

Feedback from Engagement Exercises

1. People Scrutiny Committee

1.1 The People Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 13 December and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent committee, for its consideration in January 2022. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of relevant extracts of the Local Government Association's briefing on the Autumn Budget and Spending Review and the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health Department and the Children's Services Department.

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

Adult Social Care and Health

1.3 The Board received an update from the Director of Adult Social Care on the reforms to Adult Social Care (ASC) announced in 2021, focussing particularly on the most recent announcements made in the ASC Reform white paper. The Board clarified the Council's latest understanding on the detail of the reforms and expected implementation in East Sussex.

1.4 The Board were concerned that important detail was still awaited from Government on how the ASC reforms to charging announced earlier in the autumn would be implemented in practice, as this is needed to undertake informed budget and service planning, particularly given the potential impact the reforms could have on ASC. The Board also questioned whether the ambitions of the latest ASC reform White Paper, particularly the ambition to deliver tailored care, were achievable in light of the underlying service and workforce pressures facing the Department and wider care system.

1.5 The Board welcomed the draft Portfolio Plan for Adult Social Care and Health and supported the priorities and plans set out within it. No changes were requested. In discussing the plan and the Department's work, the Board:

- highlighted the importance of ensuring new and existing housing was accessible to enable people to stay in their own homes for as long as possible;
- encouraged consideration of options for alternative models of care, which the Director confirmed the Department and care providers actively explore;
- sought assurance on the latest position in face-to-face delivery of ASC services following disruption earlier in the pandemic; and
- discussed measures to improve workforce recruitment and retention, welcoming recent success in recruiting Newly Qualified Social Workers.

Children's Services

1.6 The Board received an update from the Director of Children's Services on the Department's priorities for the coming year, including in responding to national policy changes and delivering priorities and programmes outlined in the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan. The Board discussed these areas and:

- requested information on the potential impact of the Government's ambitions for all schools to join a multi academy trust and remove school improvement grants to local authorities;

- asked about the mechanisms in place to ensure inclusion and the roles of schools in the community was upheld when schools joined academies trusts; and
- sought assurance social workers had manageable and safe case-loads, which the Director confirmed the Department monitored closely and took steps to address when they were too high.

1.7 The Board agreed to report to Cabinet that they are very concerned about the potential for savings to be made in the Early Help service.

1.8 The Board supported the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan and the plans and priorities within it.

General comments to Cabinet

1.9 The Board were disappointed the Levelling Up White Paper has not been published in line with the Government's original timeline, as it was expected that the further detail this would provide on the levelling up agenda would have a range of implications for the County Council that the Board were keen to understand.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1 The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board met on 16 December 2021 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 Local Government Financial Settlement for 2022/23.

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

2.3 The RPPR Board is supportive of the work being done by the departments within its remit and did not propose any changes to the draft Portfolio Plans. The Board commented that it was difficult to make comments on the budget without knowing the impact of the Local Government Provisional Settlement on the Council's MTFP. The Board may make further comments after the details of the Settlement are available and the impact is known.

2.4 The Board discussed the relationship between capital and revenue spending on highways maintenance, and whether a case could be made for further investment in highways in order to improve the condition of roads and pavements. The Board also noted the role of highway drainage in preserving and maintaining roads in good condition.

Summary Comments to Cabinet

2.5 The comments that the Place RPPR Board would like to make to Cabinet are:

- The Place RPPR Board is supportive of the work being carried out by Governance Services, Business Services and the Communities, Economy and Transport departments as outlined in the draft Portfolio Plans and has no suggested changes to the Portfolio Plans.
- The Board discussed the case for making further capital investment in highways maintenance, and the relationship with ongoing revenue budget expenditure, in order to improve the condition of roads and pavements in East Sussex. This may be something that the Place Scrutiny Committee may wish to explore further in the future.

- The Place RPPR Board has found it difficult to make detailed comments on the budget without knowing the impact on the Council's MTFP of the Local Government Provisional Settlement.

3. East Sussex Wider Strategic Partners

3.1 The Leader, Deputy Leader and Chief Officers held a virtual meeting with representatives of the Council's wider strategic partners on 5 January 2022. 29 partner organisations were represented in the meeting, from public, voluntary and private sector organisations and service user groups.

3.2 The Leader opened the session and thanked partners for joining, as it was a valuable opportunity for partners to provide feedback, help shape ESCC's planning for the year ahead and ensure our priorities were aligned wherever possible, to achieve the best outcomes for residents and make the best use of collective resources.

3.3 The Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer then delivered a presentation which provided an overview of the evidence base that underpins ESCC's Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) planning for 2022/23; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2022/23 onwards; and updates to the Capital Programme. The presentation explained that although following announcements in the autumn Spending Review and provisional Local Government Finance Settlement ESCC expected to be in a stable financial position for 2022/23, future years were much more uncertain. This was due to planned changes to the way local authorities are funded, uncertainty regarding the long-term impact of COVID on service demand, and an expectation that new pressures would arise from planned policy changes, particularly in Adult Social Care. For this reason, partners were updated that joint lobbying would continue to be very important to ensure ESCC and the county received sufficient funding in future.

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

- Partners were supportive of - and acknowledged the need for - joint lobbying, recognising the challenge the Council and county faced in advocating for the particular needs of East Sussex (which were distinctive to large parts of the wider South East region) to ensure they were met as part of the Government's levelling up agenda. Partners suggested that producing a short summary of opportunities, challenges and asks for the county could be useful and support partners in lobbying they undertook through their networks. The Council welcomed the offer and agreed that partners' voices could be particularly powerful and bolster the County Council's lobbying. It was agreed that development of a summary of opportunities, challenges and asks for the county would be best developed following publication of the Levelling Up White Paper so that it could be positioned effectively within that agenda.
- The opportunity to link up with health partners and others on the planning and delivery of overarching agendas that all were working on, such as increasing the use of digital technology and delivering carbon neutrality, was noted. ESCC was confident that it was well-aligned in its planning with partners on areas where services worked closely together or were commissioned/ delivered jointly (for example, health and social care integration) but recognised there could be more opportunities to align on broader agendas and would ensure this was picked up in future Council planning.

- The Chair of the East Sussex Parent Carers Forum highlighted the response from parent carers to engagement undertaken as part of the recent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) Comprehensive Needs Assessment of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in East Sussex. This had highlighted that the current system of provision was not seen by parent carers to be working effectively to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. The opportunity and need to invest now to support the needs of children and young people with SEND to ensure that challenges and disadvantage they face were not amplified by the pandemic was also emphasised. The Leader gave assurance that the delivery of the national SEND Review was a priority lobbying ask for the Council. The Council was feeding into extensive work taking place nationally to inform the SEND Review, including through the Leader's role as spokesperson for Children's and Young People's issues on the County Councils Network. The Director of Children's Services said that it was often challenging for the Council to meet the expectations parents had for their children within resources available. The Council also wanted to ensure children with additional needs were provided for in mainstream education where appropriate to support better outcomes for children. The Government had provided additional funding for SEND through schools funding and ESCC was providing additional placements in special schools which was expected to help to address pressure on resources while the outcome of the SEND Review, and more fundamental reform to the system, was awaited.
- Recent increases in inflation and the related increase in the cost of living was noted, along with the challenges this presented for meeting staff pay requirements and recruitment and retention of staff across all organisations. Partners asked how the Council planned for and addressed this. It was confirmed that inflation is factored into the MTFP, using indices provided by the Office of Budget Responsibility, and within specific contracts. ESCC recognised it would need to review and consider how inflation was factored into contracts tendered in light of the expected increases in inflation in 2022/23, longer term budget pressures and uncertainty of future funding. ESCC also agreed that focus on retention of staff would be needed in the coming months and knew that pay was an important part of staff satisfaction in their jobs. However, the Council also knew pay was only one of a number of factors that contributed to job satisfaction and staff also needed to be well-trained, supported, connected to the community they served and to partners, so this was also a focus of work to maintain retention.
- The recognition in the presentation of the significant challenges facing the social care sector was welcomed, as partners confirmed the coronavirus pandemic had been tremendously difficult and had a huge impact on the sector, particularly on the recruitment and retention of staff. The forthcoming ASC reforms to charging were expected to have a further significant impact on the sector so partners confirmed the need for lobbying to ensure the impact of the changes were appropriately understood and funded by Government, and were committed to continued partnership working on this. ESCC agreed that the challenges in recruitment and retention of staff in social care were significant and difficult to address as they related to a labour shortage for care work.
- Partners welcomed the comprehensive presentation, the information on ESCC's financial position provided and the positive financial position the Council expected to be in for 2022/23. ESCC acknowledged this position was only possible as a result of prudent financial management over many years. This had required very difficult decisions and delivery of significant savings in the last decade to maintain balanced budgets, which the Council knew had had an impact on partners and residents, but had ensured stability now.

- Challenges facing Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners in continuing current levels of service following the end to one-off COVID funding in March were outlined. ESCC recognised the challenges facing the VCS, really valued the work the sector delivered in the county and had worked hard to ensure one-off COVID funding allocated by Government was distributed to the sector as quickly as possible for this reason throughout the pandemic. While ESCC could not commit to continue the one-off funding when the allocations from Government ended, the challenges facing the sector would continue to be considered by ESCC in its future planning.
- Further detail on the saving planned in Children's Services in 2022/23 was requested. It was explained that the saving planned was to reduce spending in the early help service. This saving had originally been identified when the Council developed its Core Offer and had been deferred over a number of years since, in recognition of the pressure families and communities were under. This, and other planned savings, would be reviewed in developing the final budget proposals.
- The County Council's commitment to partnership working was welcomed by partners, and the innovative, open and challenging, but positive, relationships partners had with officers across the organisation was strongly valued.

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