

Feedback from Engagement Exercises

1. People Scrutiny Committee

1.1. The People Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 16 December 2022 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2023. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2022;
- a summary of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Local Government Finance Policy Statement 2023/24 – 2024/25; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health and the Children's Services Departments.

1.2. The Board met before the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023 to 2024 was published on 19 December 2022. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer at their meetings on the finance briefings circulated and asked clarifying questions on publication of Council Tax limits and specific grants.

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

Adult Social Care and Health

1.4. The Board received an update from the Director of Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) on the draft ASCH portfolio plan, and noted that the delay to implementation of the planned reforms to Adult Social Care charging would provide greater capacity for the Department to focus on delivery of other priority plans and agendas in the coming year. These included:

- Working with health partners to deliver the Sussex Integrated Care Strategy and its pan-Sussex priorities to grow and support the health and care workforce, improve the use of digital technology and information, and support stronger partnerships and collaboration at a locality level.
- Developing an integrated community model to strengthen links between community health and social care services, borough and district councils, and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and ensure a joined up offer in East Sussex.
- Preparing for reintroduction of Care Quality Commission assurance inspections in 2023.
- Working with partners to: maximise financial inclusion and coordinate a cross-sector response to the rising cost of living; provide support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, including through ongoing delivery of the Homes for Ukraine scheme; and build community networks, with this work all brought together under a new Partnerships Team.

1.5. The Board welcomed the draft Portfolio Plan for ASCH and supported the priorities and plans set out within it, which responded to strategic challenges for ASCH (such as around workforce, digitisation and safeguarding) that the Committee had considered in the last year. No changes were requested.

1.6. The Board had concerns about the ongoing real-terms reduction to the Public Health Grant that had been signalled nationally. The Board received assurances that uncertainty around future allocations was factored into planning and any reductions in the grant in 2023/24 would be managed through the Public Health Reserve.

Children's Services

1.7 The Board received an update from the Director of Children's Services, Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability and Lead Member for Children and Families on the Department's priorities for the coming year, outlined in the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan.

1.8 The Board discussed the draft plan and priority areas of work outlined, and asked:

- if health visiting targets were being met, which the Director confirmed was an area of focus and challenge for the service;
- about challenges with recruitment in, and community access to, schools;
- questions to understand the Department's strategy around use of Special School Placements and mainstream provision in meeting Special Educational Needs (SEN), and the role of cost and parental choice in determining provision;
- about mechanisms for assessing the performance of, and inclusion in, academies;
- about progress with reshaping the internal structures of the Education Division; and
- about parental concerns around SEN provision potentially driving increasing numbers of children being Electively Home Educated.

1.9 The Board supported the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan and the plans and priorities within it. No changes were requested.

1.10 The Board agreed that, in light of previous updates the Committee had received on particular challenges with improving school attendance in the county, the Board was supportive of the Department's work to improve school attendance and that this should be a priority area of focus in the coming year.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1. The Place Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 22 December 2022 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2023. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2022;
- a summary of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Local Government Finance Policy Statement 2023/24 – 2024/25; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Communities, Economy and Transport, Business Services and Governance Services Departments.

2.2. The Board met after the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023 to 2024 was published on 19 December 2022. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer at their meeting on the implications of the provisional Settlement for the Council's financial position and the specific grant allocations, where these were known. The Board were also able to ask clarifying questions on the financial briefings and any implications for the Council.

2.3. The Board reviewed the draft portfolio plans for the three departments within its remit and asked a number of questions about the services and future plans for each department. The Board did not recommend any changes to the draft portfolio plans and considered them within the context of the emerging financial outlook for the Council.

2.4. The comments of the Place Scrutiny RPPR Board are set out below.

Comments to Cabinet

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement

2.5. The Chief Finance Officer provided the Board with further detailed information on the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement. Overall, this will mean an estimated increase in the Core Spending Power of the Council of 9.8% (assuming that the Council exercises the option for the maximum increase in Council Tax). This includes an increase of almost £14 million in the Social Care Grant which will go some way to meeting cost pressures the Council is facing in these areas.

2.6. Although the Fair Funding Review has been delayed until after the current Parliament ends in 2025, there is a greater degree of financial certainty regarding the funding position for the Council over next two financial years than had been anticipated.

2.7. The RPPR Board welcomed the relatively positive provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, and that additional grant funding had been provided in a number of areas.

Savings

2.8. No new savings have been planned for 2023/24 whilst awaiting more detail on the Council's future funding position. The Board heard that the information contained in the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement confirms that there will not be a requirement to identify new areas for savings in the next financial year.

2.9. The Board welcomed that there will be no requirement for new savings in 2023/24.

Income Generation

2.10. The RPPR Board notes that income generation as well as savings can help with meeting the budget pressures the Council faces. The Board heard that all Council departments regularly review the opportunities for income generation both through new initiatives and increasing existing fees and charges.

2.11. The Board considers that the Communities Economy and Transport department should continue to consider the opportunities for income generation, such as the equalisation of some on street parking charges across different Civil Parking Enforcement schemes and use the income to invest in areas such as transport improvement schemes and highways maintenance.

Reserves and one-off investment of Services Grant

2.12. The Board noted that the Government is looking at the level of reserves held by councils. As part of the Council's financial planning Cabinet had previously agreed to hold the majority of the £5.175 million Services Grant in reserves, rather than committing it to one-off investment projects, until there was more certainty about the Council's financial position.

2.13. The Board asks that Cabinet, through the RPPR process, considers re-instating some of the one-off investment proposals such as the speed limit survey and measures to improve road safety to reduce the number of Killed and Seriously Injured (KSI) incidents in the County.

Communities, Economy and Transport (CET) Portfolio Plan - Community Match Fund

2.14. The RPPR Board notes that the Community Match capital fund has been undersubscribed with a lower number of bids submitted by community groups. This is in part due to the cost of some schemes requiring a large amount of match funding to meet the 50% match funding requirement, which can be beyond the capacity of some community groups and smaller Parish Councils. The Board recommends that if the Community Match Fund continues to be underspent, consideration is given to reviewing the contribution level required by community groups and raising the amount the Council contributes (e.g. 50% - 70% funding provided by the Council for larger schemes).

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 6 January 2023. 32 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 2023/24; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2023/24 onwards; and updates to the Capital Programme. The presentation explained that following announcements in the Autumn Statement and provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, ESCC expected to be in a stable financial position for 2023/24, and there were no plans to seek any new savings. However, the financial position further ahead was much more uncertain and there was a recognition of the impact that the national economic context and cost of living pressures were having on demand for council services and their cost of delivery, and that partners were experiencing similar pressures. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, expected policy changes, in particular reforms to adult and children's social care, and repeated one year financial settlements were additional challenges that meant there was long-term financial uncertainty. ESCC remained committed to partnership working wherever possible, and 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:

- The high rate of inflation was noted as a significant challenge and partners asked whether the rise had impacted on the Council's 10-year Capital Programme. It was confirmed that inflation is factored into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and Capital Programme, using indices provided by the Office of Budget Responsibility and industry specific indices. In addition, many of the Council's contracts have price fluctuation clauses included in them which offer protection from some of the impacts of inflation, however the current high inflation rate meant the Council may ultimately not be able to do as much as it had planned to. The inflation rate was a national issue that ESCC was not in a position to solve and which the Government had committed to reducing as a priority. The Chief Finance Officer added that rising interest rates would result in increased returns from investments, generating extra income which could offset some additional costs.

- Partners also noted the impact that the high rate of inflation was having on their costs, in particular in the adult social care sector where a large proportion of staff are paid close to the level of the national living wage. ESCC reassured partners that it was aware that the associated costs of high inflation were putting pressures on their budgets. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health explained that ESCC was prioritising support for adult social care providers as much as possible, but national funding was necessary to ensure the market would be viable for the future. Partners asked what scope there was for ESCC to provide an inflationary uplift to grants and contracts it had with Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations. It was explained that the MTFP included an allowance for contractual inflationary uplift, however the current rate of inflation was excessively high which meant ESCC could not guarantee an inflation matching uplift to all contracts. Wherever possible, ESCC would engage with partners to discuss any extra support it could provide, as it recognised the importance of the VCSE sector's work in supporting residents and reducing service demand for its own services.
- Partners understood the cost of living pressures people across the county were facing, and noted that this was a significant driver of increased service demand for all. Partners highlighted the importance of welfare and debt advice services and asked for an update on the Council's work to increase financial security and ensure those in need get support. As an individual local authority ESCC could not solve the significant cost of living pressures felt by residents which were driven by national factors, however the work of the Council and partners through the East Sussex Financial Inclusion Group aimed to alleviate some of these pressures. It had worked to signpost residents to financial advice and support services, and maximise benefits claims for those entitled to them. While welfare and debt advice services were under review as part of this work, ESCC recognised that they provided a very important and valuable service at the current time. Responding to concerns on the impact that the rising cost of living was having on families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the Director of Children's Services also highlighted that the Children's Services Department regularly shared updates on cost of living information, advice and guidance with schools, early years settings and other services, and worked closely with the Financial Inclusion Group.
- In light of the significant service demands and pressures being felt in the NHS and social care sector, partners asked for more detail on ESCC's allocation from the Adult Social Care Discharge Fund and how it was being spent. ESCC was working in close partnership with the NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board (ICB) to jointly use local allocations to improve the flow of patients through the health and social care system. The grant was being used to increase the number of social care beds and home care packages. ESCC was also working to increase the capacity of the independent care sector, particularly addressing workforce challenges by recruiting more care staff from overseas. Challenges in the care market were seen as long-term and would require a whole system response to be adequately addressed.
- The Chair of the East Sussex Parent Carers Forum raised a number of concerns impacting on children and young people with SEND, including disparities in attainment, inclusion and support in education, increases in the number of requests for Education, Health and Care Plans, mental health waiting lists and successful appeals at SEND tribunals, and asked whether ESCC's new SEND strategy would do enough to address these issues and ensure ESCC was seen as a source of support. The Leader gave reassurance that councillors and officers were acutely aware of these issues and remained focused on addressing them. The Director of Children's Services recognised

the frustrations felt by many parents and carers of children with SEND and noted that the number of SEND tribunals ruling against ESCC was reflective of the national picture. ESCC aimed to ensure that children were supported both in mainstream schools and in special schools, in the right way to meet their needs. It was committed to working with children, young people, families and schools to ensure that specialist provision was made for the right children and that all children were supported appropriately. The Government had pledged to make a number of reforms to address the current system-wide challenges, and ESCC was keenly awaiting the Government's response to the SEND and Alternative Provision green paper consultation.

- Partners recognised the difficulties in connecting many of the rural parts of the county to the transport network and asked what ESCC was doing to address this. ESCC's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) aimed to provide better value for money for rural bus services, given that many rural bus routes did not have sufficient demand to make them economically viable. The BSIP featured greater use of demand responsive transport and mobility hubs to provide greater rural connectivity to areas that were not covered by conventional bus routes. Demand led services would also help connect rural communities to schools, hospitals and GP surgeries. Building on successful work to improve access to high speed broadband over a number of years, ESCC would continue work to maximise broadband coverage across the county to further support increasing rural connectivity. This would be particularly important in the context of the county's limited transport infrastructure and the trend towards increased remote working.
- Reflecting on the presentation and the current high demand for business space in the county, the Chair of Team East Sussex asked all partners to assess their property portfolios for underutilised assets that could be reclassified for business use, helping to encourage job creation and boost economic growth in the county. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport was supportive of this suggestion.
- Partners found the presentation and discussion informative and helpful, and welcomed the County Council's commitment to partnership working. The innovative, open and positive relationships partners had with officers across the organisation were strongly valued.

3.5 Partners were thanked for providing a clear message on what their priorities were, and they 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.