Coastal ACTION

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IMPROVING COMMUNITY SAFETY IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES

Reducing Crime in Hastings & Rye

Pactical measures to create safer coastal communities

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POLICY PAMPHLET



FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE POLICY PROBLEM HARMING COASTAL COMMUNITIES

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Crime in Hastings & Rye

The national picture

Crime is an emotive topic, and behind every statistic is a victim. In some cases, people have been victims of a violent attack, leaving them feeling vulnerable within the community they live. In other cases, antisocial behaviour can blight communities and cause many to think that the area they reside in is undesirable. The emotive consequences of crime can also cause people to feel that the issue is much more common than it is, causing politicians to promise to get tough on criminals.

This narrative asserts that getting tough on crime will catch the criminals responsible for the problem and put them behind bars. This rhetoric can often distract from the fact that an adequate number of police officers and detectives must be in place in order to identify and bring perpetrators to justice. Currently, there are over 5,000 police investigator vacancies[1], limiting the number of crimes that can be fully investigated. The lack of an ability to investigate crime means that an increasing proportion of cases are unresolved, quite often due to an inability to identify a suspect or collect sufficient evidence. CPS data confirms this and has highlighted a slow but steady long-term decline in conviction rates, with Crown Court rates dropping 5%-points between 2022 and 2023[2]. These lower conviction rates also may potentially deter crime from being reported, giving a false sense that crime levels are stable or decreasing. As is the case with the recent rise in unaddressed shoplifting, causing some business owners to stop reporting thefts[3].

It also takes attention away from the worrying thought that the court system may not be able to cope with an increased caseload and that additional pressures might make the justice system less effective. It is important to note that in recent years the backlog has been rapidly growing, with outstanding Crown Court cases standing at over 67,000 and Magistrate Court cases facing

a backlog of over 376,000 cases[4]. Further, even if the case gets to court, people can often find it hard to secure the legal services they need to gain a fair outcome. According to the Legal Services Board's latest Individual Legal Needs Survey (ILNS), 32% of people who face a legal problem have their legal needs unmet, meaning they can't secure adequate professional legal representation and resolve their case[5]. For example, it found 38% of people with a legal problem could not secure professional support, and 31% of people did not know where to go to secure any form of assistance (note these statistics refer mostly to civil cases).

As a result, the survey also found that 57% of people were unable to secure any form of support. This may have led to 45% of people saying they gave up trying to resolve their case because they felt their effort would make no difference[6]. Around 30% of people also stated that they stopped trying to gain an outcome from their legal problem because they felt no one could help them resolve their problem or because they felt the process was just too expensive[7]. Further, others say they find it hard to secure justice due to health issues resulting from being unable to resolve their issue, with 58% of such people citing stress causing them to visit a health professional[8]. Therefore, many people can drop out of the system due to a lack of professional support compiled with lengthy court delays and accumulating distress. Vitally, this means that many who could resolve their legal problem if the justice system worked efficiently never manage to secure justice.

For those who do secure justice and gain a conviction, the "tough on crime" approach can continue to fail and make the problem worse by increasing the prison population to the point of overcapacity. Currently, the prison population stands at its highest level since records began in 2011, with it now reaching over 88,000 people[9]. Indeed, due to this overcrowding, in the recent riots, the government had to check daily if there was the capacity to sentence and jail offenders[10]. If prisons become too overcrowded, offenders can develop more violent behaviour due to the sheer volume of dangerous inmates, making it hard for prison officers to let people out of their cells. This increase in violence then encourages officers to increase cell time, which only

makes the violent spiral worse. Importantly, a recent report by the inspectorate found most prisons had 70% of their prisoners spending less than two hours a day out of their cells[11]. This can limit the amount of time inmates can spend on learning, drug prevention and other rehabilitation services, leading to low rehabilitation rates. This problem can also get worse as increased violence can make prisons an intolerable place to work, leading to staff shortages. In the last year, there were over 8,500 attacks on staff (an increase of 16% from 2022). Also, the proportion of prison officers quitting the force rose by 3%-points, bringing the yearly total to 15%[12]. This, in turn, has led to less time for prisoners to be allowed out of their cells, meaning they have less time to engage in rehabilitation programmes. All this has led to more people having limited choices when coming out of prison, making the probation service even more vital.

Yet, if the probation service is not adequately funded or well governed, once offenders are released, they may not be well supported and can be more likely to reoffend. Incidents of crime can increase and become more problematic to deal with. In such incidents, you may have someone who entered the system as a non-violent offender but has gradually developed more violent behaviour through their prison sentence. This leaves probation officers with an increasingly difficult and complex caseload, putting immense stress on the workforce. Worryingly, the country's probation service has declined in quality. One report by the HM probation inspectorate confirmed that chronic shortages of staff meant that 60% of all investigated cases were deemed to be at an unsatisfactory standard[13]. Overburdened probation workers then struggle to perform, and this leaves people who require the most support to fall through the cracks. When these people leave the system, they often struggle to build a stable life, making them more likely to reoffend. Crucially, rather than dealing with the issue, it creates a cycle of crime, and a cycle that can become increasingly violent and difficult to address. If this cycle of crime occurs and the necessary staff (police officers and detectives) and court capacity are not in place, this can leave a cycle of violent crime that progressively goes unaddressed. Indeed, for sexual offences like rape,

less than 5% secure an outcome and only 2% gain a conviction, a decline of over 1% in the last 5 years[14]. In the long run, this only dents people's faith in the criminal justice system.

In such scenarios, it is considerably easier to reduce crime and stem the increase in violent behaviour by stopping as many individuals from entering the broken system as possible. Consequently, rather than focusing on narratives that talk tough on crime, it might be more effective and better value for money to prioritise prevention methods. This can be difficult due to its multi-agency nature. Failures within the care, social services, health and education systems require a lot of government departments to work together to produce change. This is both expensive and complicated, meaning there may not be the political will to do this or be feasible in tough economic times. Yet, more basic solutions, such as filling vacancies, improving prisons, tackling the court backlogs and helping individuals to secure professional representation could also improve the current poor state of the criminal justice process.

This work seeks to identify how the tough-on-crime narrative is not delivering good outcomes for the public throughout the entire justice system by focusing on the case study of Hastings & Rye. It will also create an objective analysis of crime in the Hastings & Rye area to fully understand the level and nature of crime within the constituency. From this, it will seek to identify measures that can be used to tackle and prevent criminal acts within the areas of the town where crime is most prevalent.

The current state of crime within Hastings & Rye

Overall crime and declining conviction rates:

Total crime in Hastings has remained consistent over the last decade. In 2012, 12,198 crimes were reported to Sussex Police. In 2023, the yearly number of reported crimes within Hastings & Rye had decreased to 11,406 instances[15]. This slight decrease in crime indicates the tough-on-crime approach has been effective at tackling crime and making communities a safer place to live. Yet,

dig beneath this headline figure and you start to see a criminal justice system in distress. As stated earlier, the tough-on-crime approach often ignores how frequently reported crimes can be resolved. According to Sussex Police data, in Hastings & Rye, the proportion of all crimes that are resolved (an outcome that leads to some form of caution, community service or prison sentence) has sharply decreased. Figure 7.1 shows that whilst in 2014, 14% of reported crime was resolved, by 2023 this only stood at 4%. In particular, violent crime within Hastings & Rye has experienced a dramatic decline in the proportion of cases being resolved, with their being a 19%-points decline in these crimes resulting in a conviction (23% down to 4%). This means that higher-risk offenders are less likely to face a day in court than they would have been only ten years ago. With the known drop-off in conviction rates on violent attacks and sexual offences, this potentially is allowing very dangerous offenders to continue to walk free. It may even cause them to think they will be unlikely to face consequences if they carry out a similar act. Therefore, these trends potentially could make people less safe in the long run, indicating that the current

tough-on-crime approach is not making people in Hastings & Rye any safer.

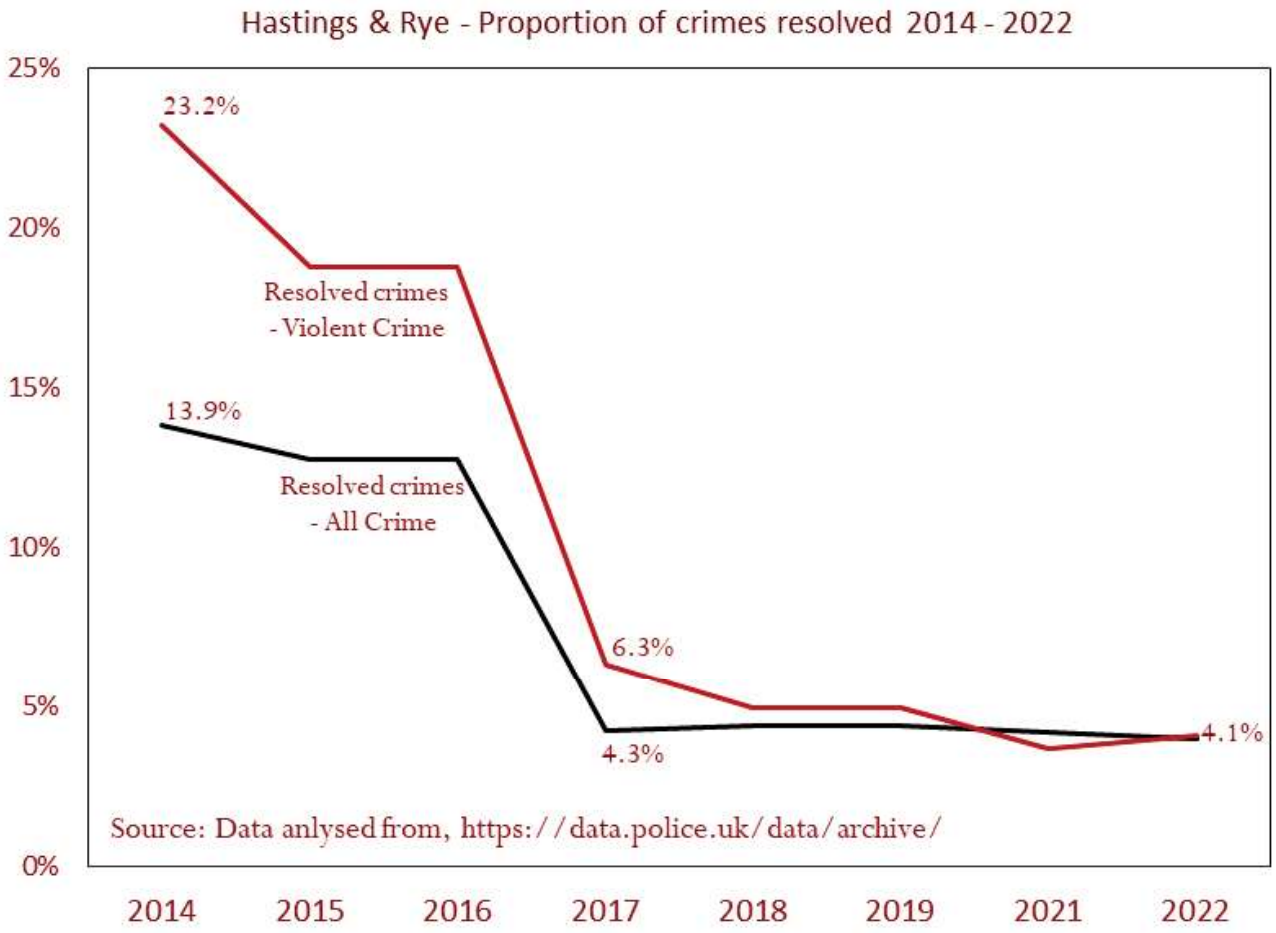


Figure 7.1 Proportion of reported crime that is unresolved, 2014 - 2022. Source: https://data.police.uk/data/archive/

This decline in the proportion of crimes being resolved may have come from the shortage of detectives. In Sussex, investigations have found that detective teams have been frequently severely understaffed, with over 100 vacancies having not been filled[16]. This may have left Sussex Police less able to investigate reported crime, despite the overall level slightly decreasing. The stretching of the local police force could mean that they have less time to collect evidence, analyse reports and pursue suspected offenders. If so, this will have made it harder for the Sussex Police to identify suspects and produce cases strong enough to go to court. Further, due to time pressures, even cases that go to court may not be as tight as they could, potentially bringing the conviction rate down further. This theory is confirmed by Sussex

Police data, which shows that the proportion of crimes where no suspect can be identified went from 15% in 2015 to 23% in 2022, an 8%-points increase[17]. This increase was even larger for reported violent crimes, indicating great difficulty in gathering evidence and building cases for more complex cases. This raises the potential that higher-risk offenders will be emboldened, as they may have carried out a violent attack without even being identified as a suspect. Crucially, this inability to identify suspects means cases are harder to bring to court, which can help to explain why conviction rates have declined and why violent crime resolution rates are so low. Again, the low likelihood of facing a trial for the most violent and high-risk offenders may cause them to less fear the consequences of their actions. Therefore, this cycle can increase the frequency of violent crime, and even if overall crime levels do not increase, the crime that does exist can become higher risk over time.

The court backlog:

Out of the declining proportion of reported crime where an effective case can be built, further barriers exist when seeking to take a case to court. These barriers firstly consist of a large court backlog, meaning the case may take a very long time to be heard. The second barrier is an inability to secure professional legal services that can provide the necessary support to navigate the justice system.

Firstly, even if the police beat the reduced odds of identifying a suspect, gathering evidence and building a sufficient case, victims can often find themselves waiting long periods of time for their case to be brought to court. Lewes Crown Court, where the most serious cases are heard, has experienced a sharp rise in its backlog. In 2015, there were fewer than 300 backlogged cases, but this had risen to 535 by 2019. Since the pandemic, the backlog has increased further, to 1,012 in 2022, and this again increased to 2,096 in 2023[18]. Worryingly, the backlog includes 208 cases relating to alleged violent attacks and 141 for sex offences. This means that there are 350 cases where victims of such crimes were, on average, waiting 166 days for their trial, with

some having waits of more than two years[19]. On further research, Ministry of Justice figures reveal that for Crown Court cases, the average days to wait from an offence to a charge has increased from 58 days (2014) to 163 in 2023. In terms of arrest to case completion, in the same period, this increased from 292 days to 464 days[20]. This is bad for two reasons. Initially, this means victims within the constituency may drop their cases due to the distress such trials can cause, potentially letting the most violent escape justice without even facing a trial. Secondly, this potentially means that a high-risk offender is free to carry out their activities for six months before they face a trial where there is sufficient evidence to show that they could be a violent offender. For those held on remand, meaning they are detained until their trial is completed, their wait from arrest to case completion in 2023 was 237 days, up from 16 days in 2014. As 10% of people nationally held on remand are acquitted, this means that people who are found not guilty of any crime on average are spending 237 days in custody[21].

Magistrate courts in Hastings aren't any better. Across Sussex in 2024, there were 5,182 open cases, up from 4,382 in 2019. Local solicitor firms have indicated to their clients that they may face a delay of over 500 days, meaning some can wait up to two years before they can get their case heard.[22] According to the Ministry of Justice, in East Sussex, from 2018 to 2023, the average days an individual has to wait for their civil case to be heard rose from 426 days to 549 days[23]. For criminal cases that go from the Magistrate courts to the County Crown Court in Lewes, delays have also increased, with average days from arrest to completion increasing from 140 days in 2010 to 240 days in 2024. Again, these delays are bad as they may cause individuals to give up on seeking justice, as costs can escalate the longer cases go unresolved. Worse still, upon hearing these large delays, individuals may not seek to take their case to court, potentially leading to fewer cases getting a satisfactory resolution.

Barriers to accessing justice:

Even if an individual can secure a date for a court case, the barriers to accessing justice are still plentiful. Firstly, according to the Individual Legal Needs Survey (ILNS), in the South East, 38% of individuals failed to secure professional help, with 57% of people unable to gain any form of help (+2% on the national average)[24]. As these figures mostly relate to civil cases, this again demonstrates the difficulty in securing justice for these types of cases. Further, according to Law Society research, the constituency of Hastings & Rye has low levels of legal services and legal aid support, making it particularly challenging to secure professional support locally[25] In the South East, 31% experienced a significant financial loss due to their legal problem, with 8% losing more than £10,000 (2% greater than the national average). This can be devastating for low-income communities like Hastings, meaning a lack of financial support could leave individuals without adequate support and cause them to be unable to pursue their case.

Also, the stress from an ongoing case that is unable to be dealt with due to court backlogs can cause individuals to feel like dropping their case is the best course of action. As 55% of people reported stress or an illness resulting from their case (2%-points higher than the national average), this could help to explain why the South East has a higher proportion of people giving up on trying to secure justice than compared to the national average. In the South East, 29% of people who quit before securing justice say they do so because they can't find anyone to help them, which in Hastings is likely to be higher due to the lack of legal services and legal aid. 27% also say they stopped trying to resolve their legal problem because the process was too expensive (3%-points higher than the national average).

Again, due to the low-income nature of Hastings & Rye and a lack of legal aid support, this means that people in the constituency are particularly exposed to this problem. No wonder why this leaves 45% of people who quit before securing a satisfactory resolution saying they felt continuing to seek justice would not have made any difference to their outcome. Partly because of

these experiences, 31% of people within the South East say that they do not feel they know where to go to secure adequate support. This can partially explain why out of the 70% of people within the South East who were recorded as having a legal issue within the last four years, 34% are recorded as having an unmet legal need (2%-points higher than the national average). This means that over a third of people who experience a legal issue are unable to secure adequate representation within a reasonable time frame for a serious legal problem. Therefore, many individuals with serious legal cases in Hastings & Rye fail to secure the justice they are seeking, with the proportion of such individuals probably being significantly more than compared to the national average.

Worryingly, this can discourage people from taking future action if they were to encounter another legal problem. For example, 39% of all individuals within the South East who faced a legal issue stated they felt their actions had resulted in no improvement for their particular legal problem. 25% believed that making an active effort to resolve their problem would make no difference[26]. Also, 38% of people displayed low levels of confidence in the legal sector, potentially leaving such individuals to not pursue justice in future, leaving more crimes unaddressed.

Prison and probation problems:

Out of the relatively few people who secure a resolution to their reported crime, some secure a conviction against their perpetrator. Once a conviction is secured, prison and probation services become essential to stop reoffending and a growing cycle of violent crime. Sadly, both services in East Sussex appear to be in crisis. The last two inspections of Lewes prison by the inspectorate have produced damming reports. A recent report found that infrastructure was crumbling and there was a rising tide of violence[27]. In some cases, cells were described as unsatisfactory, with basic sanitation facilities needing repair[28]. The inspectorate report also highlighted the declining provision of purposeful activity. This, in part, might explain why 210 men had carried out over 600 acts of self-harm in 2023[29]. Further, the

report found that 28% of inmates tested positive for illegal substances, making the cycle of violence worse in recent years. This has forced staff to lock prisoners in their cells for longer periods, stunting rehabilitation efforts. This led the prison inspectorate to conclude that Lewes prison was not sufficiently good for safety, prisoner conduct, or preparing prisoners for release[30]. Despite this finding, 20% of prisoners have been released as street homeless and due to overcrowding in prisons, some were released early who were still deemed to be a danger to the public[31].

Therefore, probation services in East Sussex are confronted with a growing, violent and dangerous caseload, making it hard to keep control of their workload. According to an inspection of East Sussex probation services, this has led to people leaving the service, recruitment challenges, difficulty delivering services, a lack of risk analysis on offenders and cases being transferred without information being shared[32]. Consequently, this led the report to conclude that many areas of the service were inadequate and improvement was needed in order to adequately deliver services and prevent reoffending. Therefore, due to the deteriorating state of the local prison and probation services, this does raise the prospect of people leaving the system more violent and less supported. This means that if reoffending does occur, recorded crime has the capacity to become more violent.

Increase in violent crime:

Crucially, data from the police archive shows us that crime is becoming more violent. In 2011, there were 1,643 incidences of crime categorised as a violent or sexual offence, but in 2023 this yearly figure had risen to 4,487, an increase of 173%. Also, the number of thefts rose from 1,461 instances to 1,826 in the same period, mostly driven by shoplifting activity thought to be associated with increasing levels of violent organised crime groups[33]. This rapid increase in violent crime has occurred at a time when overall crime levels have remained fairly static, meaning that crime overall has become more violent in nature. In 2011, only 9.3% of all crime in Hastings & Rye was categorised as a violent or sexual offence, but by 2023 this had risen by

30%-points, to 39.1% - see Figure 7.2. Consequently, it would appear that failings within the prison and rehabilitation system may be one factor behind the increasing rate of violent crime. It could also raise the prospect of crime becoming more associated with organised gangs. As crimes that lead to a conviction become more violent, this means that over time, the prison and probation service will have to deal with harder-to-address offenders, only putting further pressure on these services. This, in turn, will put further pressure on staff and make it harder for them to maintain effective prisons and rehabilitate offenders. This means that violent offenders could leave the system less able to cope and be more likely to commit further violent offences in future. Therefore, this presents a worryingly long-term picture of continuing rising violent crime rates if reform does not occur.

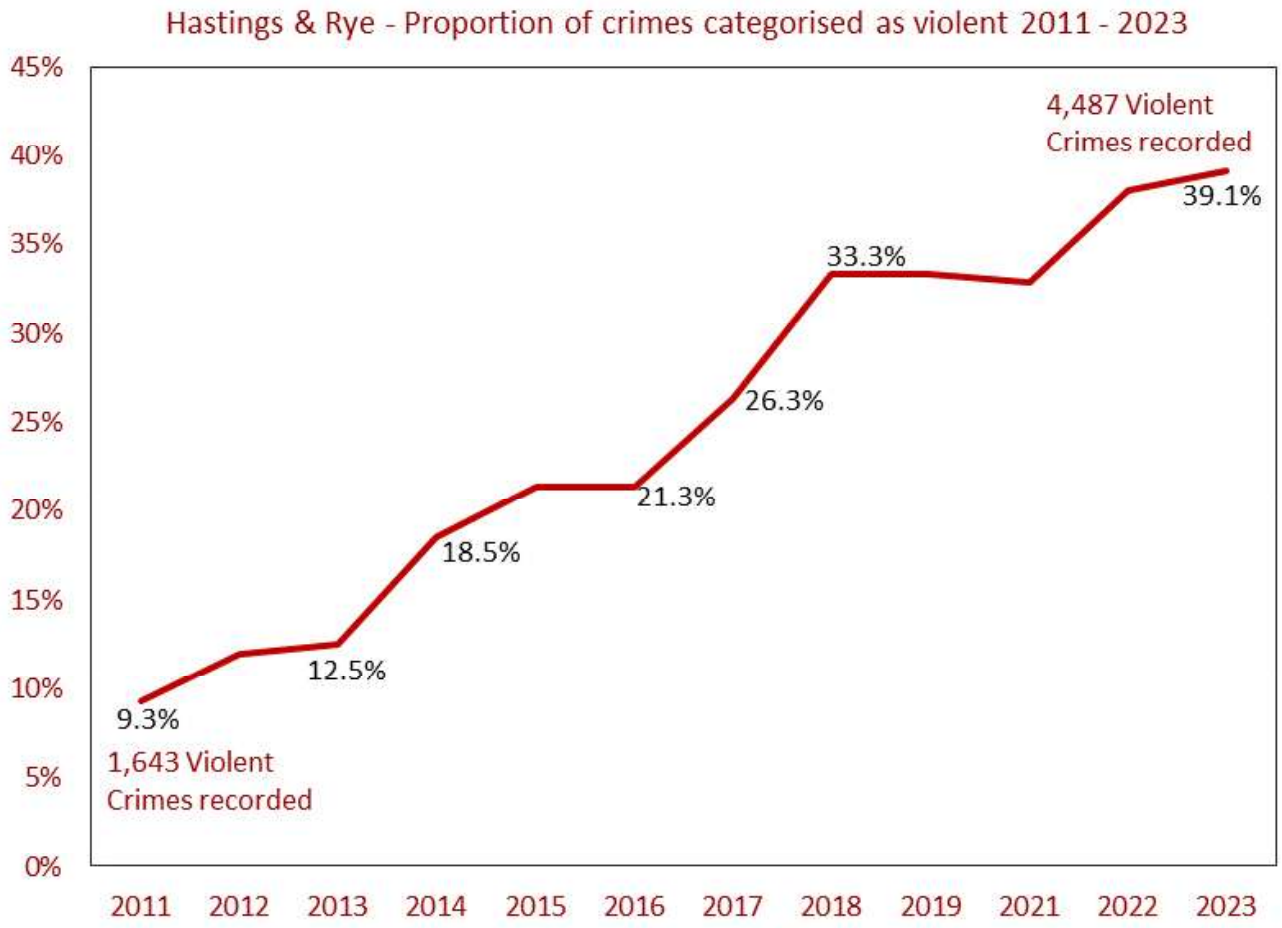


Figure 7.2: The proportion of crime categorised as violent, 2011 – 2023. Source: https://data.police.uk/data/archive/

Where is crime most prevalent in Hastings?

Figure 7.3 demonstrates that crime is most prevalent in Hastings within two council wards, Castle and Central St Leonards, the two main economic centres. Further, the data also shows that it is within these two wards where the majority of violent crime and organised thefts take place. Within Castle Ward, the roads that in 2023 accumulated the most recorded reports of crime were either on or near the high street, with violent offences, anti-social behaviour and thefts making up the bulk of all reported crimes. Within Central St Leonards, the majority of crime also gravitated towards economic centres and roads nearby such areas, with this crime being categorised as mostly violent or theft-related. Further, this has long been the case, with violent and theft-related crime mostly occurring in such wards in 2011. But the key difference is that the number of crimes in these wards that are recorded as violent has risen sharply. For instance, in Central St Leonards, crime categorised as violent rose from 186 to 416, a rise of 124%[34].

Castle Ward also showed similar increases, with thefts also seeing a large increase in the last three years. Again, these increases appear to focus on the economic centres of these areas. Worryingly, although these areas have seen increases in the most high-risk crime, these are the localities that have seen some of the largest decreases in conviction rates. For instance, in 2015, 60.2% of crimes were recorded as not being able to prosecute or identify a suspect. Yet, by the end of 2023, the figure stood at 83.9%. Therefore, as crime is rising and conviction rates are falling within these specific areas, efforts to tackle the growth in violent and theft-related crime should be focused in these wards.

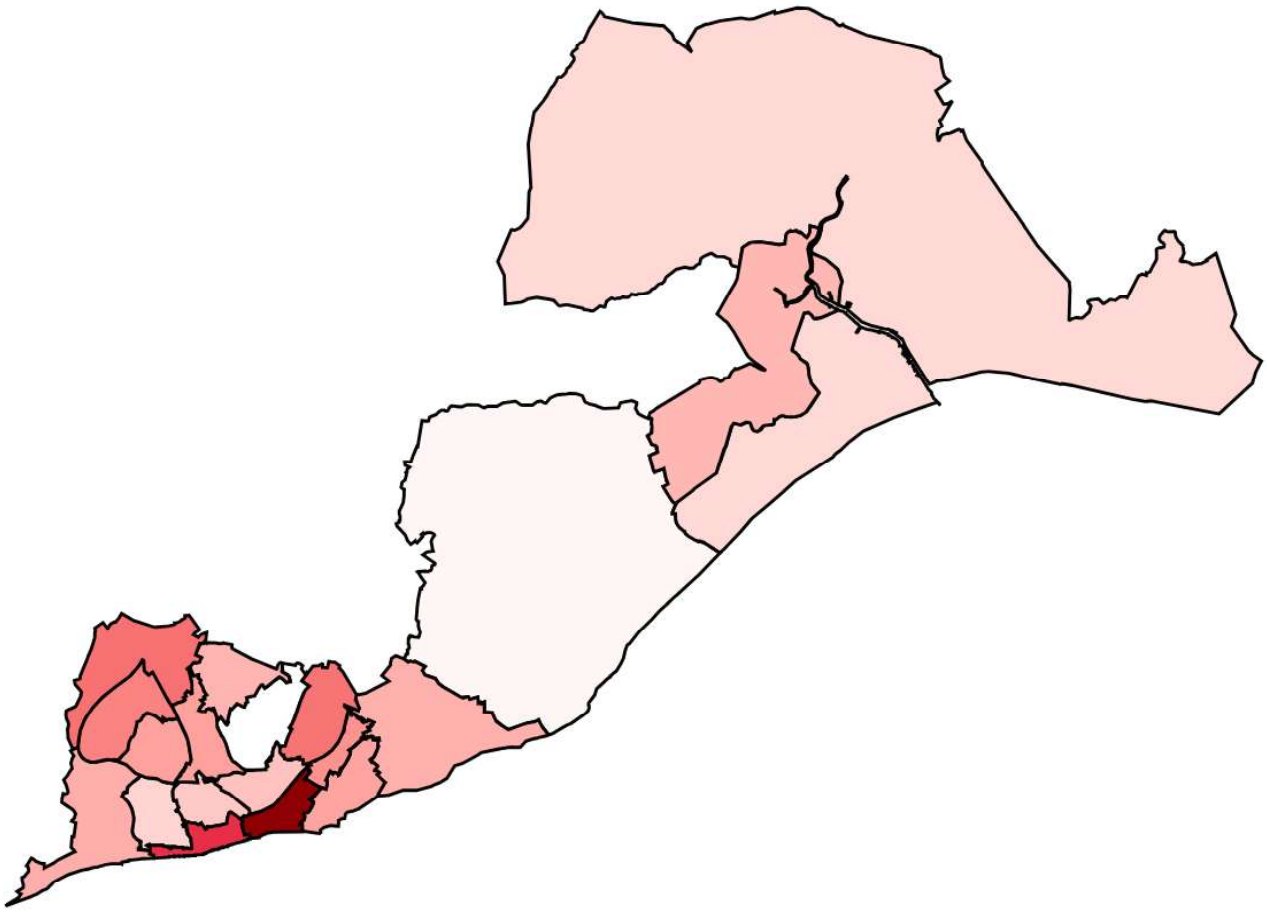


Figure 7.3: A heat map showing all crimes in Hastings & Rye by council ward. It shows where crime occurs the most in the constituency of Hastings & Rye. Hotspots include Castle and Central St Leonards Source: https://data.police.uk/data/archive/

What can be done to tackle this problem?

In order to deal with the problems within the justice process, this chapter has discussed, it will need action at every level, as there are significant problems at every stage. This means seeking to make improvements from the moment the crime is reported to the point where an individual is found guilty of an offence and goes through the prison system. By doing this, individuals can re-enter society reformed, and rising violent crime rates can be cut. To help improve the current situation, local and national representatives could focus on:

Dealing with crime, particularly rising violent crime.

- Increasing staff
- Increasing the number of police officers, specifically in areas where crime is high and on the rise. This will help increase the police presence in the town centre areas where violent crime is on the rise the most.
- Increasing the number of detectives in an effort to resolve more crimes. The recruitment could be focused on areas of rising crime within specific areas, such as targeting violent crime in Hastings & Rye.
- Increasing the number of neighbourhood officers to help increase the police presence.
- Spreading awareness on how neighbourhood police can be contacted and how they can help reduce localised crime, such as anti-social behaviour and thefts.
- Reinstating local community police hubs in areas high in crime to help encourage a police presence in key areas and encourage people to report crime.
- Having dedicated officers for violent crime in hotspot areas, such as specialists in domestic abuse, rape and organised crime.
- Working with the police to improve response times for reported crime and the speed of evidence gathering.
- Increasing a sense of safety
- Improving street lighting in problematic areas to help increase a sense of safety in the town centre and deter those perpetrating violent crime. This could be focused on a street level, where data can identify problem streets.
- Getting the local council and police to implement a Night-Time Safety Charter, setting out the principles and policies to reduce violent crime at night. This plan could also work with late-night venues to improve safety and help shift workers and drinkers get home safely.
- Giving town protection orders for repeat violent offenders and shoplifters. This would mean that the most problematic offenders would be barred from town centre zones, helping efforts to deal with the most problematic areas.
- Using local representatives to help report crime. For example, continuing to work with the local police force to help close down drug dealing when residents report such issues to their local councillor.

- Setting targets for cutting violent crime where violent crime is prevalent. Such targets could be halving attacks against women and seeing more weapons, such as knives, being taken off the streets.
- Using technology to increase conviction rates.
- Seeking funding from relevant bodies to restore funding to Hastings town centre CCTV services. This will help catch repeat offenders and tackle growing anti-social behaviour, violent and theft-related crime. As the majority of crime occurs within specific roads in the town centre, this could help reverse current declining conviction rates.
- Seeking funding from relevant bodies to install more deterrents and CCTV in areas where crime is high and often unresolved.
- Asking to become an area where AI CCTV is trialled so as to collect data on whether such technology can help increase conviction rates.
- Seeking funding and local council support in improving and increasing shop security. This will help to combat the rise in shoplifting and attacks on shop workers in town centre areas.
- Using data better to locate and target crime, such as targeting organised crime (like county lines drug operations). Also, using data monitoring to set clear and realistic targets for resolving reported crime, which could be publicly available.
- Delivering more bleed kits in areas where violent crime has been high.

Improving access to justice.

- Clearing the court backlogs to help reduce waiting times and the number of people who drop out before accessing justice.

This could be done by improving the poor condition of some of the local courts, thus increasing the capacity to hear cases throughout the year. Also, increasing disability access could help those with disabilities gain access to justice quicker.

- Creating new temporary court spaces, which could help increase capacity until the backlog is fully addressed.
- Increasing the number of staff in courtrooms. This could also help to create a more efficient justice system.

- Where possible, keeping cases out of the court by settling less contentious disputes before they get to the courtroom.
- Investing in technology to help make court case hearings more flexible, allowing more cases to be heard at times that are convenient for those seeking justice. Also, collecting data to better understand how efficiently courtrooms are being used, which could help increase efficiency in the system.
- Improving access to legal services.
- Helping to build more local networks which can connect charities and agencies that can either give people legal support or direct them to sources that can.
- Focusing on increasing legal aid in legal areas where there is limited legal professional support, such as housing and benefits.
- Giving more recognition of voluntary work for young people training to enter the legal profession. Awarding people with certificates for giving free legal advice through services like Citizens Advice could help give more professional support in areas where few legal advisers work. This would also give younger trainees more avenues into the profession.
- Setting up a National Legal Service that could help provide free sources of legal advice and direct individuals to where they can go to get adequate professional support. This could be delivered through Citizen Advice services. Such services could be connected to local GPs and hospitals, so people having negative health consequences from their legal issues can be directed to a legal form of support.

Improving the prison and probation service.

- Improving prisons with East Sussex.
- Committing funding to renovate local prison areas that are currently either in need of repair or not fit for purpose.
- Building more temporary prison space for additional capacity to reduce overcrowding and ensure offenders can be sent to prison when needed.
- Keeping offenders out of prison for minor first-time offences, which could be done with other forms of punishment – like community service. Also, earlier interventions for younger offenders may help keep prison numbers down. For example, there could be better links with local education facilities and charities that increase skills and provide economic opportunities for those at risk of entering the prison system.

- Increasing safety for prison officers and recruiting more. This will help to ensure prisoners can be released from their cells for an adequate number of hours each day, allowing them to access recreational and rehabilitation activities.
- Providing more recreational and rehabilitation facilities in prisons to help reduce reoffending.
- Funding more education and skills programmes to ensure prisoners have economic opportunities when leaving.
- Tackling rising drug use and violence levels in prisons.
- Building temporary accommodation for prisoners to ensure prisoners are not released homeless, again to assist in reducing reoffending rates.
- Improving local probation services.
- Training new probation workers to increase the number of workers in the system in the long term.
- Spreading the more complex and harder cases evenly to help reduce pressure on people working in the service, once more probation workers are in the system.
- Improving coordination between local prison, probation, agency and charity services to help reduce reoffending.
- Building better partnerships between services and outside agencies that can help reduce reoffending, such as education and skills programmes.

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