

1. Trade union representatives

1.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 20 January 2021 to consult on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2021/22.

1.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade unions, and the staff they represent, for their hard work over the last year keeping services running in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. The Leader explained that the financial position this year was less challenging than previously. This was because lobbying by the Council with its partners across the sector had led to Government announcing additional grant funding and Council Tax flexibilities in the Spending Review in November. These provisions, combined with some savings planned in the Medium Term Financial Plan, had allowed the Council to balance its budget this year.

1.3. The Leader said the decision as to whether to increase Council Tax this year would not be taken lightly and the Council was very aware of the challenging times facing residents. The Council, however, continued to face significant uncertainty beyond next year and funding raised from Council Tax and the Adult Social Care (ASC) Levy would allow the Council to safeguard social care services where there were significant pressures. The Leader pledged to continue to lobby the Government strongly to deliver a sustainable funding settlement for local government, and for social care in particular, in the longer-term.

1.4. The Assistant Chief Executive outlined the budget proposals to be considered by the Cabinet and the detail of the provisions made in the Spending Review that enabled officers to present a balanced budget this year. These included £2.5m additional one-off social care grant funding; estimated £1m compensation for 75% of irrecoverable Council Tax and Business Rates in 2020/21, lost as a result of Covid-19; £2.6m in Council Tax Support Grant to support households unable to afford Council Tax payments next year; and £4.5m generated through a proposed 1.5% Adult Social Care Council Tax precept. The precept was in addition to a 1.99% increase in Council Tax, meaning the planned council tax increase for 2021/22 was 3.49%. Savings of £864k were also required but it had been possible to defer some planned savings in Children's Social Care (in the family key work and safeguarding services) due to the additional funding settlement and in recognition of the pressure families were under as a result of the pandemic.

Lobbying

1.5. Trade union representatives welcomed the lobbying undertaken over the past year by the Council and asked for further details about it.

1.6. The Leader had written on behalf of the Council to the Chancellor and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government about funding needs. The Council also contributed to national lobbying via the County Councils Network (CCN), the Local Government Association and with partners in the South East 7. Lobbying on funding focussed on the need for a sustainable long term funding settlement, recognising the uncertainty created by Covid-19 had made that difficult for Government to deliver this year.

1.7. The Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities added that extensive lobbying of MPs had taken place, and the frequency of meetings with MPs had increased during the pandemic. Members who were also Members of district and borough councils were also lobbying via the District Council Network. The Director of Children's Services confirmed lobbying of the Department for Education on issues impacting East Sussex children and families took place through the CCN, as the Leader was the Chair of their Children and Young People's Board; and through officer groups such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

Health and social care integration

1.8. Trade union representatives asked for an update on health and social care integration work in East Sussex and for further detail on the reset of activities referred to in the Cabinet report.

1.9. The Director of Adult Social Care explained that the integration programme had not progressed as expected this year due to the pandemic but that the significant progress achieved in the several years the programme had been running had put the whole health and social care system in a strong position for responding to the pandemic. It had helped the Council continue to flexibly and effectively deliver services, for example, through the integrated community services teams comprising district nurses and social care workers.

1.10. The reset of plans for integration during 2021/22 included undertaking those activities originally planned for 2020/21, such as greater care coordination; further locality team integration, including developing stronger links with Primary Care Networks (PCNs); and shared access to a single data source but informed by the lessons learned from Covid-19 to ensure we built on progress made during the response. The integration programme would also take into account the proposals in the NHS England consultation document on the structure of Integrated Care Systems.

Early Help and Safeguarding Services

1.11. Trade union representatives asked for more detail on the Early Help and Safeguarding Services savings planned over the Medium Term Financial Plan.

1.12. The Director of Children's Services explained that the savings for 2021/22 were generated by the decision taken in 2019/20, following a review of the Early Help Service, to cease running services from 10 Children's Centres and two nurseries. The two nurseries were closed on 31st December 2020, so the effect of those savings would be realised during 2021/22, as they had run for a portion of 2020/21.

1.13. The Director explained that the 2022/23 savings for the Safeguarding and Early Help services included the reduction of family group conferences services; reduction in specialist drug and alcohol assessment teams; and reduction in the family key work service. These were savings identified for an earlier iteration of the Medium Term Financial Plan but had been able to be deferred repeatedly due to additional one-off funding received each year. The ability to do so again this year was very positive as the savings would have a significant impact. The need to take the savings in future was dependent on whether the Council received a fair funding settlement that adequately reflected pressures on Children's Services and our lobbying would continue to press for that.

Council Tax

1.14. Trade union representatives had concerns about the impact of an increase in Council Tax, particularly as East Sussex already had high rates, and asked how the planned increase in East Sussex compared to elsewhere in the country. Trade unions also suggested the Council should work to increase residents' awareness of why Council Tax increases were necessary.

1.15. The Leader said that a number of factors had been considered by officers in making the recommendation of a 3.49% total increase. The Council was very conscious of the huge burdens facing residents and due to prudent decisions in the past and success with lobbying, it was not necessary to recommend taking the full 3% ASC Levy this year, which would have meant a 4.99% increase. The Leader agreed it was important to try to increase

awareness that Council Tax increases were necessary to fund pressures in adults and children's social care, and thereby did not fund an increase in the universal service offer; but that it was a challenging situation to communicate as the majority of residents did not come into contact with social care services so were not familiar with the work the Council spent the majority of its budget on.

1.16. The Leader confirmed the comparison tables of councils' Council Tax levels would be published once local authorities' budgets were set. However, the Leader knew that ESCC's planned increase was below those proposed by most of our regional neighbours, who planned to take the full 3% ASC Levy increase in 2021/22.

Savings

1.17. Trade union representatives welcomed the stable position the Council was in this year but acknowledged there were still savings to be made, including in delivering the Keep Sustainability Plan and that the decision to reduce hours there could create a need for redundancies. Further detail was also requested on the savings proposed for Trading Standards in 2022/23 and 2023/24.

1.18. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport confirmed that every effort would be made to minimise redundancies following the reduction in opening hours at the Keep. The Trading Standards savings would involve a reduction in the more routine inspections and preventative work of the team. The service would continue to fulfil its statutory role to keep people safe through high risk food sampling and animal health disease control.

Climate Change

1.19. Trade union representatives asked whether the Council could have gone further to address climate change with its budget proposals, particularly with more investment in cycle paths and public walkways given the health benefits they can also have to residents.

1.20. The Leader and Director of Communities, Economy and Transport responded that the Council knew the Climate Change response was a hugely important part of its work and that there needed to be cross-Council consideration of the way all decisions and activities impacted our ambitions to reduce carbon emissions.

1.21. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport said that the Council was clear on its ambitions, having declared a Climate Emergency; and the Transport for South East Sub-National Transport Body, which was chaired by the Leader, had set out a plan for net carbon neutral transport across the South East by 2050. The Director agreed efforts to increase cycling and walking was an important part of tackling climate change as the Council could affect action on climate change in three main ways – via reducing emissions from the Council estate, developing greener transport infrastructure, and by encouraging people to adopt greener behaviours.

1.22. The Director outlined the range of specific work the Council was doing to tackle climate change, including work to reduce carbon emissions from, and make improvements to, its own estate; including being one of the first councils to install electric charging points for its pool fleet at County Hall.

- Cabinet would consider a scrutiny report on 26 January with a series of recommendations on how it could reduce its carbon emissions from its own activities.
- Making ongoing investments in improving walking and cycling infrastructure as part of its capital programme; and developing a Local Walking and Cycling Investment Plan to enable bids for a share of the £2bn Government capital funding for cycling and walking infrastructure.

- Using the Local Transport Plan to influence people's behaviour through the promotion of cycling and walking and public transport; and
- Using its convening power to encourage greener decisions and behaviours among residents.

Divestment

1.23. The trade union representatives asked for an update on County Council plans for divestment from fossil fuels.

1.24. The Chief Finance Officer confirmed a report with an update on the position of the East Sussex Pension Fund would be reported to the 1st March Pension Committee.

Future Years

1.25. Trade union and County Council representatives concluded by acknowledging what a challenging year it had been for staff and that the ongoing uncertainty in funding for local government added to challenges for teams and staff. The Leader thanked trade unions for their work to support staff and all agreed that open and early communication would continue to be important for managing the challenges that would be faced in the years ahead.