Tier Local Authority out of 317 in the country. Those experiencing deprivation close to otherwise more affluent communities close by can feel significantly more enhanced levels of exclusion than might be the case in other areas. Those in our most deprived communities are more likely to be affected by social inequality and potential difficulties accessing Council and other public services.

In East Sussex overall, 20.3% of residents identify as disabled, and adult social care demand is high with 5,329 requests per 100,000 residents. The complexity of health and care needs is continuing to increase, particularly in areas with ageing populations and rural isolation.

Integrated Community Teams



Integrated Community Teams (ICTs) in each East Sussex district unite local authorities, the NHS, public health, and VCSEs to address local health and wellbeing priorities. These teams focus on:

Simplifying access to care

Delivering proactive, personalised, multi-disciplinary support for those with complex needs such as frailty or dementia

Promoting prevention through collaborative actions, like encouraging physical activity

For instance, rural day clinics for mobility issues have reduced neuro outpatient physiotherapy waiting times from 76 to 25 weeks, with all service users rating their experience as 'very good'.



5.3 Children and Young People

In East Sussex, more children achieve a good level of development at the Early Years Foundation Stage than national figures. However, levels of attainment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 are below national averages. As with other data, such attainment levels at an East Sussex geography hides levels of poorer educational outcomes within some areas of the county, in particular Hastings.

There are complex and systemic issues facing the education and children's services sector. Estimations reflect that, by 2029, the number of children and young people is expected to decline slightly by 1.4%. Demand for services and the complexity of cases continues to significantly increase, with 59.3 Child Protection Plans in place per 10,000 children aged 0-17 years. There are currently 690 looked after children. 41.6% of all children and young people aged 0-25 with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in East Sussex are placed in special schools which is over nine percentage points higher than the England average. EHCPs of SEND maintained by the Council increased by 87% from 2015 (2,645) to 2025 (4,940).

5.4 Housing Need and Supply

Across East Sussex, there is a shared vision for healthy, safe and affordable homes for all, with a focus on preventing homelessness and ending rough sleeping, and a priority on accelerating housing delivery and improved infrastructure. The imperative for this vision is clear as access to affordable and social housing is generally a challenge in East Sussex, with the average house price higher than the national average (£340,000 compared to £290,000). The cost of private rented housing also rose by up to 29% between 2019 and 2024, generally outstripping rises in earnings. In some parts of the county, homes are over 10 times the average annual earnings of residents.

High housing costs have an acute human toll. The draft East Sussex Housing Partnership Strategy (2025-2030) reports that there are currently over 1,200 households living in temporary accommodation, with some areas experiencing rates that are double the national average. The high cost of housing exacerbates the loss of young working age people to other areas with higher paying employment opportunities and/or more affordable housing, with knock-on effects for the local economy.

Housing delivery in East Sussex has not kept pace with need, remaining relatively static over the past 5 years, with a total of 9,131 net housing additions. Delivery of both market and affordable housing is not consistent in all areas, with some areas delivering at historically high levels while other areas are seeing much lower rates of delivery.

Although delivery remains lower than targets, consents remain at all-time highs (particularly in Wealden and Lewes District) so the planning system should not be seen as the exclusive or even primary blocker. In addition to constraints on land supply, build-out rates have been disappointing, informed by a number of factors not in councils' control and not addressed by reorganisation. These include higher interest rates, increasing cost of materials and labour, a lack of certainty over future affordable rent policy and the emergence of important but competing demands for investment to meet higher safety and energy performance standards.

While there are likely to be benefits from being able to bring functions such as housing, planning, transport and social care together within one tier of local government, an enhanced partnership relationship between central government and both the new unitary and the proposed Sussex MSA will also be crucial to delivery.

This enhanced relationship would involve additional funding and powers for the unitary that would ideally be made immediately available to districts and boroughs in recognition of a shared sense of urgency about tackling the housing emergency, including:

- funding and support to ensure the timely delivery of infrastructure and utilities to encourage higher build-out rates
- powers to ensure new homes are built to a carbon neutral standard, which has the added potential to reduce household fuel bills and improve health outcomes as well as reduce the need for future spending to improve energy efficiency and stock quality
- removing the cap for housing benefit subsidy rate for local authority homelessness placements as well as fully and sustainably address the disconnect between Local Housing Allowance and private rents in East Sussex

5.5 Economy and Employment

As with housing, councils in East Sussex have set out a shared vision for economic prosperity in the county. Developed in partnership with Team East Sussex, the East Sussex Prosperity Strategy sets out a roadmap to 2050 for securing better opportunities and living standards for the people who live in the county, as well as to help businesses to thrive and grow.

East Sussex Housing Partnership



East Sussex Housing Partnership is an inter-sectoral collaboration involving six councils, housing providers, social services, criminal justice, public health and the voluntary and community sector. The partnership is currently finalising a shared strategy that will optimise all existing levers to help accelerate build-out and address housing need, by:

Pulling together a pipeline of public sector assets to be brought forward for new development;

Making the best use of existing stock, including a county wide Empty Homes Programme drawing on shared resource;

Enabling providers to benefit from economies of scale when planning their approach to compliance, e.g. staff training schemes;

Expanding Local Employment and Skills Plans to build capacity in the local construction workforce, including links to Section 106 processes; and

Developing a county wide Supported Accommodation Strategy developed, in line with new regulations.



The Strategy builds on a recognition that the economy in East Sussex is diverse, supporting 246,000 jobs and generating around £9.9 billion. It is also polycentric: Eastbourne, Hastings and Bexhill are the largest urban areas, but no single centre dominates; most of the county is rural and protected within the South Downs National Park and High Weald National Landscape. Outward connections to London, West Sussex, Kent and London and indeed on to the European continent via France (discussed in more detail in section 5.6) are also important, positioning the region well to play a pivotal role within the wider economy of Southeast England.

The county's business landscape is also diverse: of the 23,000 enterprises, the majority are small employers. Business density and sector composition vary: most businesses are small employers and rural parts of the county account for 36% of the total business stock in East Sussex. There are growing specialist strengths in two of the sectors in the Government's Modern Industrial Strategy: advanced manufacturing and digital technology. The area's outstanding natural environment also drives

Partnering with Government to boost economic prosperity



Newhaven is a Channel ferry port, significant because of its international ferry links to Dieppe, the port operations, its rail connectivity with two stations, and as a place of industry in a predominantly rural area. Recognising the potential for growth in marine and maritime sector, the Government has made it one of the beneficiaries of recent initiatives.

Newhaven Unleashed

The Newhaven Enterprise Zone has been designed to act as a catalyst to support good sustainable economic growth and business resilience. Established in 2023, it has a core focus on creating employment floorspace and growing the number of skilled jobs. Grant programmes include a Low Carbon Investment Fund to support enterprises in Newhaven to develop low carbon products and/or incorporate low carbon processes or services. To date, 78 new jobs and 635 sq m of floorspace has been created or refurbished.



“Re-imagining Newhaven” Pathfinder Pilot

After Lewes District Council initially secured funding from 3 different government funds, these separate allocations have been amalgamated into one programme called the Pathfinder Pilot. The consolidated 'Re-imagining Newhaven' capital grant allocation of just under £37m is enabling the delivery of 12 transformational projects in the town. Completed projects include a new 3G pitch at Newhaven Football Club, and refurbishment of the Ferry Terminal building. Projects currently in the delivery phase include a new fish processing plant which allows fish landed in Newhaven to be processed, stored and distributed from the site.

demand for a thriving visitor economy, worth £5 billion annually. Finally, there is a shared view among councils and businesses that the East Sussex economy needs to both adapt to and capitalise on opportunities from climate, technological and demographic change in future.

East Sussex is an attractive place to live, but economic disparities are pronounced across the area. Productivity in East Sussex, as measured by Gross Value Added (GVA), has persistently lagged with GVA per filled job in the county at 73% of the UK equivalent. While the county has seen modest productivity growth in recent years, this has not been sufficient to significantly change the relative position. Ultimately, productivity translates into impacts on households as well as the wider economy. For example, in 2022, gross weekly earnings commanded by people working in East Sussex were around 90% of the UK average.

The Government has clearly recognised the ambition of councils and business partners in East Sussex to improve productivity and generate more growth, notably by establishing an Enterprise Zone (EZ) in Newhaven, one of only 48 in England. The EZ programme was set up by the government to drive local growth by offering a range of incentives to businesses, such as business rate relief and simplified planning. All business rate growth generated within the EZ is retained by the local authority to reinvest in local economic growth.

Alongside the Newhaven EZ, the Government also entered into an innovative funding arrangements with Lewes District Council to support business and jobs growth, as well as improvements to the public realm. Set out in more detail below, these initiatives can in some respects be considered precursors to the devolved powers now being offered to MSAs. This demonstrates that East Sussex has a track record

Connect to Work



East Sussex was only the second area in the country to launch the devolved Connect to Work programme.

Connect to Work follows a supported employment model where local authorities, housing, and voluntary sectors collaborate to help people with disabilities, mental health issues, unpaid carers, and those with care experience find jobs. The programme aligns individual and employer needs through profiling, job-matching, engagement, and ongoing support.

Just weeks after work started in East Sussex, the programme started to deliver results, with 60 people referred to the service in its first seven weeks. From September, the East Sussex programme will add more delivery partners and have a greater focus on supporting those at risk of homelessness, increasing employment opportunities, reducing demand on housing.



of working as a trusted partner to Government, which stands to strengthen the foundations on which a new MSA would be built.

Within East Sussex, the economic activity rate (i.e. the proportion of 16-64-year-olds either in work or actively seeking work) is around 76%. This is notably lower than the average across the southeast. The employment rate is also about five percentage points below the regional average. The reasons for low activity rates are many and varied. Some people are unable to work because of ill health (and the data suggest this is a significant factor in the county). Others may be unable to work because of caring responsibilities – which becomes more likely as the dependency ratio increases. A third group may struggle to access suitable employment, for a range of reasons: skills and qualifications, a lack of opportunities to progress in the workforce to achieve their potential, or physical barriers to access (for example transport accessibility, availability and cost). East Sussex was at the vanguard of places delivering the Government's Connect to Work programme, reinforcing its trusted partner status when it comes to delivering a priority shared nationally and locally.

While there is an expectation that the new Sussex MSA would hold substantial powers and funding related to economic development, employment and skills; evidence from existing combined authorities shows that any strategic authority can only be effective if the primary authorities that become its constituent councils also operate on sensible economic footprints that enable them to discharge their own economic, transport, housing and planning functions effectively. Particularly in the context of enormous structural change, continuity wherever possible will be particularly valued by business and developers, many of whom have had a substantial involvement in the development of the existing county-wide strategies as well as day-to-day relationships within local networks.

During the process of developing the East Sussex Prosperity Strategy, the importance of these local business networks at both town/district- and county-level was stressed, given the predominantly 'small and micro enterprise' nature of East Sussex's business

Growth Hubs



The East Sussex Growth Hub is the first place for businesses to come for support. It provides a free service to help local businesses find information, specialist advice, funding, tools and resources to start, run or grow. The Growth Hub builds strong relationships with them all and connects them with the right support at the right time. Since April 24 it has delivered over £1m in grant funding, given over 1300 hours of business support to more than 400 businesses, delivered over 500 hours of support to start up businesses, and has made over 300 referrals to specialist advice to help them scale, innovate and export. Examples of particular success can be found in the Newhaven area where the Growth Hub has complemented regeneration activity by the Re-imagining Newhaven Board.



base. These networks included recent sector focused coalitions of entrepreneurs (such as the tech-based Chalk consortium in Eastbourne), and active local chambers of commerce and business associations. These represent small and micro enterprises, as well as generating pride in place.

Building on the local partnerships and networks that already exist at county, district and town level within East Sussex would make it easier for a new MSA to hit the ground running when it assumes devolved responsibilities for the whole region.

5.6 Infrastructure and Access

Transport and digital infrastructure are unevenly distributed in East Sussex. All districts and boroughs in East Sussex experience net commuting outflows, although the pattern in Eastbourne is almost in balance, reflecting the town's large concentration of employment. Within the county, the largest inter-district flows are from Wealden into Eastbourne, and within the Hastings and Rother economic market area.

Connections beyond the county boundary are very important. Historically, proximity to London has been an important factor in the growth of East Sussex's coastal resorts, and today, the capital is both an important travel-to work destination and a key market for the county's leisure and visitor offer. The west of the county is also close to Crawley, Gatwick and the A23/M23 Corridor, while to the northeast, Tunbridge Wells is an important employment hub and service centre for much of Rother and Wealden, as well as for Hastings. Rail connections run from London to Lewes, Eastbourne, Uckfield and Hastings, and east-west along the Coast from Brighton to Ashford via Eastbourne and Hastings. The strategic and main road network follows a similar pattern, with the A27/A259 running along the coast, and the A21 and A22 running north to join the M25. The county also enjoys a number of strategic active travel links, including the South Coast and London to Eastbourne routes on the National Cycle Network. Finally, as noted earlier, Newhaven is an important light industrial centre and ferry port particularly for freight connections to France.

Rural isolation is a major barrier to service access, where 24% of rural residents cannot reach a town centre within 30 minutes. The poor connectivity and lack of public transport between rural and urban areas limits economic growth and increases the risk of isolation and loneliness among those affected, this is evidenced by Hastings having the highest rate of transport related social exclusion in the country. It also contributes to an over dependency on private cars, which in turn increases the county's emissions.

Digital connections have improved significantly in recent years: in Rother and Wealden (the two most rural districts in the county), full fibre coverage stood at 53% and 54% of premises respectively in 2023 (compared with just 6% and 17% two years earlier). However, while there are great opportunities in rural East Sussex for increased remote working and the use of digital technology to overcome relative isolation, it is important that infrastructure investment keeps pace with the economic potential.

As devolution extends across the country, new MSAs will be expected to play a substantial role in coordinating the funding and prioritisation of infrastructure across their region as the existing combined authorities currently do. The infrastructure and investment pipelines will be set out in the MSA's LTP using evidence drawn from the constituent authorities, who play a key role in developing and operationalising schemes. Constituent councils will also have substantial highway responsibilities who play a key role in developing and operationalising schemes. Constituent councils will also have substantial transport responsibilities of their own which require sustainable

and predictable investment, e.g roads maintenance and active travel. This reinforces the need to ensure that each unitary operates on a geographic footprint that is sensible and coherent from a transport and economic perspective.

The commitment in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill to devolve more powers and funding to local areas through MSAs is one that councils in East Sussex have already signalled that they welcome, together with West Sussex councils and Brighton and Hove City Council. Swift follow-through on the offer of an integrated settlement to the new Sussex MSA is essential to accelerate infrastructure and housing delivery. The flexible and predictable long-term funding that integrated settlements offer would provide the Sussex MSA and constituent unitaries a powerful new tool to boost market confidence in the deliverability of the development pipeline,

Waste and recycling services

Case study 

All six authorities in East Sussex worked together successfully to design and deliver an easy to use and value for money recycling service for residents, after jointly assessing collection and disposal options. This and joint public information campaigns have helped increase recycling rates from 37 percent in 2019 to 46 percent in 2024.

Three of the five district and borough councils in East Sussex work together in a joint waste partnership with the aim of improving the quality and effectiveness of waste collection for residents and maximising shared opportunities between the two tiers of waste collection and waste disposal (a county council function). The partnership jointly procured a single contract with Biffa to provide waste collection, street and beach cleaning in 2019 – enabling efficiencies of scale and residents have seen a significant fall in missed bin collections.

The other two borough and district councils are not in the waste partnership but share most of their services and collaborate closely on waste collection and recycling programmes under an umbrella in-house service, which is branded Environment First.

Shared service plans to further improve efficiency and delivery were already being put in place before devolution and local government reorganisation were mooted. These include rationalised systems for environmental health/public protection and for planning services. These will be built on in preparation for unitarisation.



help align housing and infrastructure delivery to enhance economic, social and environmental outcomes, and assuage resident concerns about the pressures that can come with new development.

5.7 Natural Beauty and Culture

East Sussex benefits from some of the most beautiful and historic landscapes in the country. Over two thirds of the county are under environmental protection or designated for landscape value, including South Downs National Park, High Weald National Landscape, 26 Local Nature Reserves and four National Nature Reserves. These protections mean that the development of housing and infrastructure is heavily constricted in some areas. The threat of climate change is rendered more urgent in the context of our environmental assets. Current estimates indicate that the sea level may rise by 1.15m by 2100, presenting a significant risk to our coastal communities.

Financial inclusion programme



The Financial Inclusion programme facilitates collaboration between local authorities and statutory and voluntary partners throughout the county, with the aim of enhancing residents' financial wellbeing and resilience. The programme prioritises maximising resident income, promoting inclusive support, and fostering increased capacity, cooperation, and shared insight among participating organisations.

Services and initiatives developed under this partnership have contributed significant improvements in financial wellbeing for East Sussex residents, amounting to millions of pounds. For instance, the county council, together with district and borough councils, utilised the Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) platform to systematically identify individuals eligible for, but not currently receiving, available support.

Between August and December 2024, these councils implemented a series of targeted benefit uptake campaigns, focusing on Healthy Start vouchers, free school meals, Council Tax Reduction, Pension Credit, and Attendance Allowance. Within just six months, through coordinated national and local campaign efforts and effective use of the LIFT platform, this strategic approach enabled residents to access an additional £1.3 million per annum.



East Sussex has a rich and unique cultural canvas which forms the backdrop for residents and visitors lives. Different things strike chords with different people but the spectacular traditions of Bonfire Night in Lewes and Jack in the Green in Hastings, the historical importance of Hastings, Battle and Rye, the landscapes of Seven Sisters and Beachy Head, Ashdown Forest and High Weald, the cultural offerings of Bloomsbury and Charleston, Towner, Glyndebourne and De La Warr Pavilion are all distinctly East Sussex and only part of the things that make us feel we belong to East Sussex. Thriving wine growers and many craft breweries are important contributors as is the unique and longstanding relationship between Newhaven and Dieppe which continues to be celebrated each year. With the rolling hills of the High Weald to the ancient woodlands of Ashdown Forest, East Sussex's rural heartlands offer a rich tapestry of heritage, community resilience, and natural beauty. These landscapes are deeply cherished by residents and visitors alike, forming a vital part of the county's identity.

5.8 Collaborative Approaches to Achieving Consistencies

Sharing resources, expertise and customer service is already second nature for all six councils in East Sussex. For example, an East Sussex procurement hub spends over £55 million a year on goods and services for Hastings, Rother and Wealden councils. One of its aims is to spend local: £4 million has been spent with local firms in the first quarter of this year alone.

Eastbourne and Lewes councils have been sharing services for a decade, with a joint operating model which has enabled annual savings of up to £2.7m. Shared service arrangements also exist across two or more councils in environmental health, legal services and building control. East Sussex County Council has also found efficiencies through former or existing shared services arrangements with neighbours Surrey and in Brighton & Hove on IT, HR and procurement and legal services.

5.9 Public service reform

The strength of the partnerships across East Sussex of councils, NHS, police, further education, businesses, independent care providers and the voluntary and community sector provide a robust and effective platform for delivering public sector reform. The pilot 'Partnerships for People and Places' with MHCLG and other departments proved effective and was highlighted as best practice evaluated by the Government. The work we have collectively done on financial inclusion (more detail below) has been very effective and our work on integrated neighbourhood teams with the NHS in East has created the operating model across Sussex.

The Joint Community Rehabilitation Service integrates NHS community therapists and council rehabilitation support workers delivering programmes to over 8,000 people each year. Health and Social Care Connect (HSCC) operates 24/7 365 days a year and provides an integrated contact centre which provides the public and professional access point for adult social care and NHS community services. It handles over 140,000 contacts each year providing triage, advice and clinical and professional triage. District and borough housing teams have embedded occupational therapists to stream DFG processes and the joint Housing Partnership, covered elsewhere, has delivered significant improvements.

This foundation of established joint working, learning and delivery will ensure the new unitary can embrace opportunities for faster public service reform with local partners in East Sussex and also make a robust contribution to the joint work at a Sussex level,

especially through the MSA. Pan Sussex arrangements are well established for NHS/Social Care, community safety, road safety and economic growth and the new East Sussex unitary will be an effective partner as new opportunities arise.

5.10 Workforce

The six councils in East Sussex all place huge importance on having staff who are well motivated, highly trained, effectively supported and engaged. The wide range of peer reviews, inspections and staff surveys demonstrate how proud our staff are to serve the people, families, communities and businesses of East Sussex. These contributions are not only recognised in external reviews but are vital in achieving successful service delivery. These successes include in the high-risk social care services for our most vulnerable people. It is important to recognise that these services operate on the existing East Sussex and District Council footprints and any disaggregation risks disruption, uncertainty, reduced retention and recruitment and increasing costs. The Government guidance clearly indicates an expectation that the transition would be done as a continuing council model of local government reorganisation. This provides significant reassurance to staff that the implementation will be streamlined and minimise the number of staff to be TUPE'd. We are determined to ensure clear, timely, joined up and open working with staff and the trade unions continues to underpin the collective approach to this work.



6 Case for Change

6.1 National and Local Drivers

6.1.1 National Drivers

The Government's ambitions for local government reorganisation were reaffirmed in the English Devolution White Paper, *Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, published in December 2024. The White Paper sets out a clear direction for simplifying local government structures and embedding devolution as a constitutional principle. It calls for stronger local leadership, more integrated public services, and long-term financial sustainability as the foundation for national renewal. A single unitary authority would provide the scale and coherence needed to deliver joined-up services across health, housing, education, and social care. It would also create a single point of democratic accountability, enabling clearer leadership and more effective engagement with residents and partners.

The proposal aligns with the emerging Sussex MSA, which is expected to play a key role in regional economic development, transport, skills, and climate policy. A unified East Sussex authority would be well positioned to act as a strategic partner within this structure, contributing to and benefiting from devolved powers and funding.

6.1.2 Local Drivers

Locally, the case for reorganisation is driven by the joint desire to improved customer outcomes and value for money for residents through consolidated services to deliver holistic delivery of services whilst achieving efficiencies through economies of scale.

6.1.3 Strategic Alignment

A single unitary authority would enable whole-system planning and delivery. It would allow for the integration of housing and social care strategies, ensuring that vulnerable residents receive coordinated support. It would also improve strategic commissioning, allowing the authority to align budgets and outcomes across services and sectors.

The model supports place-based prevention and early intervention, particularly in areas such as mental health, youth services, and homelessness.

6.1.4 Benefits of Reorganisation

'One East Sussex' offers a range of benefits that address both national and local priorities.

- **Financial savings:** The consolidation of back-office functions, rationalisation of assets, and streamlined governance are expected to deliver on savings over time, although the future single unitary option would still result in a substantial operating deficit. These resources can be reinvested in frontline services and community priorities.
- **Improved outcomes:** Integrated service delivery will lead to better outcomes for residents, particularly in interdependent areas such as social care, housing, and education. A single authority can take a holistic view of need and design services accordingly.
- **Stronger voice:** A unified East Sussex will have greater influence in regional and national decision-making. It will be better placed to secure investment, shape policy, and represent the interests of its residents.

7 Options Appraisal

7.1 Options Considered and Appraisal Criteria

This section sets out our assessment of the structural options for LGR in East Sussex. In line with the government's statutory invitation and the six criteria outlined in the December 2024 English Devolution White Paper, we have undertaken a comparative appraisal of the following options:

- **Option 1: 'One East Sussex'** - a single unitary authority maintaining the existing area of East Sussex covering the existing county council boundary, with Brighton & Hove City Council remaining as is
- **Option 2: Two unitary authorities** within the existing East Sussex boundaries, with Brighton & Hove City Council remaining as is
- **Option 3: Expansion of Brighton & Hove City Council** to absorb parts of Lewes District (four variants)

Each option has been assessed against the six government criteria:

1. Right size and scale
2. High-quality and sustainable public services
3. Financial sustainability
4. Local collaboration and consensus
5. Support for devolution
6. Community engagement and empowerment

Our analysis draws on demographic, financial, and service performance data, as well as stakeholder engagement and lessons learned from other business cases submitted. The scoring reflects the extent to which each option meets the government's criteria and supports the long-term objectives of reorganisation, including simplification, resilience, and improved outcomes for residents.

We have applied a consistent scoring framework across all options:

- 1 = Meets very few or none of the criterion's requirements
- 3 = Meets some of the requirements
- 5 = Meets most or all of the criterion's requirements

No weighting has been applied, in line with the government's guidance that all criteria are of equal importance. The scores are based on a combination of quantitative evidence (e.g. population thresholds, financial modelling) and qualitative assessment (e.g. stakeholder consensus, governance coherence).

The table below summarises the scoring across all options. A detailed rationale for each score is provided in the following section.

7.2 Summary of Options Appraisal Scoring

Criterion	Option 1: Single East Sussex Unitary	Option 2: Two Unitaries (Coastal/ Inland)	Option 3: Brighton & Hove City Council - Expansion Option
1. Right Size and Scale	5	3	2
2. High-Quality and Sustainable Services	4	3	2
3. Financial Sustainability	4	3	2
4. Local Collaboration and Consensus	5	3	1
5. Support for Devolution	5	3	3
6. Community Engagement and Empowerment	4	4	2
Total (out of 30)	27	19	12



7.3 Detailed Options Appraisal Rationale

Criterion	Option 1: “One East Sussex” Single East Sussex Unitary	Option 2: Two Unitaries for East Sussex	Option 3: Brighton & Hove City Council - Expansion Option	
1. Right Size and Scale	<p>A single unitary authority for East Sussex would serve a population of ~555,000, meeting the government’s population guidance. It aligns with existing service footprints and enables strategic planning across a coherent geography.</p>	<p>5 The guiding principle of a 500,000 population for new authorities means this model would create asymmetry and the risk of reduced resilience.</p>	<p>3 The proposed expansion of Brighton & Hove into the district of Lewes would fragment East Sussex’s geography and redraw local authority boundaries. The resulting size of Brighton and Hove City Council would still be significantly under the guiding principle of a 500,000 population for any of the proposed variants. The extension into Lewes would be disconnected from existing service footprints, undermining strategic coherence.</p>	<p>2</p>

2. High Quality and Sustainable Services	<p>A single authority would enable integrated planning and delivery across adult social care, housing, education, and public health. It would reduce duplication, support consistent service standards, and enable a shift towards prevention and early intervention. The model supports whole-system approaches to complex challenges such as homelessness, SEND, and mental health. It also provides a platform for innovation and transformation, particularly in digital service delivery and community-based models.</p>	4	<p>While some integration would be possible within each unitary, the model introduces significant risks related to the disaggregation of statutory services, particularly in social care and education. Fragmentation could lead to service disruption, inconsistent standards, and increased costs. The model may also struggle to deliver consistent transformation across both authorities, particularly given the differing financial and demographic profiles.</p>	3	<p>This model would disrupt existing service footprints and partnerships, particularly in Lewes and East Sussex County Council. It risks fragmentation of services, loss of institutional knowledge, and reduced capacity for integrated delivery. The model does not support sustainable service transformation and may exacerbate existing inequalities in access and outcomes.</p>	2
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3. Financial Sustainability	<p>Financial modelling indicates that a single authority offers the greatest potential for savings through back-office consolidation, shared procurement, and rationalised assets. It avoids the high transition and disaggregation costs associated with multi-unitary options.</p>	4 <p>Some savings could be achieved through consolidation within each unitary, but the model introduces higher transition and disaggregation costs. The smaller scale of each authority may limit opportunities for efficiency and increase exposure to financial shocks. The inland authority, in particular, may struggle to achieve financial resilience given its smaller population and rural geography.</p>	3 <p>This model would require complex boundary changes and introduce significant transition costs. It offers limited opportunities for savings and may create new financial pressures for both Brighton & Hove City Council and the remaining East Sussex authorities. The model lacks a clear path to financial sustainability and may exacerbate existing inequalities in funding and service delivery.</p>	2
4. Local Collaboration and Consensus	<p>This proposal has been jointly developed by all six councils in East Sussex, with shared data, joint governance, and aligned objectives. Engagement has been extensive, and while some differences of opinion remain, there is broad consensus on the need for reorganisation and the benefits of a single authority. The model builds on existing collaboration and provides a platform for deeper integration.</p>	5 <p>Support for this model is mixed. Some councils have expressed concerns about the potential loss of influence or control, particularly in smaller or rural areas. The model risks creating new silos and undermining existing partnerships. It may also lead to competition rather than collaboration between the two new authorities.</p>	3 <p>This proposal was introduced late in the process and has not been subject to the same level of engagement or scrutiny. There is no consensus among East Sussex councils, and the model is widely viewed as a threat to local identity and service coherence. It risks undermining trust and collaboration across the region.</p>	1



5. Support for Devolution	A single authority would provide a strong, coherent partner for the proposed Sussex and Brighton Mayoral Strategic Authority. It would enhance East Sussex's ability to attract investment, shape regional policy, and deliver devolved functions. The model aligns with the government's devolution agenda and supports the creation of a simplified, strategic governance structure.	5	While each authority could engage with the MSA, the model risks diluting East Sussex's voice and creating inconsistencies in regional engagement. It may also complicate the delivery of devolved functions and reduce strategic coherence.	3	This model aligns with Brighton & Hove City Council's ambitions for devolution but undermines the coherence of East Sussex as a strategic partner. It may create tensions between authorities and reduce the effectiveness of regional governance. Any change to existing boundaries, however small, has a significant fixed cost in terms of time, capacity, money, and uncertainty/disruption to services, which includes staff in councils, schools and contractor organisations. This will potentially have a negative impact on vulnerable people and on tenants in council housing.	3
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6. Community Engagement and Empowerment	<p>The model includes proposals for area committees, local hubs, and participatory governance mechanisms to preserve and enhance local voice. Engagement activities have been extensive, and representation modelling has been undertaken to ensure fair councillor-to-resident ratios. The model supports stronger accountability and more meaningful engagement.</p>	4	<p>This model could offer improved access and responsiveness by creating smaller, more locally focused authorities. In theory, this could enhance community engagement, particularly in areas where residents feel disconnected from county-level decision-making. The likely geography of the two unitaries means there is a risk that smaller or more deprived areas (e.g. Hastings) could be marginalised within a larger coastal unit, while rural areas may struggle to maintain visibility in a more dispersed inland authority. Without robust mechanisms for neighbourhood governance and cross- boundary collaboration, the model could exacerbate existing inequalities in voice and influence.</p>	4	<p>Engagement has been limited, and the model is widely viewed as top-down and externally driven. It risks alienating affected communities and undermining trust in local government. There is no clear plan for preserving local voice or enhancing democratic accountability.</p>	2
		27		19		12

7.4 Engagement and Feedback

Resident and stakeholder engagement has been a central pillar of the development of this business case. The process has been designed to ensure that the views of residents, elected members, officers, and partners are reflected in the design and evaluation of the proposed options for LGR in East Sussex. More detailed feedback from engagement to date is set out in the appendix.

7.4.1 Engagement Activities

Engagement has taken place through a range of channels, including:

- An online survey for resident consultation across the county.
- Weekly working groups with officers from all six councils.
- Interviews and workshops with council leaders and chief executives.
- Focus groups with residents across all five districts and boroughs.
- An online survey for stakeholders across the county
- Targeted engagement with user voice groups
- Regular engagement with Brighton & Hove City Council representatives, plus engagement with a West Sussex representative to ensure transparency
- Finance engagement and working sessions.

A separate consultation for Lewes residents also took place related to the proposals by Brighton & Hove City Council to extend the authority boundaries. 7,472 residents responded to the Lewes consultation survey, with overwhelming opposition (86%) to make a change to the Lewes district boundary.

Strong representations opposing the aforementioned extension proposals have also been made by Newhaven, Peacehaven and Telscombe town councils; and Iford, Kingston, Rodmell and Piddington parish councils. Additionally, there was a joint representation from the parish councils of the Lower Ouse (Kingston, Iford, Rodmell, Northease, Southease and Piddington). Broadly these all made the case that no credible evidence had been produced to demonstrate that residents and businesses of those areas would be better off in an entirely new geography rather than continuing to work within existing networks and partnerships. More detail on the results of the Lewes-specific survey is set out in the appendix.

7.4.2 Residents Survey

A survey was available to residents across East Sussex over May and June 2025. The survey gathered over 5,500 responses across East Sussex and revealed strong engagement across diverse demographic groups.

Broadly, 9 out of 10 residents identified at least one benefit associated with having just one single council across the area covered by East Sussex County Council and all five District and Borough Councils. The most common potential positive with this proposal was cost savings – comments referred to savings made through ‘economies of scale’, ‘greater purchasing power for service contracts’ and ‘staff reductions.’

Access to services was mentioned as a positive by a quarter of respondents – comments mentioned ‘improved services’, ‘easier access to services’, ‘consistency in delivery across the county’ and ‘reduced duplication.’

Concerns included:

- ‘our area would be forgotten’ by a single, county-wide council.
- a new council wouldn’t ‘understand their area well enough’
- East Sussex was too big an area for a single unitary

Key themes that related to the process of change and were not specific to any one suggestion were:

Loss of local representation:	Larger governance structures could lead to a loss of local representation and control, making it harder for residents to have their voices heard.
Impact on services:	Proposed changes could negatively impact local services.
Administrative efficiency:	Some respondents are sceptical about the efficiency and cost savings of the exercise.
Scepticism and caution:	Some prefer to maintain the current system or make only minor adjustments.

7.4.3 Weekly working groups

Since the inception of the LGR programme, officers from all six East Sussex councils have participated in weekly working group meetings. These sessions have provided a structured forum for joint planning, data sharing, and the co-development of key components of the business case. In addition to regular meetings, a series of thematic workshops have been held to review and refine core content, including financial modelling, governance design, and service integration strategies.

This collaborative approach has ensured that the business case reflects a shared understanding of local priorities and challenges, and that all councils have had an active role in shaping the preferred model.

In the spirit of regional collaboration, the East Sussex working group has also engaged regularly with representatives from West Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council.

7.4.4 Interviews with council leaders and chief executives

As part of the development of this business case, a series of one-to-one conversations were held with council leaders and chief executives from all six constituent authorities. These discussions provided candid, strategic reflections on the opportunities, risks, and design considerations for a future unitary authority. While views varied across geographies and political perspectives, several consistent themes emerged.

Theme	Summary of Feedback and Insights
Local Identity & Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong attachment to place: Leaders and CEXs consistently emphasised the importance of local identity, particularly in areas like Hastings, Eastbourne, and Wealden. There is concern that a larger unitary could dilute this. Democratic deficit fears: Fewer councillors and larger wards could reduce accessibility and local accountability. Town and parish councils: Seen as vital to preserving local voice, but concerns exist about their uneven capacity and unclear future role. Area committees: Proposed as a solution, but met with scepticism about their effectiveness and whether they would be genuinely empowered.
Financial Health & Redistribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divergent financial positions: Wealden is financially strong and investing in legacy infrastructure; Hastings, Eastbourne, and Rother face acute pressures. Concerns about redistribution: Wealthier councils fear their reserves may be used to plug deficits elsewhere. Legacy liabilities: Risks from capital projects, housing companies, and cultural assets (e.g. De La Warr Pavilion) were raised. Desire for transparency: Leaders want clear frameworks for how resources will be pooled and allocated.
Governance & Future Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for empowered councillors: Councillors with more strategic roles was a common aspiration. Mixed views on governance models: Some support for area committees; others see them as tokenistic or overly parochial. Need for clarity: On the roles of ward councillors, town/parish councils, and how local voice will be embedded in the new structure. Design for purpose: Strong consensus that governance should be built around outcomes, not inherited structures.
Community Engagement & Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desire for co-design: Councillors want to shape the new authority, not be absorbed into it. Asset retention: Communities are concerned about losing control of local assets and services.

Theme	Summary of Feedback and Insights
Housing & Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Temporary accommodation crisis: Especially acute in Hastings, Eastbourne, and Rother. Council-led housebuilding: Lewes and Wealden are actively investing, and fear this momentum could be lost. Infrastructure delivery: Frustration with delays in highways and planning integration; desire for stronger links between planning and transport. Place-based investment: Wealden in particular is focused on legacy infrastructure and community empowerment.
Transition & Organisational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff morale and retention: Concerns about TUPE, job losses, and cultural clashes. Systems integration: IT, HR, and finance systems vary widely; some councils are already aligning in anticipation. Cultural differences: Varying levels of ambition, innovation, and risk appetite between councils. Desire for shared vision: Leaders want to move beyond structural debate and start designing the “council of the future.”

7.4.5 Public focus groups: summary of findings

A series of facilitated focus groups were held across East Sussex to explore residents' views on local government reorganisation. While not statistically representative, these sessions provided valuable qualitative insights into public hopes, concerns, and expectations.

7.4.5.1 Openness to reorganisation, but concerns about scale

Most participants were open to the idea of a unitary authority in principle, recognising potential benefits such as:

- Clearer accountability
- Reduced duplication
- Strategic service integration
- Cost savings

However, concerns were consistently raised about the potential loss of local identity, reduced access to services, and diminished influence over decision-making. These concerns were often linked to the perceived scale of a new authority, rather than opposition to the unitary model itself.

7.4.5.2 Local identity and representation

Participants strongly identified with their local towns, villages, and communities rather than with the county as a whole. There was concern that a larger authority could dilute this sense of place and reduce the visibility of smaller or rural areas.

There was also concern that councillors in a larger unitary would represent more people, making them less accessible and less rooted in local knowledge. Some participants called for councillor- to-resident ratios to remain similar to current district and borough levels.

7.4.5.3 Services and outcomes

Residents expressed a desire for reorganisation to lead to tangible improvements in services, particularly in social care, housing, education, and environmental protection. There was support for more joined-up, person-centred services and long-term strategic planning.

However, there was scepticism about whether structural change alone would deliver better outcomes. Some feared that the reorganisation could become a distraction from core service delivery or lead to further cuts.

7.4.5.4 Financial concerns

While many hoped that a unitary model would reduce duplication and deliver savings, there was concern about the cost of transition and the risk that savings would be absorbed by statutory pressures (e.g. adult social care).

There was also concern about the potential sale of local assets and the redirection of discretionary spending away from local priorities.

7.4.5.5 Governance and decision-making

Some participants welcomed the potential for stronger local leadership and more empowered councillors under a unitary model. Others feared a loss of local democracy, particularly if councillors became more remote or if independent voices were squeezed out.

There was support for devolving more powers to town and parish councils, but also confusion about their current role and capacity.

7.4.5.6 Boundaries and geography

There was no single preferred model for new boundaries, but some clear patterns emerged:

- Strong opposition to being joined with Brighton & Hove City Council.
- Support for the current East Sussex footprint as the least disruptive option.
- Interest in a rural/coastal split, particularly in Wealden and Hastings.
- Some support for a federated model (especially in Hastings), allowing for local identity to be preserved within a larger structure.

7.4.5.7 Transition and legitimacy

Participants raised concerns about the pace of change, the level of public awareness, and the legitimacy of the process. Some called for a public vote or wider consultation before decisions were made.

There was also concern about the potential loss of local knowledge if experienced staff and councillors left during the transition.

7.4.6 Stakeholder online survey

As part of the wider engagement, a five-week consultation was conducted with key stakeholders across the county, with the largest group of respondents being town and parish councils.

Key Findings

What stakeholders value in a new council:

- The top priority for stakeholders was the delivery of high-quality services that work well.
- Other important values included good access for residents, clear and honest decision-making, and value for money.

Perceived benefits of a single council:

- The most frequently cited benefit was that a unitary authority would be simpler and less confusing for both residents and professionals.
- Cost savings were also commonly mentioned as a potential advantage.
- These views aligned with feedback from the resident's survey.

Concerns about a single council:

- The most significant concern was the loss of local connection and identity, particularly among town and parish councils.
- Stakeholders also feared a decline in service quality, especially during the transition period.
- Again, views aligned with feedback from the residents survey. Alternative boundary suggestions:
- A minority of stakeholders proposed alternative geographies, with a coastal/rural split being the most common.

Notable contributions from key partners:

- Sussex Police highlighted the need to maintain local partnership working and warned of restructuring impacts on policing.
- East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service emphasised the opportunity for investment and the importance of retaining the Combined Fire Authority model (East Sussex and Brighton and Hove).
- Town and Parish Councils expressed concern about increased responsibilities without additional funding, the risk of being overwhelmed by contacts, if the unitary can't cope with the volume and as mentioned throughout concerned about the loss of local voice.
- NHS Sussex (ICB) advocated for joint commissioning with the VCSE sector and stressed the importance of maintaining local engagement to meet diverse health needs.

7.4.7 Targeted engagement with user voice groups

As supplementary engagement, we engaged directly with four key service user groups to gather their perspectives and concerns. These sessions aimed to ensure that the voices of young people, older residents, citizens, and migrant communities were meaningfully included in shaping the future of local governance. The table below presents a thematic analysis of the feedback collected sharing cross-cutting themes that emerged.

Theme	Summary
Local Identity & Representation	All groups expressed concern about losing local identity and representation in a larger authority.
Equity & Inclusion	Rural areas, older people, youth, and migrants were all highlighted as at risk of being overlooked.
Access to Services	Physical access (hubs), digital exclusion, and tailored services were recurring concerns.
Voice & Participation	Strong calls for meaningful engagement and structured feedback mechanisms.
Funding & Resources	Concerns about fair distribution and adequate funding, especially for vulnerable groups.
Learning & Best Practice	Desire to learn from other councils and build on existing strengths.



8 Financial Modelling and Assumptions

8.1 Summary

The financial modelling undertaken forecasts that, compared to the 'as-is' model, the 'One East Sussex' single unitary will generate cumulative savings of £64m by 2032/33 with £25m annual recurring savings.

In contrast, the two unitaries model is forecast to incur a net cumulative additional cost of £329m by 2032/33 with £59m annual additional recurring costs.

We have not been able to do a detailed assessment of the Brighton & Hove City Council expansion as we do not know which of the four models consulted upon is the preferred option.

Despite the positive financial benefits of establishing the single unitary, this does not address the ongoing social care funding shortfall and consequently, without additional funding to address this, the single unitary model forecasts that all reserves will be depleted, with a cumulative deficit of £5m in 2028/29 increasing to £226m by 2032/33 and an annual recurring structural budget deficit of £61m.

This ongoing position is substantially worse for the two unitaries model due to the disaggregation and consequent duplication of costs, with a forecast cumulative deficit of £619m by 2032/33 and a recurring annual budget deficit of £144m.

Whilst a single unitary is clearly the preferred model, additional ongoing funding will be required, prior to establishing the new unitary, to address the social care funding shortfall and to ensure the new unitary council is financially sustainable.

8.2 Introduction

8.2.1 Models developed

Financial modelling has been developed to understand the implications of LGR in East Sussex. Seven variants have been developed through three comparator models:

- 'As Is' comparator model summarising the existing consolidated MTFS of the six councils.
- Single unitary model with base, stretch and mid-point variants – explained below.
- A two unitaries model with base, stretch and mid-point variants – explained below.

For both the single and two unitary models, forecasts have been developed for:

- A '**base**', low risk, model with prudent estimates of potential savings and higher implementation costs.
- A '**stretch**', higher risk, model with more ambitious, higher value, but achievable, savings and lower implementation costs.
- A '**mid-point**' model which is the average of the base and stretch models, consequently representing a balance between prudence and ambition.

This financial narrative is based on the one unitary and two unitaries mid-point models and comparison with the 'as-is' model.

The financial modelling has been developed from 2025/26 through to 2032/33. This assumes that 2027/28 is an implementation year for new the unitary(ies) and 2028/29 is the first year of the new council(s). During the following five years, transformation activity is expected to be completed with 'steady state' (the point at which the new authority(ies) are fully established and reaching maturity) achieved by 2032/33

The work on the financial modelling for this business case is being done in the context of the Government reviewing the Fair Funding allocations, resetting Business Rates, simplifying grants and consulting on Temporary Accommodation funding. The prospect of multi-year funding settlements and simplified grants are very welcome but some aspects of the consultation – particularly the reduction in relative need from older people to working age adults, the council tax equalization not based in current local returns and the impact of the business rate reset has the potential for significant reductions. Given the demographics, the impact of the cost reductions in the NHS and in future as Sussex and Surrey Integrated Care Systems combined and a need to tackle perceived significant overfunding, also may bring significant pressure. It is not possible at this stage to anticipate the financial impact on the new unitary but it is important context in which the implementation will occur.

Models for three or more unitaries have not been considered as these would exacerbate the issues of the two unitaries model and would not be financially viable.

As LGR progresses and further details are understood, including government policy updates, it will be necessary to revisit these forecasts and revise the modelling to reflect known changes.

8.2.2 Brighton & Hove City Council expansion proposals

It has not been possible to undertake detailed financial modelling to consider the implications of the option(s) proposed by Brighton & Hove City Council to expand the existing council's footprint.

The range of options proposed by Brighton & Hove City Council include consideration (despite MHCLG guidance to the contrary) of adjusting the boundaries to include existing areas of Lewes District Council. The four options considered equate to a maximum of 36,000 Lewes residents transferring into an expanded Brighton & Hove City Council. This equates to 36% of current Lewes residents.

Extensive detailed work would be required to attribute actual and budgeted County Council and Lewes District Council costs and income to the areas transferring and to ensure an equitable approach that does not disadvantage either authority.

For some areas of spend where services are provided universally (consistently and equally to all locations and residents), the allocation of costs to the areas proposed to transfer to Brighton & Hove City Council could be based on simple area percentage allocations. However, for the major cost areas including adults and children's social care, in order to allocate these costs to the areas proposed

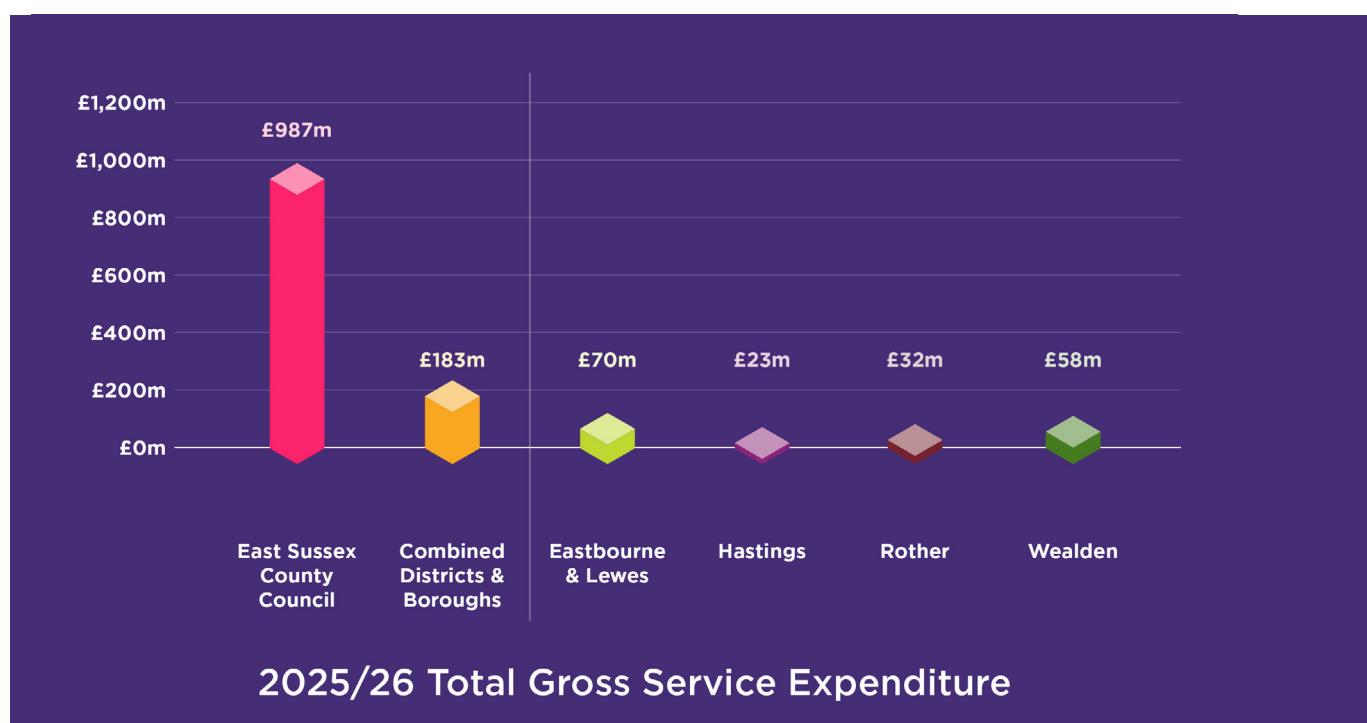
to transfer, this would necessitate a case-by-case review of client data and detailed analysis of every Children's and Adult social care record, in order to allocate costs to the transferring locations. Further work would also be required to allocate grants and income across the areas proposed to transfer.

The transfer of physical assets and the services being delivered from these would also require detailed analysis, recognising that whilst a physical asset may be located in a transferring area, the service provided would likely benefit other residents across a much wider location, parts of which would not be included in the transfer.

This disaggregation effort would be disproportionately disruptive and expensive for both councils and their residents, with no recognisable financial benefit. As noted in the table at section 7.3, this option would disrupt existing service footprints and partnerships, risking fragmentation of services and have additional fixed costs fixed cost in terms of time, capacity, money, and uncertainty/ disruption to services, which includes staff in councils, schools and contractor organisations. This will potentially have a negative impact on vulnerable people and on tenants in council housing.

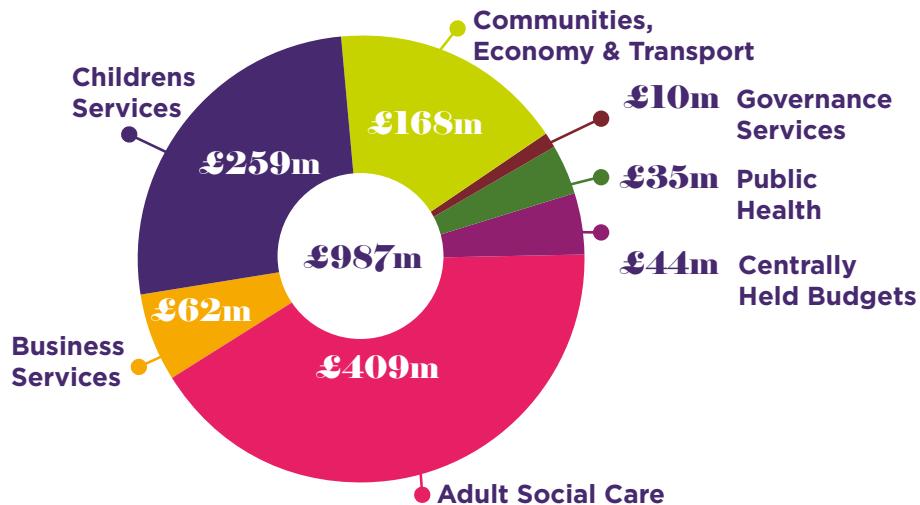
8.3 Overview and Context

The chart below shows the planned £1.171 billion gross service spend of the six councils in 2025/26 (Eastbourne and Lewes figures are combined). This chart also illustrates the difference in scale between the county, with annual spend of £1 billion and the five districts / boroughs with a combined spend of £183m.

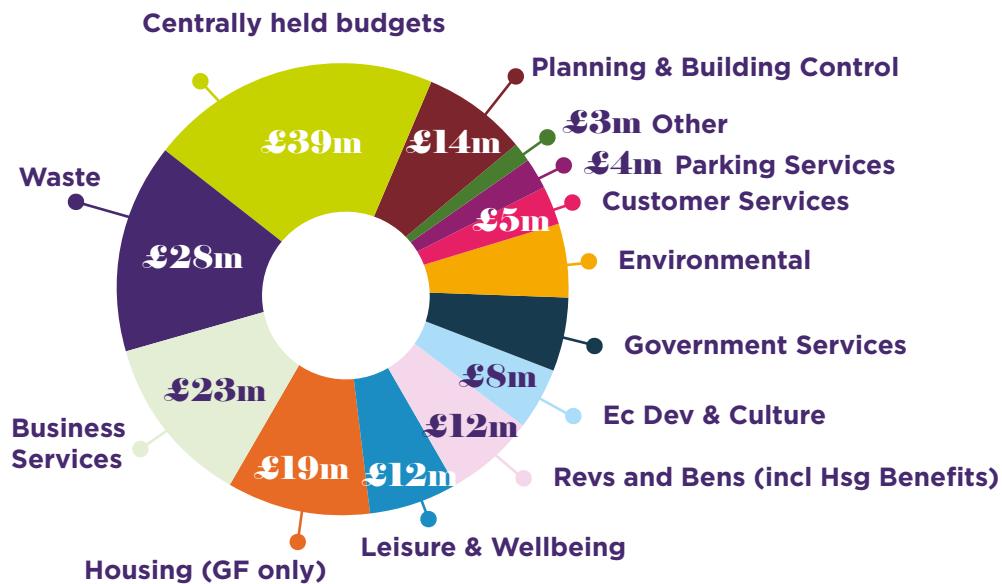


The charts below provide further analysis showing the cost of the services delivered by the county and the districts and boroughs in 2025/26. Through unitarisation, this complete range of services would be provided by a single (or two) unitary council(s).

2025/26 County Spending



2025/26 District & Borough Spending



8.4 Financial Modelling Approach

Each council's existing / updated MTFS for the period 2025/26 to 2028/29 has been used as the basis for developing the financial model.

The MTFS total service expenditure for each authority was analysed into the following cost categories:

- **Staff:**
 - Senior management
 - Front office
 - Service delivery
 - Support functions
- **Premises costs**
- **ICT Costs**
- **All other costs**

The six MTFS statements have been combined into a single, consolidated MTFS - the 'as-is' model - and this has been extrapolated through to 2032/33 using average inflation rates for each spend and income category. This time period covers five years after creation of the new unitary, allowing adequate time for initial consolidation, followed by longer term transformation and achieving steady state by 2032/33.

8.5 Cost/Benefit Analysis Modelling

8.5.1 Summary of modelling

The table below summarises the costs and savings forecast from implementing the single unitary and two unitaries models over the period 2025/26 to 2032/33. The main elements of change modelled are:

Implementation:	The implementation / transition programme and related costs required to deliver the change and establish a new target operating model for the unitary council(s).
Disaggregation:	The costs of dividing and delivering county services across two new unitary councils.
Reorganisation:	The savings opportunities immediately available, in the short-term, from combining, rationalising, consolidating and eliminating duplication across the councils.
Transformation:	The longer-term opportunities available from increased scale and combining complementary functions to enhance service provision and reduce net costs.
Funding & Resources	Concerns about fair distribution and adequate funding, especially for vulnerable groups.
Learning & Best Practice	Desire to learn from other councils and build on existing strengths.

The table below shows the net effect of these costs / savings across the period 2025/26 to 2032/33 and the resultant return (or loss) on investment.

Implementation programme: Cost / benefit analysis	Cumulative to 2032/33	
	One Unitary £m	Two Unitary £m
Implementation cost	68.456	121.246
Disaggregation cost		338.717
Total costs	68.456	459.964
Reorganisation benefit	(47.591)	(43.061)
Transformation benefit	(40.508)	(12.665)
Total Savings	(88.099)	(55.725)
Cumulative net cost / (benefit)	(19.642)	404.238

*it has not been possible to assess the Brighton & Hove City Council Expansion model for reasons outlined earlier in this section

This demonstrates the single unitary implementation programme generates a positive return on investment of £20m by 2032/33 whereas the two unitaries model forecasts a net programme cost of £404m by 2032/33.

The above calculation only considers the changes in costs / savings resulting from unitarisation and does not consider the underlying revenue budget.

Taking the underlying budget into consideration, compared to the 'as-is' model, the single unitary is forecast to generate cumulative savings of £64m by 2032/33 with £25m annual recurring savings.

In contrast, the two unitaries model is forecast to incur a net cumulative additional cost of £329m by 2032/33 with £59m additional annual recurring costs.

Whilst the single unitary is clearly the preferred model, prior to establishing the new unitary, additional ongoing funding will be required to address the social care funding shortfall to ensure the financial sustainability of the new council.

The above costs and benefits are considered in further detail in the following sections.

8.5.2 One-off implementation and transition costs

The one-off cost of implementing the transition programme has been modelled and is summarised in the table below. Implementation costs have been profiled to 2032/33 and do not include pay awards or inflation and are assumed to be funded through PWLB borrowing over 20 years.

Total Implementation & Transition Costs	One Unitary £m	Two Unitaries £m
Redundancy & early retirement	4.666	3.595
Implementation & Programme	30.308	45.461
IT Consolidation & transformation	22.050	54.975
Branding & Comms	1.750	1.750
Shadow / continuing authority(ies)	0.720	1.026
Creation of new council(s)	0.875	1.750
Closedown of old councils	0.694	0.694
Elections to shadow / continuing authorities	1.760	2.000
Contingency	5.634	9.995
Total implementation & Transition	68.456	121.246

*it has not been possible to assess the Brighton & Hove City Council Expansion model for reasons outlined earlier in this section

The implementation programmes are assumed to commence in 2026/27 and conclude in 2032/33 delivering the consolidation, rationalisation and transformation of all legacy district/borough and county services. The modelling for a new single unitary council has been predicated on East Sussex County Council operating as a continuing authority to minimise disruption while a new organisation is being designed and put in place. This model for handling the transition to a new organisation complies with guidance in the 'Anatomy of a structural changes order' circulated by MHCLG on 4 August 2025. The resultant unitary council(s) will deliver modern, digitised, efficient, value for money, best practice services with improved resident outcomes. The forecast implementation and transition costs are described below.

Redundancy & early retirement: These costs have been forecast based on the recent historic average cost of county redundancies applied to the staff savings forecast throughout this model. This forecast has been further adjusted to reflect that some staff reductions will be achieved through natural wastage.

Implementation & programme: The cost and profile of the potential additional resources required to deliver the required consolidation and transformation programme have been forecast. The model assumes that initial design stages of the programme would be mobilised from April 2026. Programme resourcing peaks during 2028/29 and ends in 2032/33.

IT consolidation & transformation: This forecast reflects the cost of consolidating and rationalising multiple, duplicate ICT systems and infrastructure and also the technology costs of supporting the broader transformation programme to streamline and optimise services.

Branding & communications: This provision has been included for the anticipated branding and resident communications work required to launch the new unitary council(s).

Shadow / continuing authority(ies): This forecast assumes that during 2027/28, each shadow / continuing authority will employ a Chief Executive, two senior officers and a Leader, Deputy Leader and three Cabinet Members.

Creation of new council(s): This forecast is an allowance to cover potential legal costs and design of governance arrangements, including the constitution, for the new council(s).

Closedown of old councils: This forecast is an allowance to cover closedown of the legacy councils, including final accounts, external audit and legal costs.

Elections to shadow / continuing authorities: This forecast is for the potential one-off cost of elections to the shadow / continuing authority(ies). Ongoing unitary council election costs are included elsewhere in the model.

Contingency: A contingency, estimated at 10% of total implementation and transition costs, has been included to fund potential unknown costs and to reflect the inherent risk in delivering a programme of this nature and scale.

8.5.3 Disaggregation costs

The two unitaries model includes estimated cost increases incurred through the division and duplication of county functions and consequent loss of economies of scale.

As county council annual spend is c£1bn, a relatively small percentage cost increase, through duplication and diseconomies of scale, generates a significant financial impact.

Some disaggregation costs could potentially be reduced through establishing and / or extending shared services. However, the modelling reflects a prudent approach, recognising that decisions regarding shared services would be for the new unitary(ies) and therefore assumes that sovereignty will prevail, with each new unitary maintaining separate functions.

Disaggregation costs have been forecast and profiled as shown in the table below and are described in the following section. The forecast £68m 2032/33 annual disaggregation cost shown below is an additional recurring annual cost.

Disaggregation costs for two unitaries	2032/33 In-year & recurring £m	Cumulative to 2032/33 £m
Senior management	11.748	57.962
Members	0.318	1.499
Staffing (Excluding tiers 1-4):		
Front office	0.124	0.612
Service delivery	6.440	31.773
Support functions	0.701	3.459
ICT disaggregation	21.263	111.628
Other non-staffing	27.315	131.785
Total Disaggregation Costs	67.908	338.717

Senior Management: These are the costs of enhancing and duplicating the top of existing county management structures across two unitaries to ensure adequate management structures. There is a corresponding saving arising from substantially reducing the existing management structures. However, this is shown separately as senior management staffing saving within the reorganisation savings (detailed below).

Elected Members: This reflects the additional cost of Special Responsibility Allowances incurred by maintaining two sets of Members across the two unitaries. There is a corresponding saving arising from an overall net reduction in Members from consolidating the six councils into two unitaries. However, this is shown separately as the Members saving within the reorganisation savings (detailed below).

Staffing (excluding senior management): The model assumes that by disaggregating staff (below senior management) across two unitaries, this will result in the need to duplicate some activities / posts and this will result in increased staff costs. For front office, service delivery and support staff, this increase has been estimated in the range of 2% to 4%, with a mid-point of 3% included in the table above.

ICT Disaggregation: This forecast assumes existing county council ICT costs would be duplicated and bolstered to achieve self-sufficiency for each unitary after exiting the current Orbis arrangement.

Other non-staffing: This forecast assumes there will be inefficiencies, duplication and diseconomies of scale by splitting existing county non-staff spend across two unitaries. This cost has been estimated in the range of 2% to 4%, with a mid-point of 3% included in the table above.

8.5.4 Reorganisation benefits / savings

Combining the six separate authorities into a single unitary or two unitaries will require initial reorganisation and consolidation activity and the potential savings have been forecast and profiled. The cumulative savings to 2032/33 are summarised in the following table and described in further detail below. The table also details the 2032/33 in-year recurring savings to demonstrate the permanent annual ongoing benefit.

Reorganisation savings / benefits	2032/33 In-year & recurring		Cumulative to 2032/33	
	One Unitary £m	Two Unitaries £m	One Unitary £m	Two Unitaries £m
Staffing - tiers 1-4	(9.675)	(9.675)	(30.849)	(30.849)
Members	(1.341)	(1.341)	(6.324)	(6.324)
Elections	(0.358)	(0.225)	(1.687)	(1.125)
Staffing (excluding senior management)				
Front office	(0.260)	(0.193)	(0.998)	(0.742)
Service delivery	(0.528)	(0.394)	(2.176)	(1.625)
Support functions	(1.002)	(0.285)	(3.675)	(1.174)
Non-staffing	(0.489)	(0.318)	(1.881)	(1.223)
Total reorganisation savings / (benefits)	(13.652)	(12.430)	(47.591)	(43.061)

*it has not been possible to assess the Brighton & Hove City Council Expansion model for reasons outlined earlier in this section

Senior Management: This is the net saving achieved from reducing existing management structures, less costs of the additional management and enhanced salaries to ensure there is adequate management resourcing in the new unitary council(s).

Members: This savings reflects the net effect of establishing the appropriate number of Councillors with a county-wide interest in the new unitary(ies), whilst reducing overall numbers.

Elections: This saving is the forecast net effect of undertaking county-wide unitary Councillor elections whilst removing legacy district and borough Councillor elections.

Staffing: Savings have been forecast for each category of staff (front office / service delivery / support functions) to reflect the immediate efficiencies available from consolidating staff across the districts / boroughs and county.

Non-staffing: Savings have also been forecast for non-staff costs to reflect the immediate efficiencies available from consolidating costs..

Cumulative reorganisation savings for the one unitary model total £48m by 2032/33 with an annual recurring saving of £14m. Cumulative savings for the two unitaries model are lower at £43m, with an annual recurring saving of £12m.

8.5.5 Transformation benefits / savings

Using unitarisation as a catalyst for service improvement, savings opportunities are available in the medium to long-term from exploiting the synergies of combining district/borough and county functions. These savings assume fundamental and radical service redesign, including the consistent adoption of best practice and integrating services to realise benefits from increased digitisation, automation and early intervention and prevention.

These transformation savings / benefits have been forecast and the cumulative figures to 2032/33 are summarised in the table below and described in the following section. The table below also details the 2032/33 in-year recurring savings to demonstrate the permanent annual ongoing benefit of these savings.

Transformation savings / benefits	2032/33 In-year & recurring		Cumulative to 2032/33	
	One Unitary £m	Two Unitaries £m	One Unitary £m	Two Unitaries £m
Staffing (excluding senior management)				
Front office	(0.771)	(0.464)	(2.528)	(1.522)
Service delivery	(1.127)	(0.620)	(3.631)	(1.997)
Support functions	(3.033)	(0.751)	(8.327)	(2.420)
Non-staffing	(7.123)	(0.831)	(17.280)	(2.100)
IT rationalisation	(1.892)	(0.946)	(5.494)	(2.747)
Property - office estate	(0.549)	(0.274)	(1.083)	(0.542)
Income - influenceable	(0.578)	(0.357)	(2.165)	(1.337)
Total transformation savings / (benefits)	(15.073)	(4.243)	(40.508)	(12.665)

*it has not been possible to assess the Brighton & Hove City Council Expansion model for reasons outlined earlier in this section

Staffing (excluding senior management): Savings have been forecast for each category of staff (front office / service delivery / support functions) to reflect the potential transformational efficiency savings available from further rationalising staff across the districts / boroughs and county as services are redesigned to maximise the opportunities and benefits of unitarisation.

Non-staffing: Savings have also been forecast for non-staff costs to reflect the longer-term transformational efficiency opportunities available from rationalising costs across the districts / boroughs and county as services are redesigned to maximise the opportunities and benefits of unitarisation.

IT Rationalisation: This forecasts the potential saving achievable from rationalising and combining legacy district and borough ICT non-staff costs into a consolidated unitary ICT function(s).

Property – office estate: This forecast saving is not location specific but reflects the potential reduction in legacy district and borough accommodation costs as staff and functions are rationalised onto a reduced accommodation footprint.

Influenceable income: Potential income increases from non-statutory fees and charges have been forecast to reflect the potential opportunity for standardising fees across the districts and boroughs.

8.5.6 Other modelling considerations

Council Tax Harmonisation

Council tax charges across the five districts and boroughs vary, although the County Council element is constant. The existing council tax band D charges must be harmonised to a single rate within seven years of establishing the new unitary council(s).

Decisions regarding timescales for harmonisation and future council tax charges will be a matter for the new unitary council and have not been considered in detail, but it is expected that, to maintain and maximise council tax yield, and ensure the most equitable approach for residents across the new unitary council(s), council tax harmonisation would be completed within a reasonable period.

The chart below shows the current variation in band D charges across the five districts and boroughs.



The model assumes that maximum council tax increases, within the referendum limit, will be applied annually and in the first year of unitarisation, the 5% referendum threshold will be applied to the whole local authority element of the council tax.

The council tax support schemes will also require standardisation across the new unitary council(s) and this will also be a matter for the new unitary council(s) to decide.

Consultations: Fair Funding Review / Business Rates Reset / Council Tax administration

The government launched the Fair Funding Review 2.0 consultation in June 2025. Any potential impact of the review is yet to be confirmed and, consequently, has not been reflected in the model. The modelling undertaken does not incorporate forecasting for the impact of future government policy changes, population growth and demographic changes or potential future increasing resident demand from, for example, adult's and children's social care, home to school transport, homelessness, temporary accommodation.

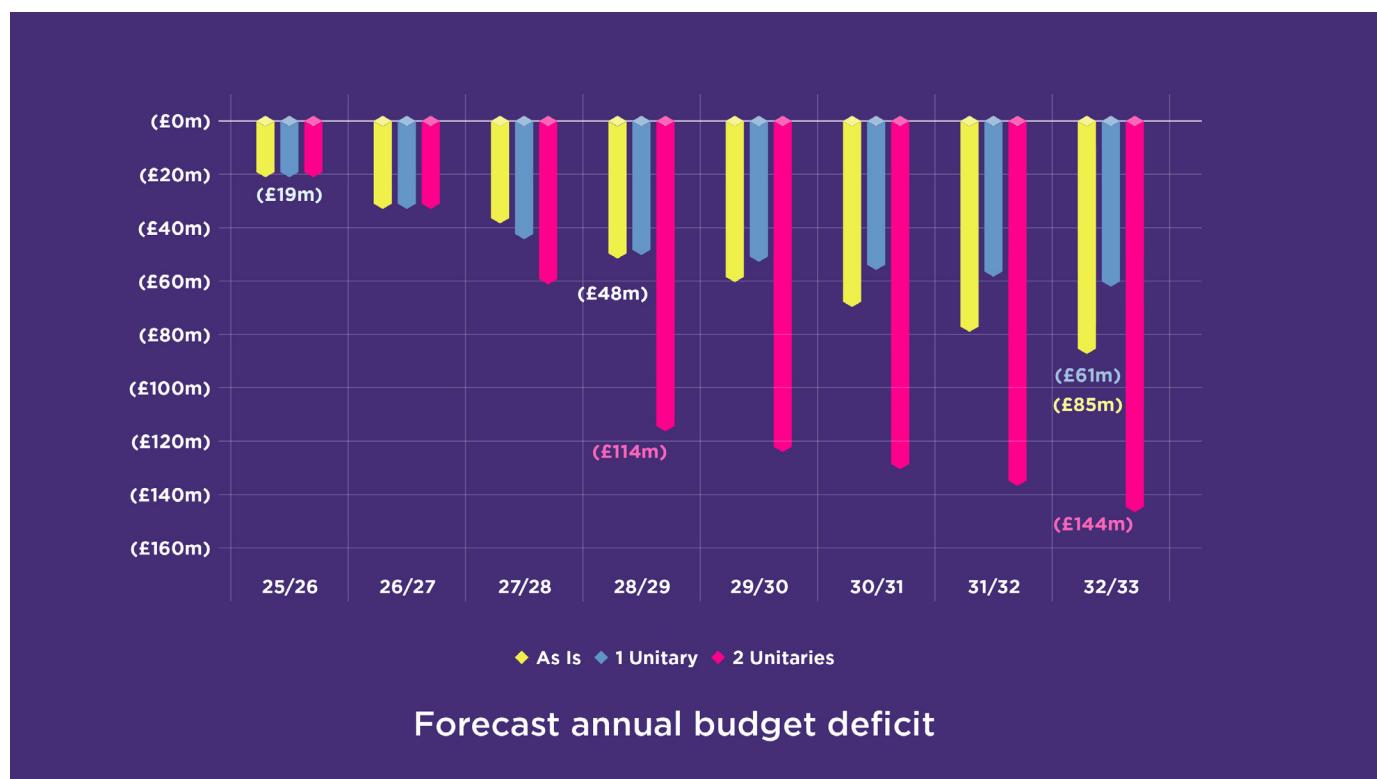
8.6 Modelling the MTFS and forecast annual budget

The above analysis focusses on the potential costs and savings generated from implementing unitarisation but does not specifically consider the underlying MTFS position.

The modelling undertaken also forecasts the potential impact on the MTFS and projects the combined reserves of the councils. This modelling is summarised below.

The cost / savings adjustments described above have been applied to the 'as-is' combined MTFS to forecast the projected MTFS position for the new unitary council(s).

The forecast annual budget deficits from the three MTFS statements for the 'as-is', one unitary and two unitary options are summarised in the chart below.



The ‘as-is’ MTFS includes a £19m annual budget deficit in 2025/26 (funded from reserves). This is forecast to increase to £48m in 2028/29 and £85m in 2032/33.

The one unitary model also forecasts an increasing annual budget deficit, but due to the net savings achieved from unitarisation, the annual budget deficit increases at a lesser rate following unitarisation, with a forecast £61m budget deficit in 2032/33, reflecting an ongoing recurring saving of £24m compared to the ‘as-is’ model and cumulative saving of £64m by 2032/33.

The two unitaries model forecasts an increasing annual budget deficit due to the additional disaggregation costs that are greater than the realisable savings. This results in an annual ongoing budget deficit in 2032/33 of £144m. This further demonstrates that the two unitaries model is not financially viable.

8.7 Impact of Social Care Costs

The ‘as-is’ model forecasts a £49m combined annual deficit for the six councils in 2028/29 and is comprised of £38m county council deficit and £11m district and borough council deficit.

The county council deficit of £38m is wholly attributable to the underfunding of social care costs and unitarisation does not address this nor introduce the additional funding required to ensure the ongoing financial sustainability of social care.

Extrapolating further, the forecast ‘as-is’ 2032/33 £85m annual budget deficit comprises £77m county council deficit attributable to social care underfunding, and £8m deficit relating to districts and borough councils.

In order to achieve future financial sustainability, it is imperative this historic social care funding shortfall is addressed through additional ongoing funding, otherwise the county council will require exceptional financial support within the next two years.

8.8 Summary and Conclusions

8.8.1 ‘One East Sussex’ Single Unitary for East Sussex option

The single unitary model provides the greatest value for money, maximising efficiency opportunities, standardisation and minimising the costs of transition and disaggregation. This option improves existing county council economies of scale and reduces net costs compared to the ‘as-is’ model.

However, without additional funding to address the existing social care budget shortfall, the single unitary model is not a financially sustainable option. Additional ongoing funding is required to achieve financial resilience and viability.

Depending on the outcomes of the fair funding review and the dedicated schools grant statutory override, the forecast position could be accelerated and exacerbated and require earlier additional funding to ensure ongoing financial sustainability prior to the creation of the new unitary.

8.8.2 Two Unitaries for East Sussex option

The two unitaries model is not financially viable due to the disaggregation costs far outweighing any savings. The two unitaries model also fails to payback implementation costs.

Specific boundaries have not been considered for the two unitaries model, as with

existing district and borough boundaries (as preferred by MHCLG) there is no equitable way to divide the population of East Sussex in equal populations across two unitaries other than, at best, a 33% / 67% split.

The two unitaries model significantly reduces savings, introduces substantial disaggregation and duplication costs and an increased transition and implementation cost.

The two unitaries option is financially unviable as disaggregation costs significantly outweigh any savings and increases the annual budget deficit rapidly, resulting in new unitary councils that would exhaust all reserves in their first year of existence, with an exponentially increasing structural budget deficit.

8.8.3 Expanded Brighton & Hove City Council option

The proposal to expand the existing footprint of Brighton & Hove City Council is not a viable option.

Additional disaggregation costs (above the cost of the single unitary model) would be incurred as, in addition to transferring a small proportion of legacy county and district / borough staff to the expanded Brighton & Hove City Council, it would also be necessary to increase some Brighton & Hove City Council staff grades to reflect increased responsibilities and new areas / locations.

There would also be diseconomies of scale across non-staff spend as legacy contracts for supplies and services would be novated and /or terminated and relet.

The implementation effort / cost required to achieve this transfer would be significant and wholly disproportionate with no recognisable benefits for residents.

In addition to the cost of implementation, this would be hugely disruptive for all councils involved and unnecessarily further drain essential scarce capacity during the broader, more significant and beneficial, implementation programme to deliver the preferred one unitary East Sussex model.



9 Implementation Plan

9.1 Overview

Delivering LGR in East Sussex will require a carefully phased, collaborative, co-designed implementation programme. Over the long term, the aim is to create a new organisation that invests more in prevention, early intervention and universal services; better harnesses digital and technological innovation to improve how services are delivered and accessed; leverages its asset base and purchasing power to secure both better value for money and more influence over the market; and can be resilient in the face of the climate emergency and future shocks. But that cannot happen overnight. Of paramount importance is the need to ensure that the new unitary authority is safe, legal, and operational from vesting day while respecting that the democratic mandate for future transformation will come after the new unitary has started electing its own councillors.

Moreover, the new organisation will be built while a new Sussex MSA is also being designed. As there will be a number of overlapping functions (e.g. housing and planning, economy and skills, and transport), there will be a need to consider how the strategic and constituent authorities can play distinct but complementary roles as their respective operating models are being developed. This parallel process has no blueprint or precedent. When earlier combined authorities were being designed, their constituent councils were generally in steady state and their officers able to play a significant role, even if their own capacity was overstretched. In future, constituent authorities will be designing themselves while collaborating on the design of their MSA while facing workforce reductions and turnover. Given a financial context that has already squeezed the corporate functions that would normally lead on organisational design to prioritise frontline services, the challenge of resourcing both unitary and MSA design without additional government support should not be underestimated.

This will require a significant change programme that ensures financial sustainability and continuation of services as well as looking to the future and ensuring together we can improve outcomes for residents.

This section outlines the proposed implementation approach, including governance, programme structure, key phases and critical dependencies. It reflects lessons from other LGR areas and is informed by the unique geography, demography, and service landscape of East Sussex.

9.1.1 Implementation objectives

- Ensure continuity of statutory services from day one.
- Minimise disruption to residents, staff, and partners and provide smooth transitions where there may be changes to how services are delivered
- Establish a single, coherent governance and operating model.
- Harmonise systems, policies, and processes across legacy councils.
- Deliver early wins and build momentum for transformation
- Embed local voice and accountability in the new structure
- Support staff through change with clear communication and engagement.
- Align with the emerging Sussex & Brighton MSA.

9.1.2 Longer-term transformation objectives

Increased investment in universal services that enhance community cohesion, civic pride and improve the public realm

- Reduced spending on acute services by investing more in prevention and early intervention to secure better resident outcomes
- Application of digital and technological innovation to enable the development and delivery of services that better reflect the way residents live their lives and the way businesses operate
- To generate more economic prosperity by presenting an even more united voice and reduce any barriers to growth from real or perceived fragmentation or friction

9.1.3 Indicative Implementation timeline

Phase	Timeline	Focus
1. Statutory consultation on reorganisation proposals	Q4 2025 – Q1 2026 (Government guidance indicates consultation will run from November 2025 to January 2026)	Communications and resident engagement
2. Mobilisation and design planning	Q4 2025 – Q1 2026	Programme governance, early engagement, risk mitigation, and transition planning.
3. Transition	Q2 2026 – Vesting Day (April 2028)	TUPE and workforce planning, service continuity, ICT and systems integration, finance and HR harmonisation, branding, and communications.
4. Future proofing	Vesting Day – 2029	Strategic redesign of services, digital transformation, estate rationalisation, and delivery of long-term benefits.

9.1.4 Programme Governance

Implementation will be delivered through a robust programme delivery approach with an appropriate level of oversight and governance. This means establishing a clear and well understood decision-making framework supported by a risk register, and benefits realisation plan. Trade Unions and partners will also be engaged with as part of activity.

9.1.5 Key Workstreams

Workstream	Purpose
Democracy, Legal & Governance	Structural Change Orders, constitution drafting, electoral planning, and governance design. This would also include the induction of members.
Finance	Budget setting, council tax harmonisation, reserves strategy.
People & Culture	TUPE planning, pay and grading review, organisational design, staff onboarding and engagement.
IT & Digital	Systems mapping, data migration, cyber security, and digital service design.
Assets, Estates & Commercial	Property rationalisation, asset transfer protocols, facilities management and procurement alignment.
Communications and engagement	Branding, resident communications and public engagement.
Service Continuity & customer service	Mapping critical services, identifying risks, and ensuring safe delivery on vesting day.
Partnerships	Maintaining and developing partnerships within East Sussex and across the region
Locality Working	Community networks, town and parish councils and community engagement.

9.1.6 Implementation and Transition Costs

Initial modelling suggests that implementation and transition costs will be £68m, depending on the pace of integration and the extent of transformation. These costs will cover programme management, ICT investment, legal and HR support, transitional staffing and other factors set out in the table in paragraph 8.5.2.

A detailed financial plan will be developed in partnership with MHCLG, with a request for transitional funding to avoid drawing down on local reserves.

9.1.7 Risks and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
Service disruption	Early continuity planning and dual running where necessary
Staff retention	Clear communication, early appointments, and retention incentives
Cultural misalignment	Joint values framework and organisational development
ICT failure	Phased integration and robust testing
Reputational risk	Transparent engagement with residents and partners

9.1.8 Detailed Timeline and Milestones

Date	Milestone	Description
November 2025	Launch of statutory consultation on LGR proposal(s)	The Secretary of State is required to consult any council affected that has not submitted the proposal, as well as any other persons considered appropriate, before a proposal can be implemented.
Autumn 2025	Government Order to postpone county and Hastings borough elections (TBC)	Postponement is being requested by the relevant councils.
January 2026	Close of statutory consultation	Government guidance has not committed to a specific date.
March 2026	Government decision on which proposal to be implemented	Based on current Government timeline, subject to Parliamentary approval.
May 2026	Mayoral Election	Hold Mayoral elections for the new MCCA.
May 2026	Legal Orders Drafted	Begin drafting Structural Change Order (SCO) in consultation with MHCLG.
June 2026	Programme Mobilisation	Establish Programme Board and confirm governance structure.
June 2026	Programme Plan Finalised	Publish detailed implementation roadmap and risk register.
August 2026	Staff Engagement Launch	Begin formal staff engagement, information and TUPE planning.
August 2026	Baseline Data Consolidation	Complete mapping of services, contracts, assets, and workforce.
September 2026	ICT Systems Audit	Complete audit of digital infrastructure and begin integration planning.

October 2026	Draft Constitution	Begin drafting new constitution and governance framework.
November 2026	Council Tax Harmonisation Modelling	Finalise modelling scenarios and begin public communications.
March 2027	Structural change order made and Implementation Teams appointed	These must be set up no later than 21 days after the structural change order comes into force
June 2027	TUPE Consultation Begins	Begin formal consultation with staff and unions.
December 2027	Service Continuity Plans Signed Off	All critical services have continuity plans in place.
May 2027	Elections	Hold elections
January 2028	Branding and Communications Rollout	Launch new branding, website, and resident communications.
February 2028	Budget Approved	Approve first unified budget for the new authority.
March 2028	Final Testing and Readiness Review	Conduct final readiness checks across all workstreams.
April 2028	Vesting Day	New unitary authority becomes operational.



10 Conclusion

10.1 Proposed Partnership with Government

To ensure the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of the proposed single unitary model, we can only achieve the improved outcomes and financial efficiencies if government are able to provide:

- **Support to address the structural deficit**, including immediate real term increases in the overall funding which are not disproportionately reliant on Council Tax increases and reflect unavoidable additional costs resulting from national factors beyond local control, including changes in the National Living Wage and employer National Insurance Contributions; funding that accurately reflects levels of need, the cost of delivering national reforms and allows investment in prevention; and targeted funding for deprivation and feasible delivery timescales, including the allocated Levelling Up Partnerships, Plan for Neighbourhoods and Future Towns Funds in the immediate term.
- **Transitional funding** to support implementation costs, including programme management, ICT investment, and workforce transition, as set out in section 9.1.6
- **Confirmation that the transition to a new unitary council will be undertaken by East Sussex County Council operating as a a Continuing Authority** until a new organisation has been put in place, consistent with Government guidance.
- **Speed of decision making.** We want and need to do the work at pace and it is in the interests of our residents that we do so, but it will need a matching commitment from the Government to operate at pace, make decisions and provide timely feedback;
- **Effective and joined up discussions with government departments as well as MHCLG.** Streamlined and joined-up access to the right people especially so there is consistency with advice being given to other authorities on the DPP.
- **Temporary protection from any negative impacts of the Government's proposed funding reforms.** Our ability to manage negative financial adjustments which flow from any new distribution methodology will be severely limited. We would also welcome early discussions on the amount of the grant funding each council would receive on day one to assist with early financial planning.
- **Clarity on the future of health system reforms** and how they will align with the new governance structure.
- **Support for community governance reviews.**
- **Flexibility on council tax harmonisation**, allowing the new authority to manage the transition equitably and sustainably.
- **Early engagement on devolution opportunities**, including the role of East Sussex within the emerging Sussex & Brighton MSA.

10.2 Conclusion

This business case presents a compelling, evidence-based proposal for LGR in East Sussex. It reflects a shared vision across all submitting councils and is rooted in the principles of financial sustainability, service integration, and community empowerment.

The preferred 'One East Sussex' model of a single unitary authority for East Sussex offers the strongest platform for transformation, based on the existing district and borough Council boundaries. It enables whole-system thinking and delivery, allowing for the integration of services such as housing, social care, education, and public health. This will lead to improved outcomes for residents, particularly in areas of high need, by reducing duplication, enabling earlier intervention, and supporting more strategic commissioning.

While the financial modelling highlights a long-term structural deficit, it also shows that, when social care is excluded from consideration, the case for a single unitary becomes more compelling. The model delivers a positive return on investment, aligns with national policy, and positions East Sussex to play a leading role in regional growth and devolution.

We recognise that reorganisation alone is not a single solution to East Sussex's financial position. Sustained financial sustainability will require fairer funding allocations, transitional support, and continued innovation. However, this proposal provides a clear and credible path forward that is deliverable, locally supported, and designed to meet the needs of East Sussex's communities now and in the future.





**This business case prepared with the assistance
of the Roretti consultancy.**

Image ref:

- Page 5 Arial view of Hastings
- Page 7 Arial view of Lewes
- Page 8 - Chailey Common
- Page 10 - Cade Street, Heathfield
- Page 24 Colonnade Bexhill
- Page 25 Older man filling in form
- Page 27 Eastbourne rooftops
- Page 28 Newhaven Marina
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- Page 30 Newhaven aerial view
- Page 32 Bexhill refuse collectors
- Page 33 Mermaid Street, Rye
- Page 35 Crowborough High Street
- Page 38 Hastings Library
- Page 50 Battle High Street
- Page 64 Forest Row
- Page 69 Ashdown Forest
- Page 71 Clockwise from top left:
 - Eastbourne seafront
 - Seaford seafront
 - Hastings town centre
 - Seaford library