

Feedback from Engagement Exercises

1. Young people

1.1. The Chief Executive joined a meeting of the East Sussex Youth Cabinet on 8 December 2020 to discuss the County Council's budget setting process and young people's priorities for the year ahead. A presentation was delivered on the priority outcomes and factors the County Council considers in setting its budget each year, and the particular issues and trends to be considered this year as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

1.2. A discussion followed the presentation, in which the following areas were covered:

Youth Opportunities

1.3. Youth Cabinet asked how the County Council was supporting young people impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

1.4. ESCC was undertaking a range of work to address the impact of the pandemic on young people, including: supporting schools to ensure vulnerable young people that had missed learning in the first lockdown had the support they needed to catch up; working with Team East Sussex to deliver the East Sussex Economy Recovery Plan, which included actions to develop young people's skills and support them into employment; introducing the Kickstart Scheme to provide six month work placements for young people at risk of long-term unemployment; and taking forward the recommendations of the Sussex-wide review of emotional health and wellbeing support for children and young people.

COVID-19 Vaccine

1.5. Youth Cabinet shared their views on the vaccine, which included feeling hopeful it would bring positive change and help the most vulnerable, wanting more detailed information about its safety given the quick development and concerns that lack of trust may impact take-up.

Spending and savings decisions

1.6. Youth Cabinet asked if the Council had to make more savings in future, what areas it would consider; and if the Council had more money to spend in future, where it would prioritise?

1.7. Some savings had been planned in the Medium Term Financial Plan that may have to be taken in future to deliver a balanced budget. These were identified when we planned our Core Offer and were areas of activity beyond those that we had identified as the Council's core service offer in times of limited resources. Beyond that, the increased remote working adopted during the pandemic may translate into some ongoing savings (i.e. savings from meeting travel costs) if services could be delivered as effectively remotely in the long-term; but being so close to our Core Offer left limited other opportunities.

1.8. For any additional spending, officers would make recommendations to Members that delivered our priority outcomes and invested in prevention wherever possible, to reduce the need for services in future. Any future spending and savings decisions would be taken following engagement with stakeholders, including the Youth Cabinet.

Lobbying

1.9. Youth Cabinet had concerns that the reduction in grant funding, alongside increase in demand and new pressures arising from the pandemic would result in further pressure on restricted resources and impact services for the most vulnerable. Youth Cabinet wanted to support lobbying efforts for more sustainable funding.

1.10. Youth Cabinet were encouraged not to underestimate the power of their voice and to reach out to MPs to share any concerns that they had. Youth Cabinet would meet with West Sussex County Council Youth Cabinet to consider opportunities to jointly raise their concerns and would also meet with Baroness Deborah Steadman-Scott OBE DL (Minister of State for Department of Work and Pensions) to discuss influencing policy making and priorities of the Government.

Domestic Violence

1.11. Youth Cabinet shared that domestic violence had been identified as a top issue in the local UK Youth Parliament Ballot and wanted to understand what was being done to address the increase in domestic violence seen nationally during the coronavirus pandemic.

1.12. Responding to domestic violence was a key priority for ESCC, in line with our priority to keep vulnerable children and adults safe, and for the Safeguarding Adults Board and East Sussex Safeguarding Children's Partnership. Unfortunately, given the increase locally and nationally in reports of domestic violence in the last year, it would need to continue to be a key priority.

1.13. ESCC commissioned specialist domestic abuse services in East Sussex to deliver a pan-Sussex five year Domestic Abuse Strategy. This strategy focussed on taking a multi-agency, partnership, trauma-informed and holistic approach; and supporting children affected by domestic abuse was one of the priority areas of the strategy. The current recommissioning of the service would include a requirement to support children experiencing domestic abuse, as victims in their own right, in line with the new requirements of the Domestic Abuse Bill. Sussex Police worked closely with schools and ESCC to ensure that children and young people who experienced domestic abuse at home were supported; and sessions teaching about healthy relationships were also delivered to children in schools by the Safer East Sussex Team.

Race Equality

1.14. The Youth Cabinet asked what the Council was doing to progress towards race equality.

1.15. ESCC had taken a range of actions but also recognised the approach to progressing race equality was as important as the actions themselves. ESCC had prioritised listening to concerns and experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff and residents to inform the approach.

1.16. In terms of actions taken this year, ESCC had delivered a series of staff webinars to highlight the importance of race equality and the need to ensure that our services were inclusive and addressed racism wherever we had the power to do so. For example, Children's Services had revised its guidance for schools on race equality, which the Youth Cabinet were thanked for their role in. The Council had a Corporate Equality Group, which worked closely with our BAME Staff Forum to hear their views about how we could keep working together to progress race equality. ESCC was also working with the NHS to respond to the disparities in the impact of COVID-19 on the BAME community. ESCC would continue to listen and learn before it acted to ensure that equality was at the forefront.

Environment

1.17. The Youth Cabinet asked how the Council could guarantee environmental targets were being met across the County, including by businesses.

1.18. As one of the biggest employers in East Sussex, the Council and had set a five-year plan to reduce carbon emissions from its own activities. We would lead by example and support businesses to progress towards a more green and sustainable future.

Future priorities

1.19. Following the meeting, the Youth Cabinet shared that the annual 'Make Your Mark' survey had identified in East Sussex that young people's priorities were:

National issues

- Free University/ No Tuition Fees
- Support our Mental Health
- Take Action on Climate Change and End Plastic Pollution

Local issues

- Tackle Domestic Violence
- Homelessness
- Training and Jobs for Young People

1.20. The Youth Cabinet anticipated choosing one national and one local issue as its campaign priorities in January 2021.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1. The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board met on 22 December 2020 to discuss the comments it wished to make to Cabinet on the draft Portfolio Plans, Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), Savings Plan and the announcements regarding the provisional Local Government Financial Settlement for 2021/22.

2.2. The RPPR Board made the following observations and comments:

2.3 Pothole repairs and road maintenance:

- The Government has announced a £1.7 billion fund for pothole repairs and road maintenance. The Board acknowledges that the spending of any additional funding will be prioritised in accordance with the existing asset management plans. It requests consideration is given to allocating some of the additional funding to renewing road markings in line with the recommendations of the recent scrutiny review, in order to improve road safety and traffic flows around the County.

2.4 Access to the internet:

- Access to the internet via the Library Service for those who cannot afford a connection and for rural communities through the Superfast Broadband Project has become increasingly important under the Covid-19 restrictions as people work from home more or have to apply for benefits such Universal Credit or make online job applications. In rural areas decent broadband is also important for home education and those who have homed based businesses.
- The Board considers that more emphasis should be given to the services that provide internet access to address digital exclusion (e.g. through the Library Service) and enable access to decent broadband in rural areas which supports residents and the local economy. The Broadband Project has achieved over 97% coverage for superfast broadband compared with a national average of 85%. However, reaching a target of 100% superfast broadband coverage is now more important and greater

emphasis should be given to the Broadband Project's future plans and ambition to enable all residents to get connected to faster broadband services.

2.5 Support for local businesses:

- The Board discussed the range of services and measures contained in the Portfolio Plan to support local businesses and the local economy. The Board observed that support for local businesses and the local economy is very important in the current circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Board notes the very good work in this area and suggests that it would be beneficial to provide some additional resources to undertake more marketing of the support available for businesses.

2.6 Trading Standards:

- The Board notes the important work that the Trading Standards Team carry out to protect vulnerable people and particularly the elderly from scams. It commented that it is important that the Trading Standards Team has adequate resources to continue with existing work and meet future requirements, such as the additional demands on the service created by leaving the European Union and supporting local businesses.

2.7 Household waste disposal:

- The Board heard the savings proposed for this service in 2021/22 will largely be achieved through operational efficiency savings. The Board suggests Cabinet considers amending the description of the savings proposal and its impact in the Savings Plan to reflect this.

2.8 Future years performance targets:

- The Board observed that for a number of the performance targets in the Business Services draft Portfolio Plan, the future years targets were set below the level achieved at outturn. The Board commented that the department could consider setting more ambitious targets where appropriate.

Summary Comments to Cabinet

2.9 The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board congratulates officers in putting together a budget for 2021/22 in difficult circumstances and acknowledges the uncertainty that is present in the budget setting process. The Board looks forward to receiving an updated MTFP at Cabinet in January 2021 and considers that it is important to also look at the potential impacts of Covid-19 on future budgets.

2.10 Covid-19 has accelerated a number of changes in the economy such as more home working and locally based businesses. The whole economy has shifted, and the Council will need to review the services it provides in that context. The Council needs to be sure footed and flexible to react to changes in the economy and Council Tax and Business Rate bases which will affect the Council's income.

2.11 If longer term funding arrangements ease or improve (e.g. a long term solution for Adult Social Care funding is found) the Council should be ready with the priorities for where it would like to invest in services as we recover from the impacts of Covid-19.

2.12 The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board believes that the focus should be on help and support for residents and the local economy. At the heart of this will be investing in highways and support for local businesses, as well as the increasing importance of broadband and access to the internet for everyone in the community. The existing work in Economic Development, Skills and Growth; Superfast Broadband; Highways Maintenance and; Library Services all support these key service areas and should be considered for further investment should the opportunity arise.

3. People Scrutiny Committee

3.1. The People Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board met on the 17 December 2020 and agreed a number of comments and recommendations to be put on behalf of the parent committee to Cabinet for its consideration in January 2021. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of a 2020 Spending Round briefing, the latest information regarding budget proposals and the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health Department and the Children's Services Department.

3.2. The comments of the People Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board are set out below:

Adult Social Care and Health

3.3. The Board welcome that no new savings are proposed for the coming year financial year but remain concerned that any further savings could lead to significant reductions in the services provided by the Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) Department. The Board are also supportive of using the Adult Social Care 3% precept and recommend it is used over a two-year period and that the impact of the additional funding is closely monitored.

3.4. The Board also reviewed the contents of the draft Adult Social Care and Health Portfolio Plan. Key discussion points included:

- the long-term impact of reduced access to face-to-face sexual health services (caused by the need to have in place Covid-19 service model restrictions). Given its concern, the Board requested further information about the support being provided.
- with regard to the Performance Measures and Targets section of the draft portfolio plan, and in response to a query about how targets are set, the Board were provided with clarification about the Department's approach to developing targets which are challenging and realistic in the context of the pandemic.
- the scale of food poverty in the county and how the Department gathers data which enables it to understand the level of need. Given its concern about the long-term impact of food poverty, the Board requested further information about the support being provided.
- the Board are keen that new ways of working are developed in response to the challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Members therefore welcomed the department's ASCH Programme, an initiative that aims to build on the lessons learnt from responding to the pandemic and ensure new working practices which deliver improved customer service and efficiencies are embedded.

Children's Services

3.5. The Board are particularly concerned about the potential impact of planned savings and the pandemic on services provided by the Children's Services Department. This includes a concern that there may be 'hidden impacts' which may only become apparent in the medium to long term. In particular, the Board are concerned about savings relating to elements of Early Help and Safeguarding services. The Board therefore welcomed the proposal to defer for a further year savings relating to these areas of activity. However, Councillors Ungar and Webb requested that their opposition to any planned or other savings are noted in the comments to Cabinet.

3.6. The Board also reviewed the content of the draft Portfolio Plan for Children's Services and sought clarification regarding a number of issues. This included clarification

about the department's approach to helping families with the most complex needs and the reasons for considering whether to develop increased capacity at children's homes.

General comments to Cabinet

3.7. The Board expressed regret that it again had not been possible for the Council to develop budget proposals within the context of a three-year financial planning process. The Board also agreed to emphasise the importance of achieving a balanced budget which recognises the pressures on both the Adult Social Care and Health and Children's Services Departments.

3.8. In the context of the unprecedented challenges the pandemic has presented, the Board also agreed to report to Cabinet its acknowledgement of the high-quality nature and range of services provided by staff in both the Adult Social Care and Health and Children's Services Departments. The Board also commended the work of other partner organisations such as borough and district councils and the voluntary sector.

4. East Sussex Wider Strategic Partners

4.1. The Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Officers held a virtual meeting with representatives of the Council's wider strategic partners on 8 January 2021. Participants in the meeting were from public, voluntary and private sector organisations and service user groups. 28 partner organisations were represented in the meeting and ESCC is grateful to all partners for the comments and feedback provided.

4.2. The Leader took the opportunity at the start of the session to reflect on how tremendously challenging the last year had been for all people, organisations and businesses in East Sussex. Flexible, innovative and committed partnership working had been fundamental to the success of the pandemic response so far and it would continue to be key to supporting residents, particularly the most vulnerable, through the coming challenging months.

4.3. A presentation was then given, which covered the context to this year's budget setting and the latest financial position for 2021/22. Partners were updated on how the coronavirus pandemic had changed the way the Council worked and the impact the pandemic, and accompanying economic uncertainty, was expected to have on future need for Council services. Partners were also reminded of the ongoing financial challenge generated by the need to meet demographic pressures with stretched resources. Partners were updated on how the announcements made in the Spending Review had impacted the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP); how previously proposed savings had been reprofiled; and the Capital Programme. Partners were asked for views and feedback on what the Council should take into account in applying the ASC Levy in 2021/22 and 2022/23. The ongoing importance of joint lobbying was emphasised, to press for appropriate and sustainable resources to meet the needs of East Sussex residents. Lobbying undertaken with partners to date had helped secure additional resources and meant the Council had not needed to find additional savings for 2021/22.

4.4. After the presentation, the following questions, comments and feedback were provided by partners:

- The County Council's commitment and approach to honest and transparent partnership working was welcomed by partners, as it enabled challenging conversations to take place in a constructive way and ensured that the best possible use was made of collective resources to meet the needs of East Sussex residents.

- Partners asked whether the change to increased remote working had created opportunities for the County Council to consider sale or lease of some of its properties. ESCC was reviewing its office portfolio to consider what buildings the Council needed now, and would require in the future, to deliver services effectively and efficiently. This review would consider how the Council could embed the benefits of increased remote and digital working, while recognising that an entirely remote-working model was not possible for many services or optimal for team working and staff wellbeing. Parts of County Hall had been shut to ensure financial and emissions savings were made from reduced cleaning and heating while national COVID guidance required many staff to work from home. The Council also had a Property Asset Disposal and Investment Strategy which ensured any buildings were disposed of as soon as they were surplus, which often involved sale or lease to partners at a peppercorn rate. Council buildings that were potentially available for lease or sale were shared through the Strategic Property Asset Collaboration in East Sussex (SPACES) programme, which public and voluntary sector partners were represented on. Partners were also encouraged to contact Chief Officers directly if there were specific ESCC buildings they were interested in leasing, buying or sharing.
- It was recognised that voluntary sector partners had been highly successful in leveraging additional funding into the county to support the COVID response, but that this left those organisations in a vulnerable financial position if and when those funding streams ended.
- Clarity on savings planned for 2021/22 was sought and it was confirmed that savings attributed to the Early Help Service in 2021/22 reflected the full savings generated from the closure of children's centres and end to provision of nurseries in Bexhill in 2020, following the review of the Early Help Service. All other planned savings in the Safeguarding and Early Help services had been deferred to 2022/23 in recognition of the pressure families and communities were under. This was welcomed by partners and groups that represented parents and carers.
- Partners asked how the coronavirus pandemic had impacted demand on Children's Services and it was confirmed that the number of Looked After Children had remained relatively stable, although there had been movement in children moving in and out of the service. The Council recognised that those working with children and young people in the county had gone above and beyond to ensure their safety was maintained in the pandemic and partners were asked to convey the Council's huge gratitude to all, including parent and foster carers.
- The particular impact of the pandemic on young people and their future opportunities was noted and it was confirmed that Children's Services would continue to target its support to the most vulnerable.
- Partners asked if the Council could afford not to take any ASC Levy, or to not take the full levy in 2021/22. The decision on how to apply the ASC Levy would take a range of factors into account, including the financial pressures facing residents this year; that prudent planning and decisions taken to date meant we did not necessarily need to take the full levy in 2021/22; but that there was a need to safeguard social care services given future funding uncertainty, anticipated additional pressures arising from the pandemic and large gaps projected in future years of the MTFP.
- The very significant pressures the whole health and social care system was currently under in responding to the second wave of coronavirus cases was noted and would need to be factored into planning alongside longer term demographic pressures.

4.5. Partners were encouraged to contact the Leader, Deputy Leader or Chief Officers if they wished to any make further comments on the budget following the meeting.