

Shaping West Sussex: The Case for a Two-Unitary Model

Foreword

This covering report presents the compelling, evidence-based case for a two-unitary model of local government in West Sussex. It draws on evidence from across the programme to demonstrate that creating two new unitary councils is the most effective way to build a sustainable, responsive, and ambitious future for our county. This model is not a compromise; it is a deliberate design to create councils of the 'right size' - large enough to be strategic and efficient, yet small enough to be genuinely connected to the communities they serve. All proponents of a two-unitary system can unite behind this vision, which prioritises local identity, democratic accountability, and transformative public service reform.

Aligning with West Sussex's Economic Geography

A two-unitary model is strategically strong because it acknowledges and aligns with the county's varied economic landscape. West Sussex does not function as a single economic unit; it comprises at least two distinct economic corridors

- A coastal/downs economic zone links the communities of Chichester, Arun, Worthing, and Adur along the A27 corridor. These areas share interconnected labour markets and strong sectoral ties in tourism, advanced manufacturing, the marine economy, rural economy and healthcare.
- A central Sussex corridor, part of the Gatwick Diamond, connects Crawley, Horsham, and Mid Sussex. This area is defined by strong transport links like the M23/A23 and the Brighton Main Line, and shared strengths in aviation, logistics, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, and digital industries.

A single, large unitary authority would be forced to reconcile these diverse and disconnected economies, leading to diluted priorities and a one-size-fits-all approach that serves neither region optimally. In contrast, a two-unitary structure respects the principles of economic geography, enabling each authority to develop coherent strategies tailored to its unique characteristics.

Unlocking Targeted Economic Growth

The West Sussex Economic Strategy (2025-2035) identifies ambitions to "Grow high value sectors and distinctive clusters" and "boost green innovation". A two-unitary model provides the focused leadership necessary to achieve these goals.

Each unitary could pursue targeted investment in its specific high-growth sectors.

- The central Sussex unitary could concentrate on its specialisms in aviation and logistics, life sciences, and digital technologies, creating joint investment opportunities in skills, apprenticeships, and training hubs to address its specific challenges.
- The coastal/downs unitary could focus on growing its visitor and marine economies, supporting advanced manufacturing clusters, and developing its creative industries and green growth opportunities, such as nature-based tourism.

This model also respects the vital role of the rural economy, including the land-based sector, horticulture, and viticulture, which are significant contributors to the county's character and output. Two authorities can better integrate the needs of rural enterprise into their distinct economic plans, avoiding the risk of these priorities being lost within a single, centralised administration.

A Stronger Partnership for Devolution and Strategic Investment

The creation of the Sussex Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) is the most significant opportunity to secure strategic investment in the region's infrastructure, housing, and skills. A two-unitary model for West Sussex creates a more balanced and effective partnership to maximise this opportunity.

Strategically, two unitaries provide a stronger and more equitable voice for West Sussex within the new devolved structure.

- **Balanced Representation:** Under a two-unitary model, West Sussex would have four seats on the MCA (two from each authority), with each pair representing approximately 25% of the Sussex-wide population. This is a far more appropriate and democratic arrangement than a single unitary, which would represent over 50% of the population with just two seats, creating a significant imbalance.
- **Focused Advocacy:** Two authorities can present clearer and more compelling business cases to the MCA for investment. For example, the coastal/downs unitary can champion investment in east-west transport connectivity along the A27, while the central Sussex unitary can focus on the M23 corridor and links to Gatwick. A single authority would face the challenge of balancing these conflicting priorities.
- **Coherent Planning:** By aligning with distinct housing and labour markets, two unitaries can develop more coherent plans for housing and employment land, helping the MCA to smooth the delivery of housing and infrastructure more effectively.

This structure enables a more agile and responsive relationship with the MCA, ensuring that investment in net zero initiatives, transport infrastructure, and sustainable development is targeted where it can deliver the greatest economic impact for the distinct areas of West Sussex.

Aligning to public, staff and stakeholder views

Based on the survey findings, there is clear and consistent support for a two-unitary model for local government reorganisation in West Sussex across all surveyed groups: the public, staff, and stakeholders.

Public Preference

A significant majority of the public, 62%, prefers a two-unitary model, more than double the support for a single unitary authority (23%). This preference for a two-unitary system is the majority view in every local authority area surveyed.

Staff Preference

The two-unitary model is also the preferred option among staff, with 55% favouring this approach compared to 29% for a single unitary model.

Stakeholder Preference

Stakeholders reflect a similar viewpoint, with 58% supporting a two-unitary model, while only 22% favour a single unitary authority.

Consideration of the six government criteria:

The two-unitary model robustly meets the six core criteria for local government reorganisation as evidenced within the Shaping West Sussex business case.

1. A Single Tier of Local Government for the Whole Area

A two-unitary model provides for a single tier of local government across the entire area of West Sussex, replacing the current two-tier system. This meets the government's core requirement for structural reform. The proposed boundaries are designed to create more sensible economic and community geographies. The financial analysis in the business case demonstrates that the tax base and service costs across the two proposed authorities are closely aligned, with only a marginal difference that falls well within acceptable margins. This ensures that neither of the new authorities would be created with an undue financial advantage or disadvantage.

2. The Right Size for Efficiency, Capacity, and Resilience

The two-unitary model creates councils with populations that align with the government's guiding principle for the optimal size of a unitary authority. This size is large enough to achieve economies of scale and build the strategic capacity needed

to tackle major challenges, yet small enough to remain agile, responsive, and close to local communities.

The financial case demonstrates that a two-unitary solution is financially viable and sustainable, delivering significant net savings of £18.8 million with the potential to rise to £34m per year compared to the current system. While the payback period of 4 to 6 years is longer than for a single unitary, this is a direct consequence of the managed transition required to safely disaggregate complex services - a necessary investment for a more resilient and locally attuned system. Two smaller, community-focused authorities are better positioned to drive efficiency and deliver meaningful, long-term change.

3. High-Quality and Sustainable Public Services

The primary purpose of local government reorganisation is to create a system that is fundamentally better at supporting the wellbeing of its residents. A two-unitary model provides the optimal structure for delivering high-quality, sustainable public services, particularly in social care and prevention.

Social Care and Prevention: This is a critical moment for Adult and Children's Social Care. The national direction, as outlined in the government's "Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England," is a radical shift from hospital to community and from sickness to prevention. The plan's vision of a "Neighbourhood Health Service" that brings care closer to home is best delivered by a two-unitary model, with decision-makers closer to the communities they serve.

A two-unitary model allows for the seamless integration of the vital preventative functions of district and borough councils - such as housing, leisure, environmental health, and community wellbeing - with social care strategy and delivery. As the IMPOWER and District Councils' Network report argues, this local connection is a "prevention superpower". This creates a powerful, place-based system where housing adaptations, social prescribing, and community support are hardwired into the operating model. This is a significant advantage over a single, county-wide model, where such granular, localised integration would be far more challenging.

While the disaggregation of complex services like Adult and Children's Social Care presents manageable risks, recent reorganisations in Northamptonshire and Dorset show that a safe transition is entirely achievable through careful planning and transitional shared services. These areas successfully used transitional shared services for functions like safeguarding boards and emergency duty teams to ensure stability. For Children's Services, the DCN and Staff College report makes a strong case that smaller, localised models can be highly effective, highlighting that what matters most is proximity to people and the places they live in. A two-unitary model is better placed to foster the strong local partnerships with schools, police, and health services that are the bedrock of effective children's safeguarding.

Local government reorganisation presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally reshape and modernise public services. The proposed two-unitary model is a strategic catalyst for deep and lasting transformation. By establishing two

entirely new organisations, we move beyond legacy systems and deep-rooted practices, creating a unique space where no single culture or operational mindset prevails.

This new model will empower leaders and staff to reimagine service delivery, harness new technologies, and respond more effectively to the evolving needs of communities—laying the foundation for a more resilient and responsive local government.

- **Integrated Neighbourhood Working:** The two-unitary model is perfectly suited to develop integrated, multi-disciplinary neighbourhood teams. These teams, working at a local level, can bring together professionals from social care, housing, public health, and other services to provide holistic, person-centred support. This approach, as championed in the Community-Powered Health and Care report, allows for a shift from a reactive, service-led model to a proactive, community-powered one. By being closer to communities, the new authorities can better understand local needs and assets, and work with residents and voluntary sector partners to co-design solutions.
- **Digital Transformation and the AI Opportunity:** Two new medium-sized unitary authorities are best placed to embrace digital innovation. The new councils can build a modern, flexible, and data-driven operating model from the ground up, unencumbered by a single dominant legacy IT infrastructure. This includes leveraging the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to improve services, predict demand, and drive efficiencies, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and digital excellence.

4. Working Together and Reflecting Local Views

The shared Shaping West Sussex business case is the product of a collaborative process involving all councils across West Sussex. The options developed have been informed by extensive engagement with the public, staff, and stakeholders. The survey results indicate a clear public preference for a two-unitary model, with 62% of public respondents favouring this approach over a single unitary. This reflects the fact that residents identify with the towns, parishes, and neighbourhoods where they live, not with a county-wide administrative structure. A two-unitary model better respects these local identities and ensures that services are shaped by local needs and preferences.

5. Supporting Devolution Arrangements

A two-unitary model aligns effectively with the creation of the Sussex and Brighton Combined County Authority (CCA). It would enable four representatives from West Sussex (two from each new unitary) to serve on the CCA. This provides a more balanced and effective representation of West Sussex's large population than the insufficient two representatives that a single unitary would provide. With each new unitary representing about 25% of the CCA's population, this model creates sensible

population size ratios and ensures that West Sussex has a strong and proportionate voice in shaping regional strategy and securing investment.

6. Stronger Community Engagement and Empowerment

A two-unitary model is fundamentally more democratic and accessible than a single, county-wide authority. With 140 councillors each representing approximately 4,764 electors, the ratio of councillors to residents is much closer to the Local Government Boundary Commission's guidance. This compares favourably to the estimated 96 councillors of a single unitary option (ratio of 1 councillor for 7,101 electors). This ensures that residents have better access to their elected representatives and that councillors have a more manageable workload, allowing them to be effective community champions.

Two smaller councils can retain local offices and drop-in centres, ensuring services remain accessible. They are also better located to hold meetings in the evening, enabling working-age people and those with caring responsibilities to participate in the democratic process. This fosters greater democratic diversity and ensures that the councils reflect the communities they serve.

In conclusion, by preserving the strengths of localism while delivering the scale and coordination needed for modern public services, the two-unitary model creates the most appropriate platform to deliver the best outcomes for the people of West Sussex.

7. Additional considerations regarding B1 / B2

The key advantages of the two-unitary model apply to both B1 and B2 variants of the model as set out above. However there are a few additional considerations that support a positive and clear choice.

Preference for B2 in Survey Results

Among those who expressed a preference for a two-unitary system, there is a clear mandate for the B2 option across all surveyed groups, where Adur forms part of the coast/downs authority with Worthing, Arun and Chichester.

This level of support demonstrates that the B2 geography aligns with how residents, staff, and key partners perceive the county's community and economic dividing lines.

Respondent Group	% Of those preferring a two-unitary option - preference for B2
Public	62%
Staff	64%
Stakeholders	52%

Social Housing Stocks in Arun and Adur (HRA)

The B2 model arguably provides an opportunity to create a more coherent and strategic approach to social housing management along the coast. It allows for the consolidation of the coastal Housing Revenue Accounts (HRAs) of Arun and Adur, a move with strong strategic and operational logic. A single, unified coastal housing authority, as enabled by B2, could develop a more effective and integrated strategy for managing its social housing stock across communities that face similar challenges. This includes strategically addressing housing supply and tackling affordability pressures. This strategic alignment allows for efficiency and a more targeted response to the specific needs of coastal residents. At the same time, it allows Crawley's larger, more urban HRA to maintain its distinct focus on its own unique housing challenges, without its priorities being diluted by Adur HRA coastal issues, almost 30 miles away.

Coastal and rural considerations

The structure of option B2 provides a framework for giving both coastal and rural issues the focus they require. B2 arguably provides a more coherent and resilient framework for managing coastal erosion and flood defence in the coastal/downs authority, providing simpler arrangements for strategic partners such as the Environment Agency. The coastal economy is also better supported, with contiguity of A27 and train commuting links and strategic coherence between Shoreham Port (Adur) and Littlehampton Harbour (Arun).

Additionally, given the differences in housing and travel to work areas in the two areas, Local Planning will be more strategically coherent in the two-unitary model.

Minimising Transition Risk

A key pragmatic benefit of the B2 option is that it avoids the disaggregation of established Adur & Worthing shared service arrangements, which provide a practical building block. This separation process would not deliver justifiable benefit and would be a distraction, drawing transformation programme resources, budget, and leadership capacity away from the primary goal of establishing the new unitary councils. There are also additional aggregation risks in the single unitary model (for example the additional complexities of merging 7 revenues systems that would be lessened under the two-unitary model).

Whilst the key advantages of the two-unitary model apply to both variants, the combination of these additional factors suggests that B2 is more closely aligned to public, staff and stakeholder preferences, as well as delivering the specific additional benefits described above.

8. Conclusion: A Resilient, Democratic, and Ambitious Future for West Sussex

The evidence presented in this statement leads to the conclusion that the two-unitary model is a sound choice for the future of local government in West Sussex. It is a design that offers a foundation for building a system that is more resilient, democratic, and ambitious for its communities.

This model delivers on the government's key objectives for reform. It is a model that:

- Aligns with West Sussex's economic geography, creating focused authorities capable of driving targeted growth in the county's distinct economic corridors.
- Commands a clear democratic mandate, reflecting the expressed will of the public, staff, and stakeholders in every part of the county.
- Creates councils of the 'right size', balancing strategic scale with the local responsiveness and agility essential for modern public services.
- Supports the prevention and neighbourhood health agendas, integrating

services at a local level to improve resident wellbeing and create a more sustainable system of health and social care.

- Secures a balanced voice for West Sussex in regional devolution, ensuring the county's large population is fairly and effectively represented.
- Is more democratic and accessible, strengthening the connection between residents and their elected representatives.

Furthermore, the B2 configuration stands out as an effective, popular, and pragmatic expression of this two-unitary principle. It is backed by a clear public preference, offers strategic advantages for coastal housing and resilience, and minimises transitional risk by preserving the Adur and Worthing partnership.

The adoption of the two-unitary model, specifically in its B2 configuration, represents a step towards a renewed local government for West Sussex. It is a choice that embraces transformation, respects local identity, and empowers communities. It is a choice to secure a more prosperous, sustainable, and ambitious future for the people of West Sussex.