

1. Trade union representatives

1.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 21 January 2020 to consult on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2020/21.

1.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade union representatives, and through them staff, for another year of hard work. The Leader updated the meeting that although there was some very welcome flexibility to invest in services next financial year, the Council continued to manage a difficult financial position. Lobbying by the County Council and wider sector had been effective in raising awareness of the social care demand pressures that the Council was managing and additional social care funding had been granted for next year as a result. Members and officers would continue to proactively lobby for adequate funding for East Sussex in the longer term, with focus on securing fair funding in the Fair Funding Review that Government had recommitted to deliver this year.

1.3. The Assistant Chief Executive outlined the budget proposals to be considered by the Cabinet. Government had announced additional grant funding for social care in the 2019 Spending Round and allowed councils to raise another 2% Adult Social Care Council Tax precept, which had generated £6.6m additional funding for 2020/21. The proposed budget made provision for this to be used to invest in projects to reduce future demand for adults and children's social care services; invest in highways and improving residential homes for children with disabilities; and defer planned savings in children's safeguarding, libraries services and trading standards. This was in addition to Cabinet's decision in November 2019 to defer planned Early Help family key worker savings to avoid unnecessary in-year redundancies.

1.4. Following the introduction, trade union representatives raised questions and views on the Cabinet papers, which are set out below.

Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) planning

1.5. Trade union representatives welcomed the proposals for investment and deferring savings, particularly in Trading Standards, but shared concerns about the longer-term financial situation, particularly the £12.5m budget gap that was projected by 2022/23. It was confirmed that the budget proposed for 2020/21 was balanced and no new savings were required in addition to the £3.5m identified in February 2019, outlined in Appendix 4 of the Cabinet report. These would be implemented through the usual process with any savings that involved changes to services subject to formal consultation and detailed Equality Impact Assessments. Officers committed to continue to keep trade unions informed as plans for future years were developed.

1.6. Trade union representatives welcomed the lobbying already undertaken by the Council and encouraged Members and officers to continue to lobby on behalf of staff, as they were impacted by changes to staffing from service reductions. All agreed that further lobbying ahead of the Fair Funding Review to highlight the specific factors driving demand in East Sussex was key to securing resource to close the gap in future years.

Devolution

1.7. Trade union representatives asked if Members or Chief Officers had further information on what was expected to be included in the Devolution White Paper announced in the post-General Election Queen's Speech. Mayoral Combined Authorities were expected to continue to be a feature of the Government's devolution offer as the Queen's Speech had committed to increasing the number of mayors. Government had also said it intended for devolution to 'level up' powers and investment in regions across England and to unlock economic growth potential. Further details would be known when the White Paper was published.

Health and Social Care

1.8. Trade union representatives asked for further information on national strategic plans for health and social care, including whether a social care green or white paper was still expected.

1.9. NHS England had published the NHS Long Term Plan in January 2019 which had a focus on community and primary care. Local health and social care providers were required to submit medium term plans to deliver on ambitions in the Long Term Plan. ESCC had worked with health partners to develop an East Sussex-wide health and social care plan, which would be considered by the Cabinet at their meeting on 28 January. The plan aligned with existing County Council objectives, built on existing joint work and progress on integration of services made through East Sussex Better Together and Connecting 4 You, but had important widened scope for collective work on prevention, children and young people (led by ESCC), community care, urgent care, planned care and mental health.

1.10. The Prime Minister had committed to bring forward plans to reform social care this year, but robust local plans to drive the changes needed to improve the health, social care and wellbeing of the East Sussex population needed to be in place should this not be delivered.

Climate Change

1.11. Trade union representatives asked what provision was being made to respond to the climate emergency and deliver on the County Council's agreed target for its own operations to be net zero as soon as possible, and in any event by 2050.

1.12. The ambition of ESCC's net zero target was discussed. While other local authorities and organisations had set targets to be net zero by 2030, the Leader was clear that ESCC's target was both ambitious in aiming for net zero at the earliest opportunity, but realistic and practical in recognising the scope of change this would require and the time that could take.

1.13. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport explained that the first step in delivering on this target was determining ESCC's current emissions output, to inform action required to reduce emissions and provide a baseline to measure progress against. This work was being done alongside borough and district council partners that had also agreed net zero targets. It was recognised additional resource was required and £55k had been allocated in the proposed budget for climate change staff resource to support delivery of an action plan once the baseline had been identified. There was however a limit to what the County Council could achieve on its own. In general, council estates only accounted for

around 1-2% of emissions in their county area. Councils had ability to influence through areas such as transport planning but Government leadership, resource and intervention would be required to deliver emissions reduction beyond that.

Council Tax

1.14. Trade union representatives raised concerns about the impact of the proposed Council Tax increase on staff who were also residents, particularly lower paid staff.

1.15. The Leader confirmed that Members were very conscious of the impact of Council Tax increases on residents, particularly as total Council Tax rates in the county were already relatively high. The total proposed increase in ESCC's element of Council Tax for 2020/21 (1.99% Council Tax and 2% Adult Social Care Precept) generated an increase of £57.24 per year on a Band D property, or £1.10 per week. The money this raised was critically needed and allowed budget proposals for deferring some savings and investing to improve public services residents relied on.

Business Rates Retention

1.16. Trade union representatives asked for clarification on the changes to the County Council's business rates retention arrangements.

1.17. The Chief Finance Officer explained that the Government had discontinued Business Rates Retention Pilots for all authorities, other than those that had been granted retention schemes through devolution agreements. The 2019/20 75% Business Rates Retention Pilot for East Sussex would end in April and ESCC would re-enter a business rates pooling arrangement with the borough and district councils and East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service. Although there were minor net benefits to ESCC of both the 75% retention pilot and pooling arrangements, greater retention of growth in business rates was not a viable funding model for ESCC. Despite ongoing efforts to attract new businesses to the county, the nature of the local economy and natural environment of East Sussex meant there were limited opportunities to grow businesses with a property square-footage that could generate the growth required to fund demand for social care services.

Managing service demand growth

1.18. Trade union representatives recognised the rising demand for services, particularly from adults and children presenting with higher needs that required more complex care and support, and asked what steps the Council was taking to manage this demand.

1.19. The Lead Member for Children and Families explained that the No Wrong Door pilot that was proposed to be introduced in 2020/21, was expected to improve support to children within or on the edge of the care system. In North Yorkshire, the scheme had resulted in significant reductions in arrests, missing episodes, hospital admissions, use of Independent Fostering Agencies, and in the time children spent in care. There was no guarantee, but it was hoped that this investment would have similar outcomes for East Sussex.

1.20. More broadly, the Council's robust business planning process, RPPR, ensured the County Council was taking informed decisions on how to best use available resources to meet and curtail rising demand, supported by an evidence base and evaluation of the performance of all activities.

Corporate Improvement Partnership with West Sussex County Council

1.21. Trade union representatives welcomed the new partnership arrangement with West Sussex County Council (WSCC) but raised concerns it would increase work for East Sussex County Council staff.

1.22. The Leader was pleased ESCC had been asked to take part in the new and innovative model for peer support in local government and had been working closely with the Leader of WSCC. ESCC was expected to benefit from the partnership, including in opportunities to learn from WSCC how we could do some things differently to improve outcomes. A review of the arrangement would be undertaken at the end of March and the expectation was that the arrangement would be taken forward on the basis of no detriment to ESCC and our staff.

Brexit

1.23. Trade unions asked when the County Council expected to know more about any potential impact of Brexit on East Sussex or the County Council. More would be known about the impact of Brexit, and our future trading relationship with the EU, after 31 January and as negotiations progressed this year. The County Council would monitor negotiations and new legislation, particularly on fisheries, agriculture and trade.

Final Local Government Finance Settlement

1.24. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed the final Local Government Finance Settlement was expected after the budget was due to be set by County Council. Significant changes to the provisional Settlement were not expected and the Chief Operating Officer would be given delegation, in consultation with the Chief Finance Officer, Leader and Deputy Leader, to adjust presentation of the Budget Summary to reflect the final settlement.

Corporate Office Accommodation

1.25. Trade union representatives raised that plans for utilisation of core administrative office accommodation was of priority interest for staff and the Chief Operating Officer confirmed further information would be available soon and plans would be reported to Cabinet in the spring.

Redeployment Policy

1.26. Trade union representatives commended the County Council's redeployment policy for both supporting staff and making best use of the Council's resources.