

Update and News

Local Government Reorganisation

You will remember that Government is proposing to change the system of local government so that district councils like Wealden are abolished, being replaced by unitary councils. These would deliver all the services currently done so by East Sussex County Council and Wealden. Government asked for proposals as to what a re-organised system would look like to be submitted by 26th September. Three have developed:

- One East Sussex council covering all the area currently served by the county council (led by East Sussex County Council),
- The establishment of five unitary councils across the whole of East and West Sussex and Brighton (led by Brighton and Hove Council),
- A “federated model” with the County council being abolished and the current districts and boroughs working together to deliver all services (led by independents in Hastings).

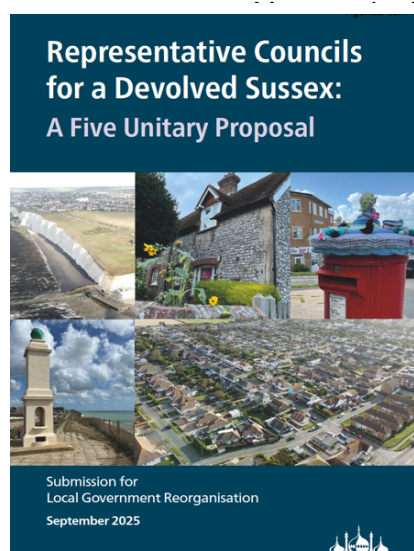
After careful consideration of all the proposals – which were very complex – Wealden councillors decided that they couldn’t support any of the proposals in their current state. The Government’s timetable meant that we had only a short time to look at them and they didn’t take account of other changes taking place in the way councils are funded and business rates are distributed. In our opinion the whole process has been rushed with Government changing its demands along the way.

We felt the proposal for a single East Sussex would establish a very large and remote council. Whilst we sympathised with the idea of smaller councils, close to residents, we had literally only a few days to look at the Brighton model. The ‘elephants in the room’ are that none of the proposals address the long-term underfunding of local authorities nor resolve the crisis in adult and children’s social care.

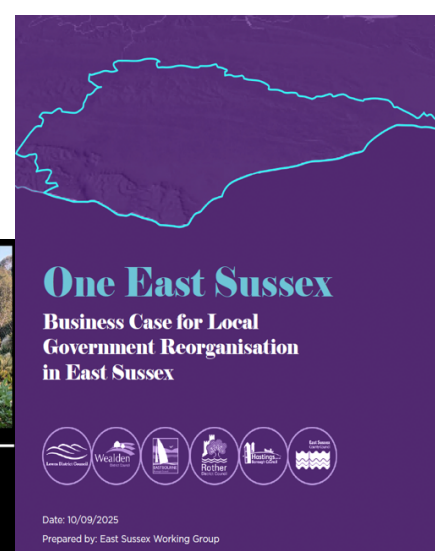
This doesn’t mean the process stops! Government will make a decision one way or the other as to which model it supports, following a consultation period next year, and councils will have to work together to make it happen, ready to start work in April 2028. Elections to these new councils are planned for 2027.

You can look at the different proposals here

<https://council.wealden.gov.uk/mgChooseDocPack.aspx?ID=6008>



LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION DISTRICT AND BOROUGH MODEL



Councillor Grants

Each councillor has been given £10,000 to help fund local projects in their ward. For this year I have now decided to support three initiatives from the Buxted Primary School, the Buxted Scouts and St. Marys Church Hall.

Supporting local business with council spending

Wealden District Council has been ranked first place nationally for spending with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), and second in the southeast of England for local spending. The data comes from an independent data collection agency, Tusell.

It is a council priority is to support local businesses and SMEs, so just under half of the total £52 million spent in 2024/25 was with local suppliers based within East Sussex and its neighbours – £4.8 million was spent directly with Wealden-based businesses.

The East Sussex Procurement Hub (ESPH) is a shared service to Wealden and other local authorities in the area. It works collaboratively to promote the use of local suppliers, actively engage with local SMEs and ensures smarter procurement – which has saved more than £1.2 million on insurance, construction/ infrastructure works, housing stock and other council services.

Funding boost from developer contributions

Developer financial contributions negotiated and managed by Wealden District Council are being used to support communities in Wealden.

Developer contributions, or S106 agreements, are negotiated by the planning authority with developers to mitigate impacts on larger development sites, to provide critical infrastructure projects, housing or community services so developers have to pay for necessary improvements to get planning permission.

As a result, Wealden District Council has recently authorised a number of payments including to Uckfield College. They will receive £217,707 to expand the capacity of their specialist facility for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Supporting Ashdown Forest

We have committed to providing £450,000 to the Ashdown Forest Foundation to support the protection and preservation of Ashdown Forest ensuring it remains a place and natural beauty for future generations.

This investment will help deliver a wide-reaching educational and cultural programme, designed to celebrate the centenary of Winnie-the-Pooh in 2026, while safeguarding the landscape that inspired the story. Funding will also support a refreshed volunteer programme, conservation efforts, and creative training and community projects—ensuring more people can connect with both the Forest and the arts.



Community Infrastructure Fund

My last update mentioned Wealden's new Community-led Infrastructure Fund. The £2m fund aims to support small and medium sized organisations to pay for improvements such as adapting buildings, energy efficiency measures, improved access to outdoor spaces, or new facilities and equipment. I know of one project from Buxted that is making an application, but the fund is still open for further applications. If you want further information, please email CLIF@wealden.gov.uk and also let me know!

Wealden in debt?

Despite some broadcast media reports and social media “commentators” getting rather excited, Wealden’s finances are in a much better position than many surrounding authorities. To explain:

In effect WDC is two "companies". WDC Housing - which does its accounting via the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and which provides housing at social rents; and WDC General - which does its accounting via the General Fund (GF) and which collects the bins, provides the car parks, the leisure centres, does the food hygiene checks and licences taxi drivers, and builds the Sports Hub, etc..

There is a very solid "wall", backed by legislation between the HRA and the GF. You can't use one to fund the other!

All of WDC's debt is on the HRA side only, and that is effectively self-financing via rental income. Debt only in the sense that your mortgage is a debt!

In the past there was some GF debt - where WDC borrowed to lend to Sussex Weald Homes, at a profit. SWH loans are currently funded from WDC reserves not via borrowing. There is no GF debt now and there is no intent to change that. Nothing, no projects, no services, on the GF side are funded by debt.

Five Ash Down Post Office and Shop

While a precise figure for just village shop closures in 2024 isn't available, the Centre for Retail Research reported 13,479 total shop closures across the UK in 2024, a significant increase from the previous year. These figures cover high streets, towns, and villages, and the majority of these were independent retailers, indicating a severe economic pressure on small businesses that operate in rural areas and villages.

Given the lifeline village shops and post offices represent, I was pleased to support plans to restructure and expand the shop and post office in Five Ash Down. The development does mean that the post office will close for a few weeks – 6th to the 28th November.

Please don't hesitate to **contact me** to discuss these or any other issues important to you.
Contact me on cllr.graham.shaw@wealden.gov.uk Tel. 07770 571828
Wealden's website is www.wealden.gov.uk