

East Sussex Insights pack



01

Introduction

Executive Summary

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

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

East Sussex Overview

Ageing Population

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

Housing and Temporary Accommodation

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

Health and Social Care Demand

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

Transport and Access

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

Economic Disparities

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

Diversity and Inclusion

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

Strategic Implications for LGR

1. Demographic and Geographic Complexity

- East Sussex has a significantly older population, with high concentrations of residents aged 65 and over, and 85 and over.
- Rural geography and economic disparities are likely to increase the cost and complexity of delivering services across the county.

2. Need for Locally Responsive Integration

- Population needs vary widely, from ageing and isolated communities in Rother and Wealden to younger, more diverse, and deprived populations in Hastings and Eastbourne.
- A future governance model must integrate services like housing, social care, and transport while remaining responsive to local differences.

3. Financial Sustainability and Disparity

- Financial viability varies across districts and boroughs. Wealden maintains strong reserves, while Hastings and Eastbourne face significant financial pressures.
- A unitary authority must manage these disparities transparently to ensure fair resource distribution and avoid perceptions of inequity.

4. Trade-Offs in a Constrained Budget Environment

- Budget constraints will likely force difficult decisions, especially around discretionary services.
- Non-statutory services such as leisure, culture, green spaces, and community assets are often the first to face cuts, despite their role in prevention and wellbeing.
- Reducing these services could lead to long-term costs, particularly for vulnerable populations.

5. Preserving Local Identity and Engagement

- Strong local identities and civic participation are deeply rooted in districts such as Lewes and Wealden.
- A larger governance structure risks diluting this engagement unless mechanisms are built in to preserve local voice and accountability.

02

Council Demographic Insights

East Sussex County Council

Demography



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



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



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

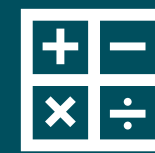
Service Delivery Challenges



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



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



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

Opportunities



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



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



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

Challenges



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



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



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

Eastbourne Borough Council

Demography



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



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



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

Service Delivery Challenges



Housing challenges:
359 households in temporary accommodation



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



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

Opportunities



Leverage diversity
to enhance inclusive service design



Invest in youth employment and vocational training

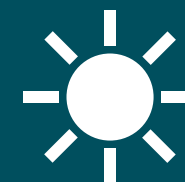


Strengthen partnerships with education and health providers

Challenges



Housing affordability and quality remain persistent challenges



Seasonal economy creates **service delivery fluctuations**



Need for culturally competent services and engagement

Lewes District Council



Demography



Balanced age profile with pockets of affluence and deprivation with a mix of urban and rural communities

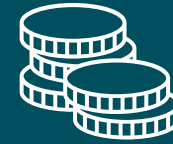


Environmentally conscious population: with strong civic engagement and active voluntary and community sector



Highest rate of frailty in county (121.2)

Service Delivery Challenges



Financially solvent according to general fund reserves of 2023 unaudited accounts



Planning appeals: 36.6% major planning applications overturned on appeal



Strong performance in environmental health and air quality

Opportunities



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



Improve planning consistency through **clear policy standardisation**



Build on civic engagement for co-designed services

Challenges



Addressing **inequalities** between urban and rural areas



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



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

Wealden District Council

Demography



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



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



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

Service Delivery Challenges



Best performing district in waste recycling (48.2%)



Rural isolation impacts access to services



Growth in both children and working age populations

Opportunities



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



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

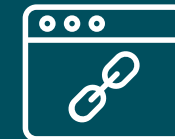


Opportunity to **explore devolved decision making** to ward councillors

Challenges



Rurality increases cost and complexity of service delivery



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



Need for tailored health and social care models

Rother District Council

Demography



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



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



Fragmented sense of identity due to different urban/rural needs

Service Delivery Challenges



Housing challenges:
160 households in temporary accommodation



Reaching isolated areas of deprivation in rural communities



Strong community networks: but limited transport infrastructure

Opportunities



Improve rural transport and community outreach



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



Maintain and enhance strong social capital VCSE

Challenges



Infrastructure gaps in housing



Health Needs:
Risk of social isolation and unmet care needs



Address skills and lack of quality employment across district

Hastings Borough Council



Demography



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



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



Children and young people expected to decline by 5.6%

Service Delivery Challenges



Poorer health outcomes: especially in mental health and child wellbeing



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



Lowest recycling rates and highest residual waste

Opportunities



Targeted regeneration and **levelling up investment**



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



Strengthen housing support and community safety in most deprived areas

Challenges



Persistent deprivation and health inequalities



Landslide challenges: appropriate budgetary planning for slope stabilisation projects



Balancing **regeneration** with affordability and inclusion

2.2 Themes from CEX and Leader meetings

Summary of themes (1)

1. Strategic vision and local identity

Common Themes:

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

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

2. Localism and community engagement

Common Themes:

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

Risks:

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

3. Housing and homelessness

Common Themes:

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

Opportunities:

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

4. Financial sustainability and risk

Common Themes:

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

Risks:

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

Summary of themes (2)

5. Service Delivery and Transformation

Opportunities:

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

Risks:

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

6. Governance and representation

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

Suggestions:

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

7. Engagement and Public Perception

Common Themes:

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

8. Political Dynamics and Alternative Models

Common Themes:

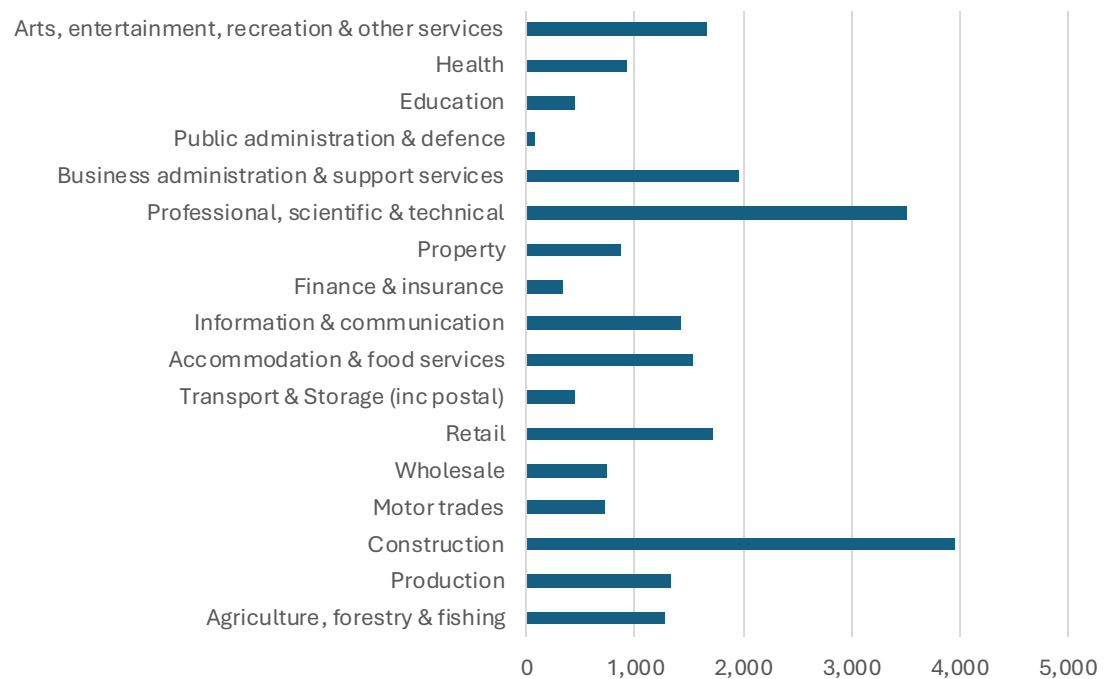
- **Tensions Around the East Sussex Model:** Hastings and Wealden expressed interest in exploring alternatives (e.g. federated or coastal models).
- **Perceived Predetermination:** Some councillors felt the process was being driven by a pre-agreed agenda (e.g. "Lewis-County pact").

3 Appendices: Data Sources

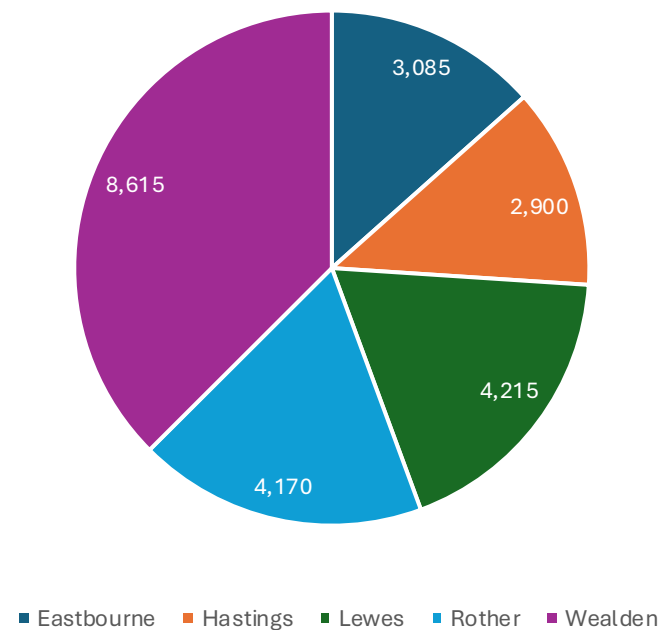
The figures presented in this report are based on the most recent publicly available data, including mid-2023 population estimates and area measurements from the 2021 Census. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, these figures are subject to change as new data becomes available or as methodologies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

Businesses in East Sussex

Number of Businesses in East Sussex by Sector

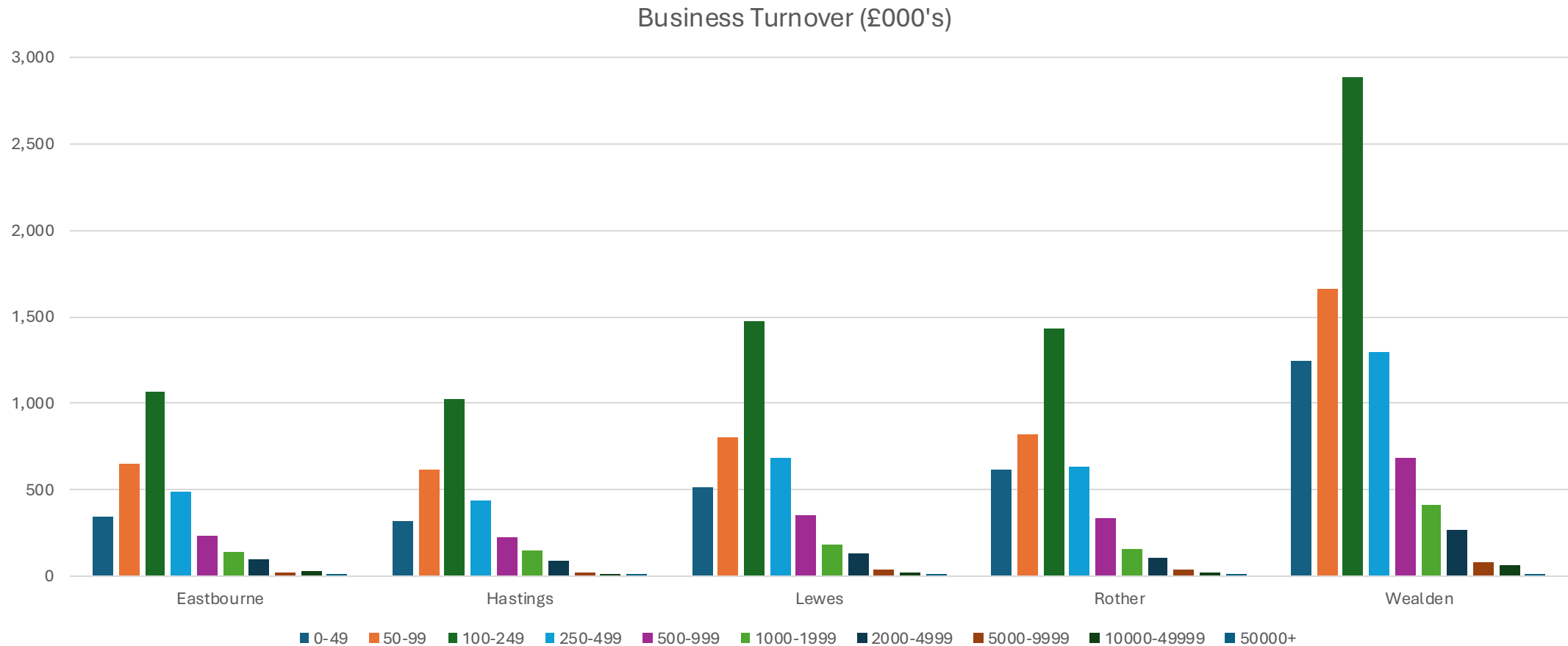


Number of Businesses by District



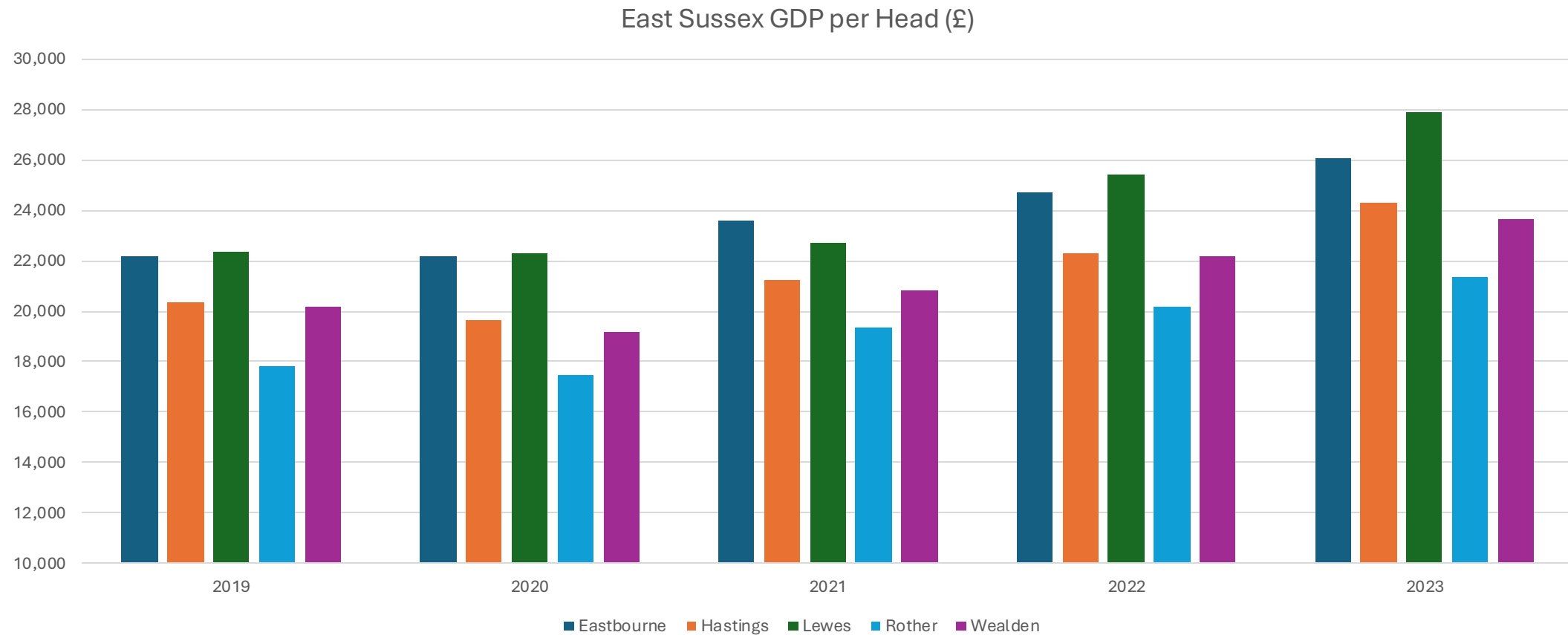
Source: [UK business: activity, size and location - Office for National Statistics](#)

Businesses in East Sussex



Source: [UK business: activity, size and location - Office for National Statistics](#)

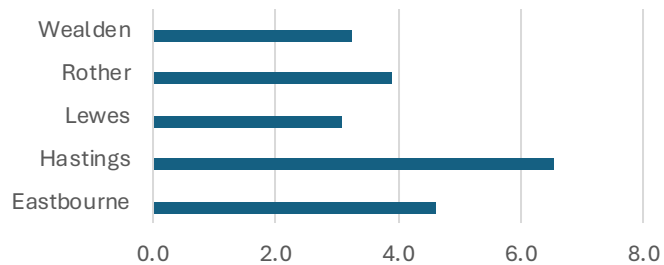
East Sussex GDP



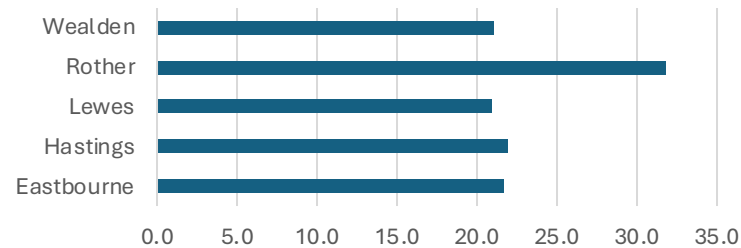
Source: [Regional economic activity by gross domestic product, UK: 1998 to 2023](#)

Labour Market Indicators

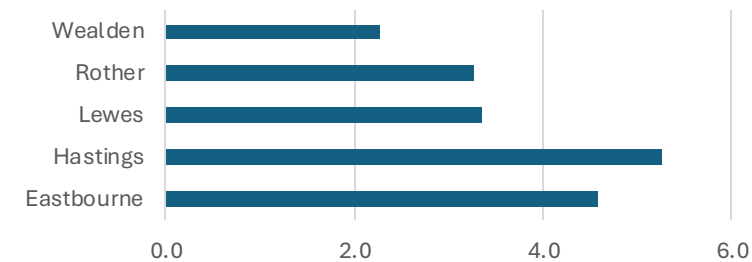
Unemployment rate
age 16 and older
January 2024 to December 2024
%



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

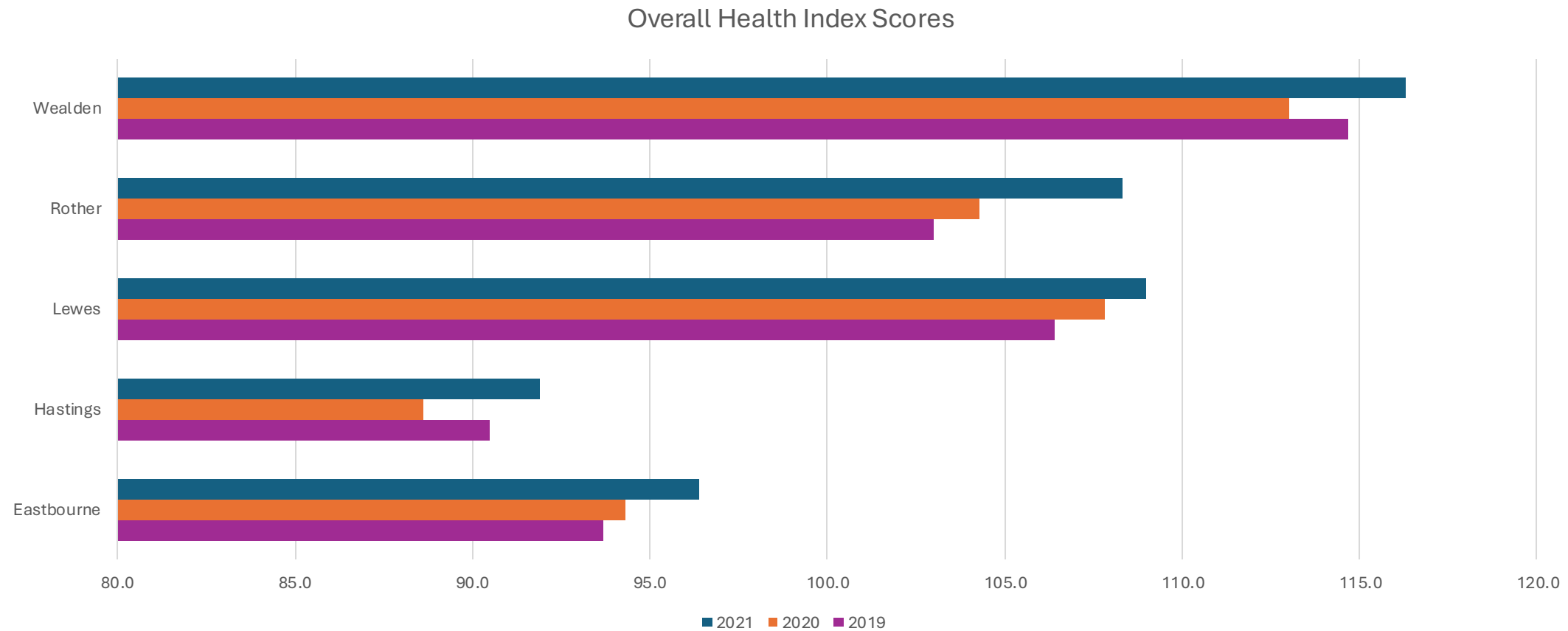


Claimant Count proportion
January 2024 to December 2024
%



Source: [ONS, Employment and Labour Market](#)

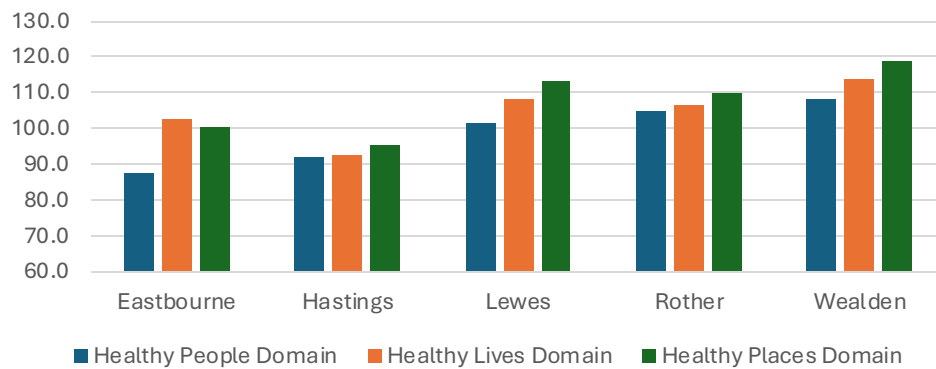
Health Index Scores



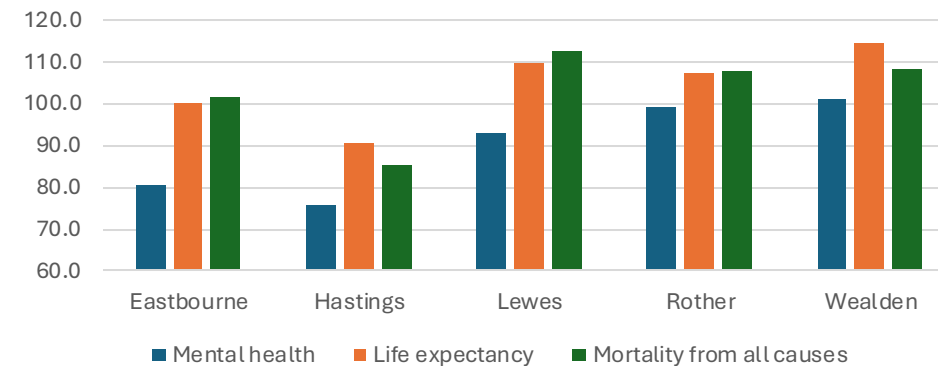
Source: [Health in England: 2015 to 2021](#)

Detailed Health Index Scores

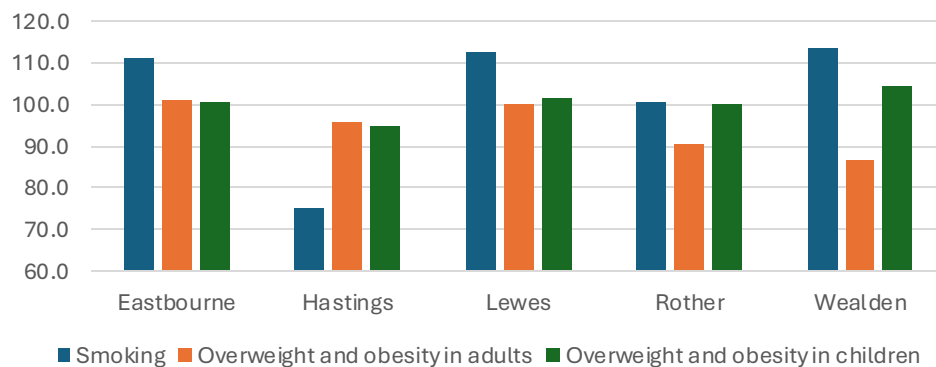
Place-based Health



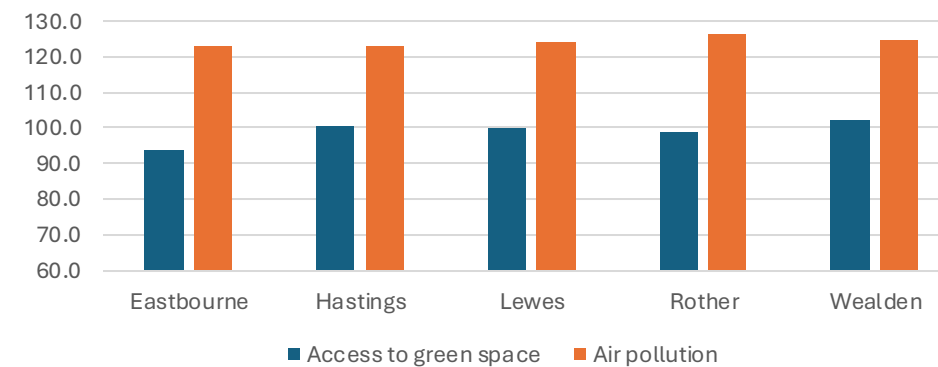
Mental Health & Mortality



Physical Health & Lifestyle



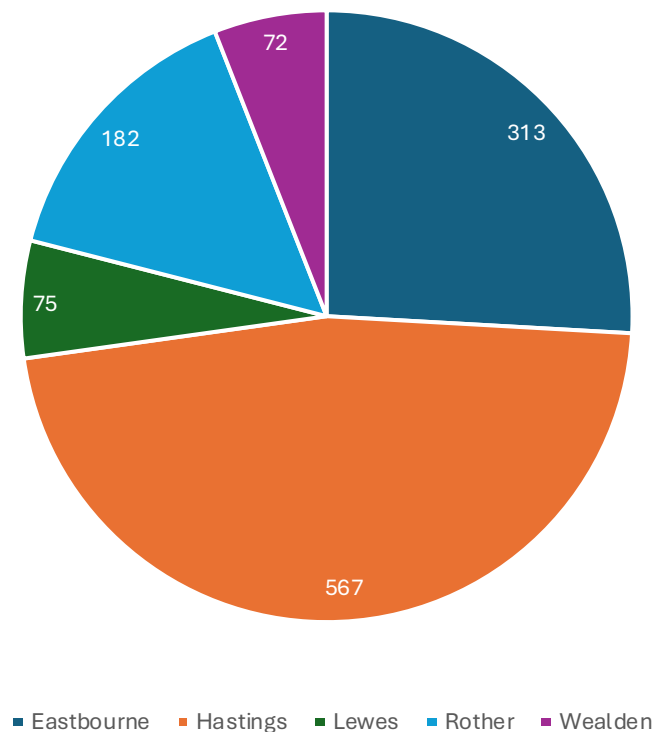
Environment



Source: [Health in England: 2015 to 2021](#)

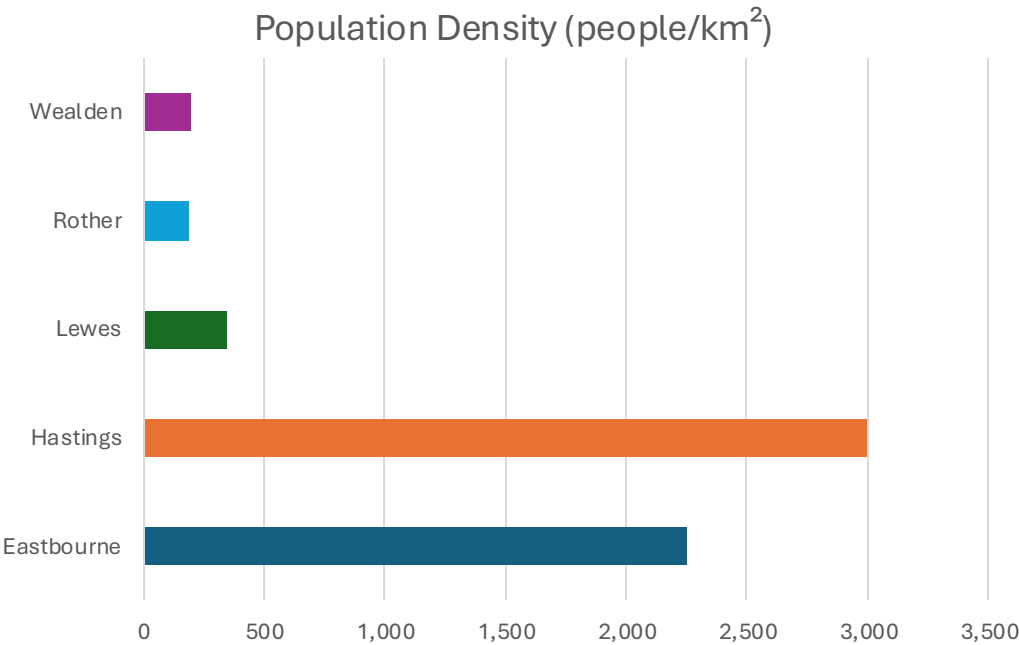
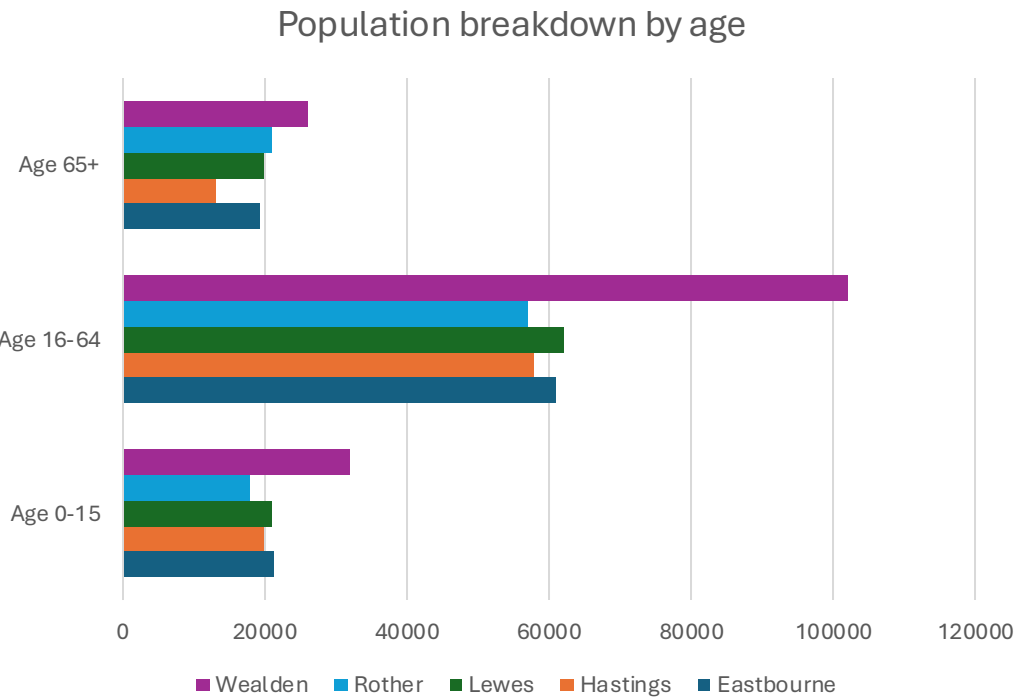
Temporary Accommodation

Number of Households in Temporary Accommodation



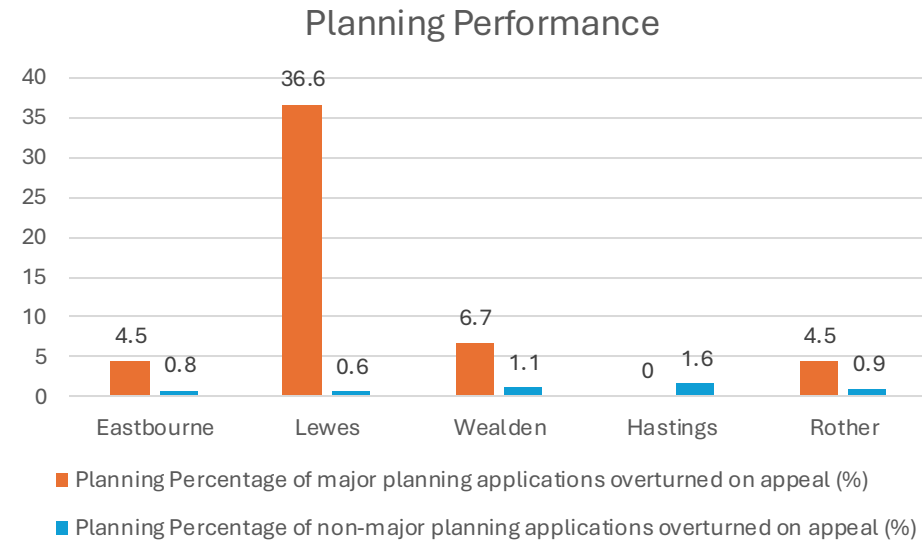
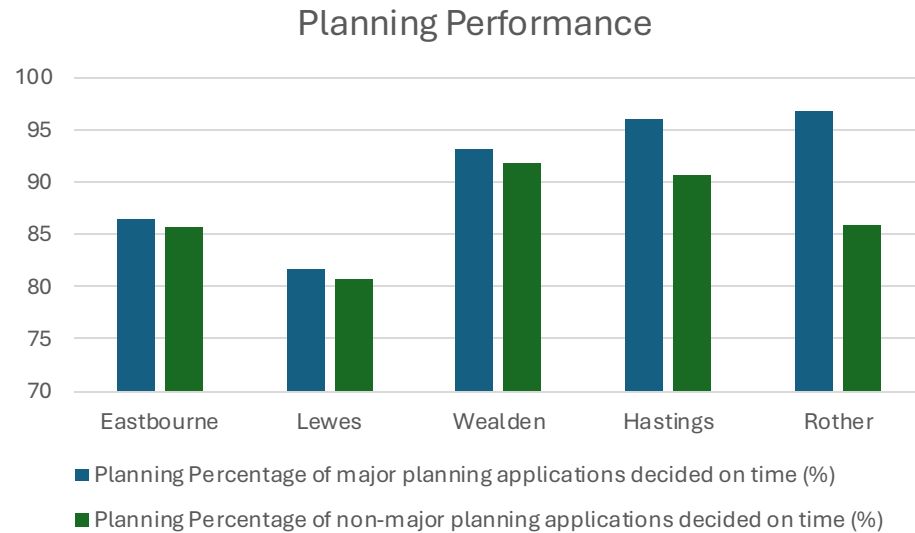
Source: [Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2025](#)

Population Profile



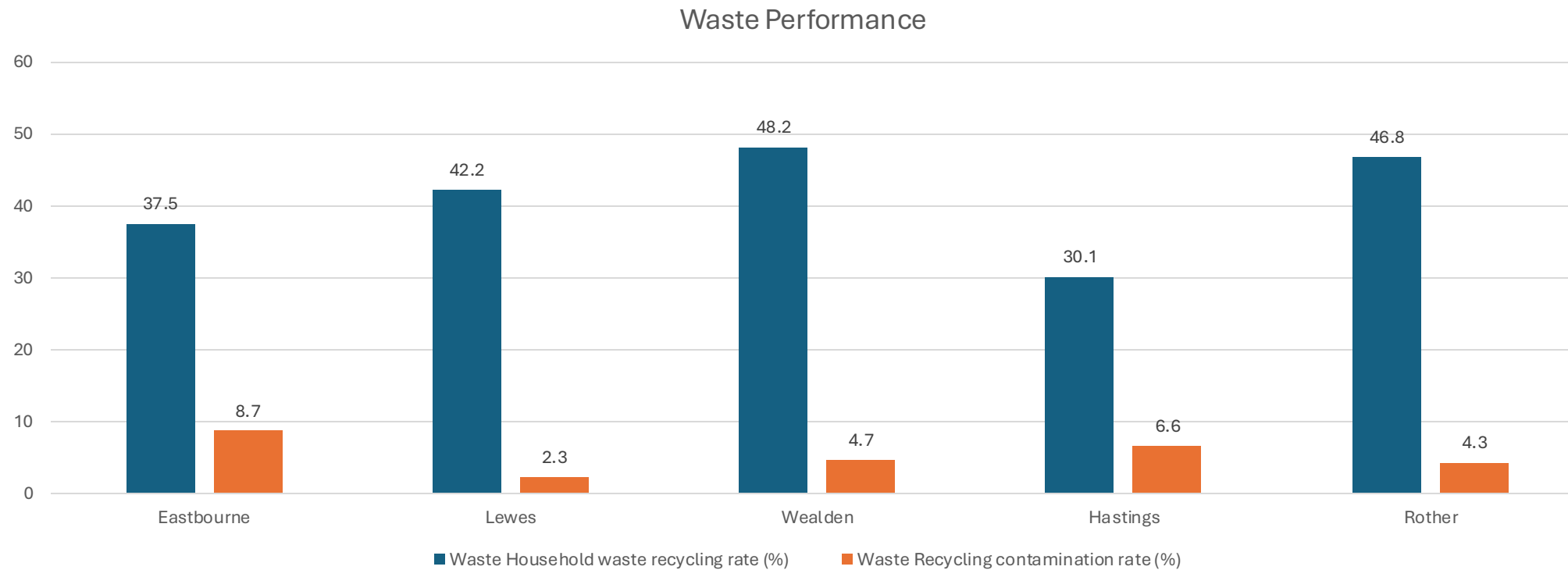
Source: [Population profiles for local authorities in England](#)

District Performance: Planning



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

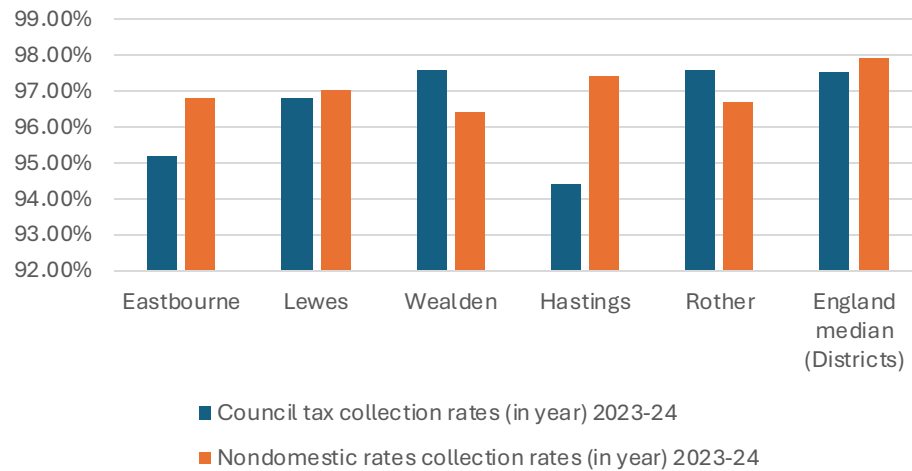
District Performance: Waste



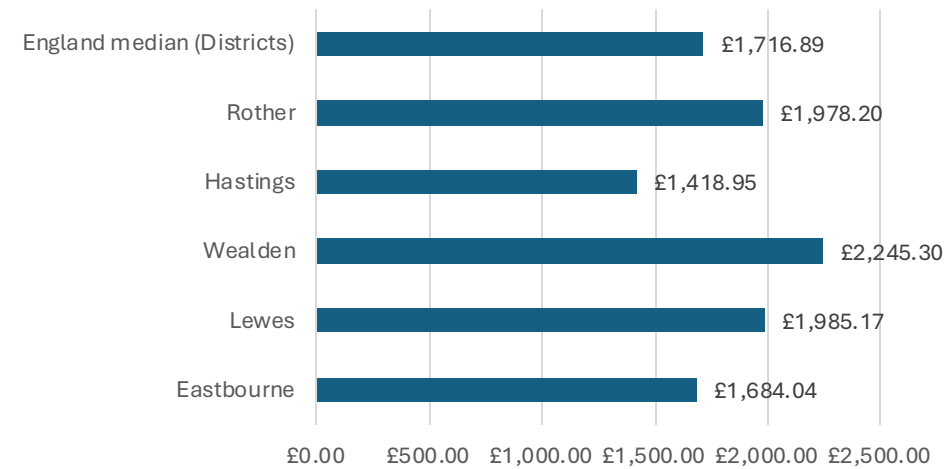
Source: <https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?>

District Performance: Council Tax & NNDR

Council tax & NNDR collection rates (%)



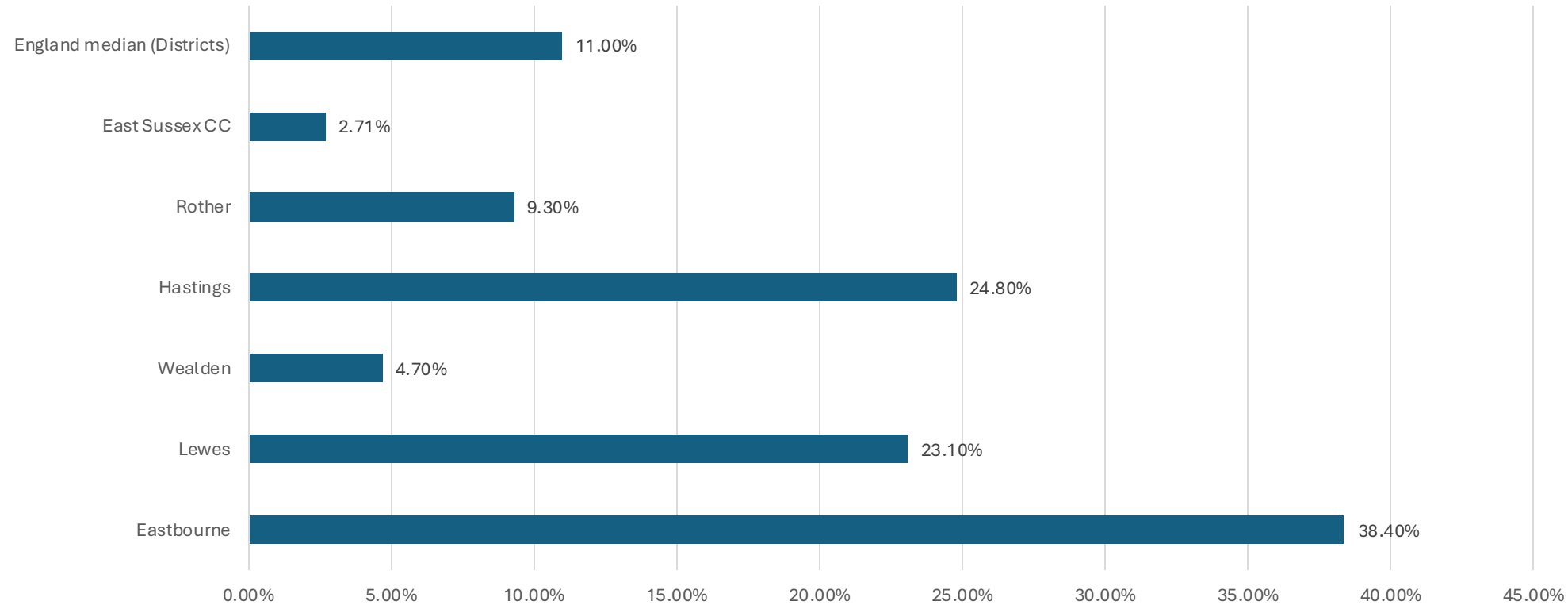
Council tax revenue per dwelling 2023-24



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

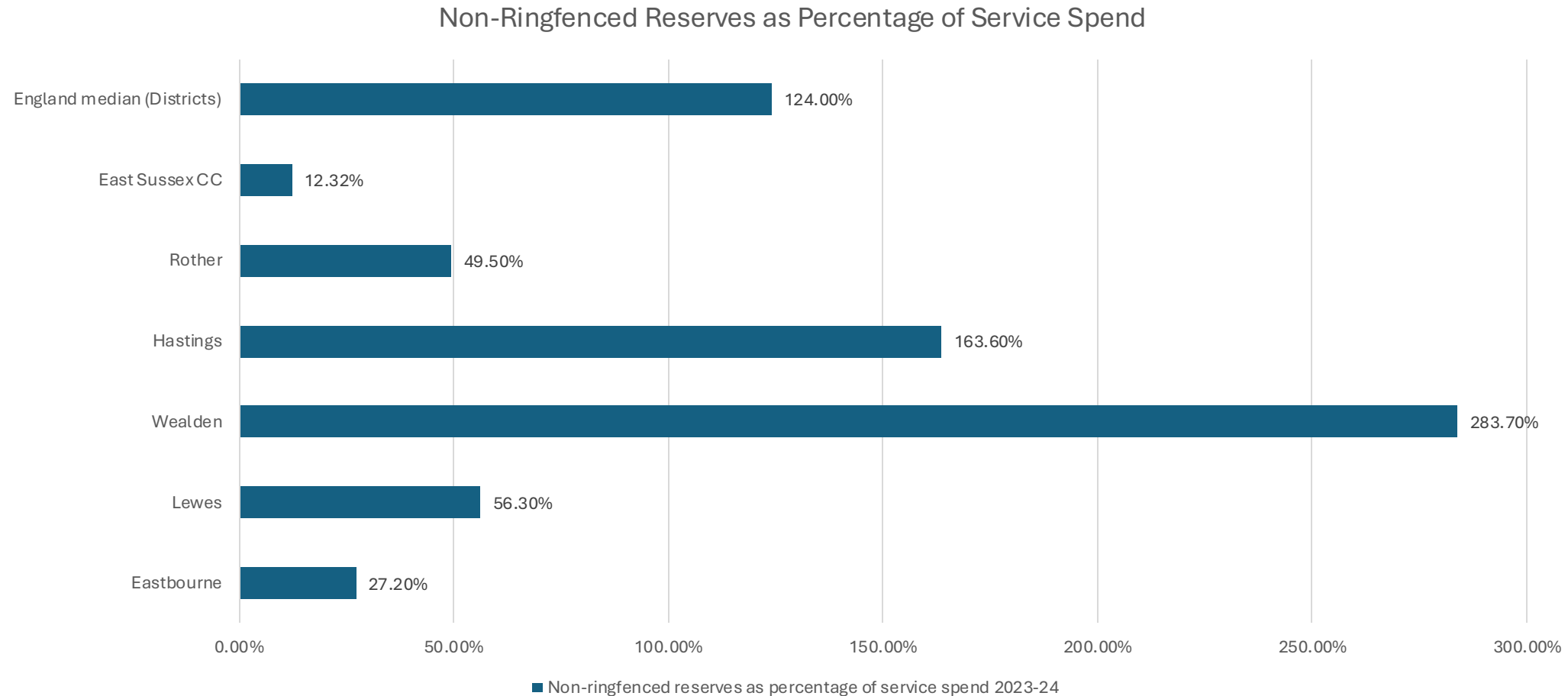
Council Spending Power

Debt servicing as percentage of core spending power 2023-24



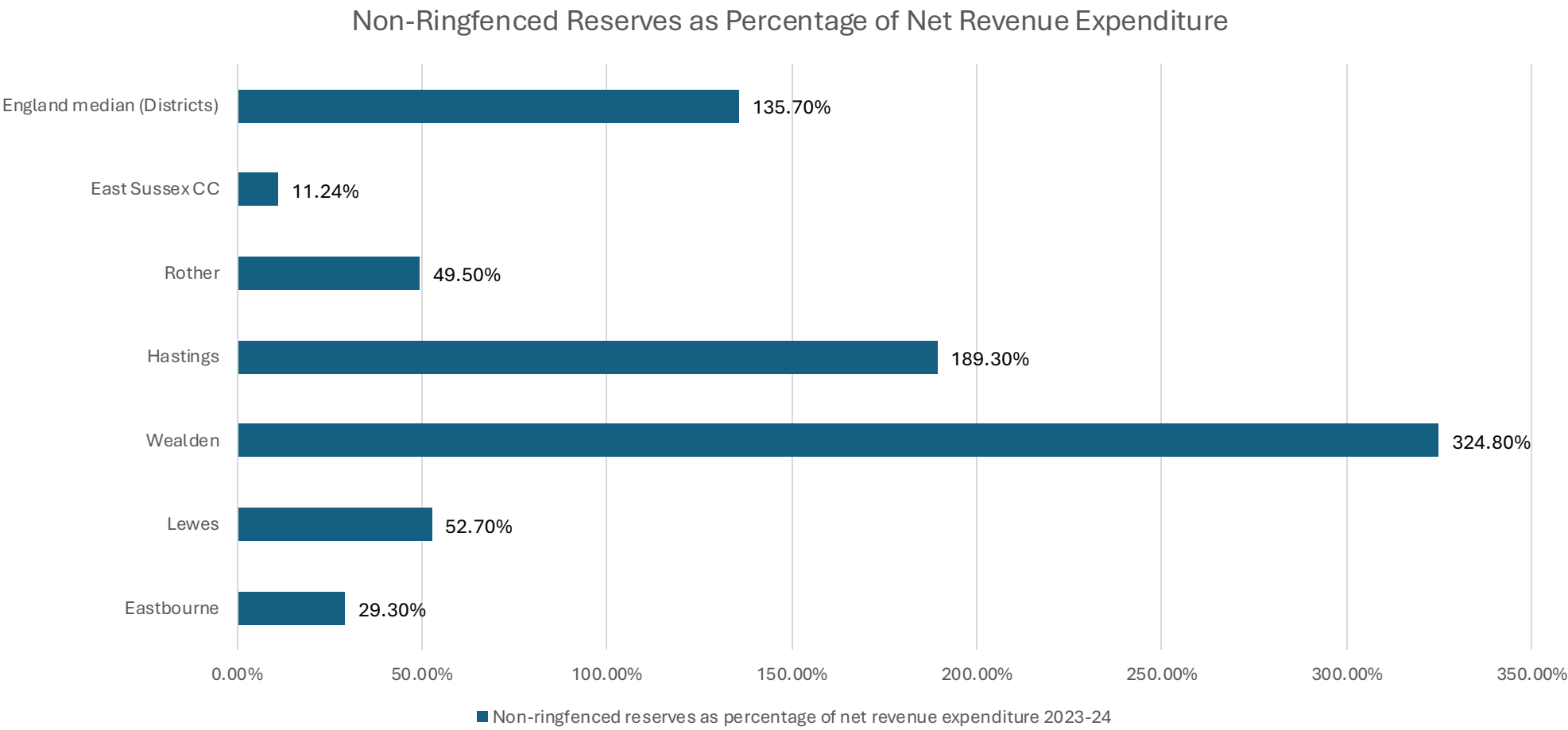
Source: <https://oflog.data.gov.uk/?>

Council Spending Power



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