

## **Item 5 - Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources: Appendix 7 – Engagement Feedback with Youth Voice Groups and Trade Unions**

### **1. Youth Voice Group Representatives**

1.1. The Lead Member for Children and Families, the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND), the Director of Children's Services and officers met with the Youth Cabinet and Young SEND Ambassadors on 23 October 2023 to discuss young people's priorities. The priorities identified were: jobs, money and opportunities; mental health and emotional wellbeing; and school attendance. Young people highlighted the need for increased opportunities for all young people, including those in rural areas, to receive information and guidance on careers and opportunities; the need for co-produced and clear information and guidance on mental health and emotional wellbeing, that promoted self-care and was accessible through a range of channels; and recommended that young people were involved in developing work to improve attendance, focusing on strengthening a sense of belonging at school.

1.2 The Lead Member for Children and Families, the Lead Member for Education and ISEND, the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director, Communication, Planning and Performance then met with the East Sussex Youth Cabinet, Children in Care Council (CICC), Care Leavers Council, and Young SEND Ambassadors on 13 January 2024 to discuss the County Council's budget setting process and young people's priorities for the year ahead.

1.3 A presentation was delivered by young people on the role of youth voice in decision making; with updates on the work of the Youth Cabinet, CICC, Young SEND Ambassadors and Care Leavers Council. A presentation was then delivered by officers on the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources process, the Council's priority outcomes, factors the Council considers in setting its budget each year, and the financial position and priority areas of work in the Council Plan for 2024/25.

1.4 Four questions, developed by young people, were then discussed in small groups with Lead Members, officers and young people. The following areas were covered:

#### **Youth voice in council processes and services**

1.5 One of the groups discussed what the Council was doing to create opportunities for young people to get involved in the reviewing of council processes and services. Young people and adults spoke of the importance of youth voice, and the different ways young people could get involved in decision making, including through the Youth Cabinet, CICC, Leaving Care Council, Young SEND Ambassadors, and Social Care Reference Groups. In addition, there were youth voice opportunities in the youth centres and in other services that the Council manages, such as the Mental Health Support Teams in schools. These groups are brought together several times a year to discuss council services and develop priority work. For example, the Climate Summit for Education Settings that aims to help schools to understand how to meet their environmental targets.

1.6 Young people commented on the importance of ensuring young people were given accessible information that they could understand when involved in reviewing services and the importance of providing feedback on any outcomes, so young people knew they were making a difference. Young people's views about different services were gathered each year,

which were used to make changes to service provision; the Department produced a 'You said, we did' report each year to reflect these changes.

1.7 Communication was a key theme in this discussion, with young people highlighting the importance of listening to young people's needs, particularly for young people in care. Young people fed back that it was important that they were involved in decisions about their care and that they felt understood by social workers.

1.8 Young people spoke about the positive impact of youth voice, noting, "partnership work between the youth voice groups helps us to build a collective sense of identity and pride, and helps us to support each other's priorities."

#### Financial support for young people

1.9 One of the groups discussed how the Council was supporting young people in the face of financial difficulties. Young people heard about the Council's aim to taking a 'whole family' approach to supporting young people, including with difficulties related to money, and that there were resources available to staff on how to provide information to families about financial support. Cost of Living Council webpages also provided information to families, and staff, about financial support available to people in East Sussex.

1.10 Additionally, the Council offers a range of specific support to care leavers over the age of 18. Young people commented that services and staff working with young people should have detailed knowledge about what support was available to young people and their families and recommended that information given to them about finances should be made as accessible as possible, so it is easily understood. They also noted the need to increase support for young people with SEND after leaving care.

1.11 Young people commented that they would like to increase their skills in financial literacy and recommended that youth voice groups have more involvement in related projects, including the Passport to Independence scheme, as they could bring different perspectives and learn from each other. Developing young people's life skills, including financial responsibilities, was also noted as a priority for young people.

#### Mental health and emotional wellbeing

1.12 One of the groups discussed how the Council was improving information about mental health and emotional wellbeing support and services. Young people commented that approaches to support young people with their mental health needed to recognise individual need and that different approaches would be needed for different people. There was also a concern that funding in this area was not being prioritised in some schools and that more training for teachers was needed (the need for more support for teachers was also recognised). In their recommendations to leadership on improving how information on mental health and emotional wellbeing was delivered, young people suggested that communication and information needed to be accessible for all young people, including those with SEND and dyslexia, and that some pupils at school may need additional support to access this information. In response, young people heard that the Council was working to improve its own webpages on the Local Offer, including information about mental health and emotional wellbeing. There was also work with the NHS and other partners to improve the way children, young people, families and professionals in schools, councils and NHS

organisations could find information, including work with a creative organisation to create social media platforms.

1.13 Young People also noted the need to improve mental health services, including improving waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the need to create more incentives for people to want to train as mental health nurses and practitioners. Young people heard there was continued focus on supporting young people's mental health through the Single Point of Advice (SPOA) team; the first point of contact for Children's Social Care, Early Help 0-19 Service, and CAMHS in East Sussex. Professionals and the public could contact the SPOA if they had concerns about the welfare and/or mental health of children and young people in East Sussex. The SPOA would screen referrals within 24 hours and pass to the appropriate service for further assessment and support. This had enhanced the process for identifying and reporting emerging complex needs, ensuring East Sussex Early Help, Children's Social Care and CAMHS teams were engaged at the appropriate level.

1.14 Young people noted the current impacts on mental health, including a lack of provision in schools for mental health support; the internet and social media making more people introverted and detached; and the lasting impact of lockdowns.

#### School attendance and developing a sense of belonging at school

1.15 One of the groups discussed how the Council was helping schools to address that many young people were not feeling a sense of belonging at school. Young people noted the impact Covid lockdowns had had on pupils integrating back into school, especially for pupils in Year 7 and 8, and the significant impact this was having on school attendance. One young person commented that they felt a lack of support for students returning to school after lockdown and it was noted that addressing bullying for all students, but particularly young people with SEND, to enable everyone to feel safe at school, was a priority for young people. Young people felt that schools providing positive extra-curricular activities encouraged more positive and supportive relationships between pupils. Young people recognised the increased workload of, and pressure on, teachers to support to all pupils but spoke of the need to support young people with challenging behaviour to avoid exclusion.

1.16 There was a wider discussion on attendance in schools with everyone recognising that attitudes to education had changed post-Covid; young people commented that schools had become less welcoming and more institutional, and they believed that attendance would improve if teachers had a greater understanding of mental health issues. There was also a comment about the pressure some young people were feeling to improve their attendance and the difficulty some pupils were feeling to return to school after periods of absence.

1.17 Officers described how CSD were working with schools to develop training and guidance to support schools to create warm and welcoming environments, including support with reviewing anti-bullying policies and practices. An Inclusion Conference for schools was organised each year by CSD – this year, its focus was on how schools could support children and young people to have a greater sense of inclusion and wellbeing, and that their individual and diverse needs are better understood.

1.18 Young people heard about Mental Health Support Teams, which included specialist mental health practitioners in schools, who helped schools to take a 'whole school approach'

and to support individual children. However, it was recognised that there was growing demand for mental health support in schools.

## **2. Trade Union Representatives**

2.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 17 January 2024 to consult them on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2024/25.

2.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade union representatives and the staff they represent for their work this year. The Leader noted that, as the report to Cabinet said, the importance of the services provided by the Council had been evident once again this year, and that delivery of those services would not have been possible without the commitment and hard work of staff who continued to respond to growing service pressures and changes. This dedication had been recognised by the Local Government Association team in the peer challenge last year. The Leader noted as detailed in the Cabinet papers, this was the most challenging financial position the Council had seen in years, due to national factors beyond local control which were resulting in growth in need for statutory, demand-led services and increasing costs right across the Council.

2.3. The Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer then delivered a presentation which provided an overview of ESCC's Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources planning for 2024/25; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2024/25 onwards and updates to the Capital Programme; and lobbying priorities in light of this financial position.

2.4. Following the presentation, trade union representatives asked questions and made comments which are outlined below.

### Staff recruitment and retention

2.5. Representatives enquired about any potential changes to staffing due to the current challenging financial situation. The Leader and Chief Executive confirmed there were currently no proposed cuts for 2024/25, other than the final Business Service Department savings from the existing programme.

2.6. Representatives noted the importance of investing in staff wellbeing and welcomed the positive work of the Council to support staff, including through Occupational Health and reasonable adjustments. However, ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention were also noted, despite improved pay, and there were concerns about the high cost of using agency staff for children with complex needs, recently seen in the Children's Services Department (CSD). A question was also asked about any financial implications for the reopening of Lansdowne Secure Children's Home. The Director of CSD responded that over recent years the Department had needed to employ agency staff with particular expertise, and at a high ratio, to support children with very complex needs who had been housed in children's homes due to a lack of suitable placements in independent homes. The Department was prioritising developing a workforce that was flexible and responsive to children's needs in order to reduce spend on agency staff if possible. The Director also confirmed that Lansdowne would open subject to Ofsted approval and was hoping to welcome several children soon. A recent positive visit by the Corporate Parenting Panel had recognised the enthusiasm and commitment of staff. The Director noted that in previous years Lansdowne had generated a small surplus, rather than a significant income, but that it

made an important contribution to the provision of secure accommodation across the country, and she welcomed the recent work with unions, and others, to reset the home.

2.7 In response to the discussion on vacancy rates, the Assistant Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR&OD) assured representatives that every department considered and discussed these through recruitment and retention boards and were working hard to address issues.

### Pay

2.8 Representatives noted the recent announcement by the Government on the increase in the national living wage and asked what impact this had on the Council budget. The Assistant Director of HR&OD confirmed that the ESCC Single Status grades matched the national local government pay grades so there were no staff paid below the national living wage, however this did have implications for the broader care economy.

2.9 Representatives noted the recent local pay awards, and the proposals for 2024/25, and asked how this would affect budget forecasting. Representatives noted differences in pay offered by other local authorities and cited recent industrial action in Brighton & Hove and suggested that this could present challenges with recruitment. Representatives asked if Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) would be conducting a pay review. The Director for ASCH responded that they would continue to monitor staff recruitment issues and would continue to discuss these issues with unions.

2.10 Representatives enquired about the use of external consultants and suggested that costs could be saved by utilising internal skill sets. The Chief Executive clarified the distinction between agency staff and consultants and confirmed that consultants were only brought in where it was justified in terms of capacity or knowledge.

### Service delivery

2.11 Representatives noted the current financial challenges facing the Council and recognised that ESCC had previously made savings responsibly, and over time, which had avoided the need for more extreme measures as taken recently by some other councils. Representatives raised concerns however, that the current projected deficit could impact service delivery and the offer to local residents. The Chief Executive responded to say that the Council would continue to explore a range of approaches, including for example the use of technology, to maintain its offer and staff engagement would be a key part of this planning.

### Prevention

2.12 Representatives raised concerns that the Cabinet papers identified the lack of funding for preventive work which had resulted in services becoming increasingly focused on responding to need. The Leader noted that previous decisions to make savings in preventive work had been extremely difficult and prevention was still a priority for the Council, including working to take forward recommendations in Josh McAllister's independent review on early prevention in Children's Services, and noting that early intervention was a core part of Council services. The Director of CSD reiterated this commitment to prevention, noting the Council's recent investment in Family Safeguarding.

### Lobbying

2.13 Representatives welcomed the ongoing lobbying outlined in the Cabinet papers, and noted the importance of lobbying to ensure councils were able to fund vital preventative work which would reduce the need for more intensive support in the future. It was suggested that future lobbying could include the positive preventative work the Council would be able to undertake, and its benefits, if it had sufficient funds.

2.14 Representatives noted it was important for ESCC and unions to lobby to protect public services and that there also needed to be increased awareness amongst the public about the range of services delivered by the Council. The Chief Executive and Leader assured representatives they were continuing to lobby at both a local and national level, including with MPs.

#### Support for migrants

2.15 Representatives asked if the proposed Government policy to house migrants at Northeye in Bexhill would have any implications on the budget. The Chief Executive confirmed that there was no clear plan for the site and that it is was a Home Office initiative in which the Council was not involved, other than advising the Government on safeguarding. ESCC would not be otherwise involved in the development or operation of the site.

#### Policy changes to social care

2.16 Representatives asked about proposals for a National Care Service and potential impacts on local service delivery. The Director of ASCH responded that current proposals were still unclear and the Council would wait for any further developments (presumably a Green Paper). However, the key to any changes to social care was adequate resources to ensure the Council could deliver the care and support that people need.

#### Highways

2.17 Representatives noted the new highways contract with Balfour Beatty and asked if the Council was seeing improvements to both roads and value for money. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport (CET) welcomed the new contract, which included responsibility of the provider to cover the costs of any failed repairs and noted that the contract aimed to ensure residents received the best outcomes from available resources. The Director also urged representatives to raise awareness of the need for residents to report potholes.

#### Council work on climate change/adaptation

2.18 Representatives noted the importance of the Council reducing carbon emissions, including from school buildings, and asked about planned work in this area. The Director of CET and Chief Operating Officer (COO) outlined the Council's priorities on reducing carbon emissions and climate change adaptation. The work included positive progress towards net zero, including through changes to make council buildings more energy efficient, switching to a green energy tariff, working with staff to collaborate on ideas to make changes and by procurement to reduce scope 3 emissions.

2.19 In terms of adapting to climate change, the Council was investing in a range of work, including improving drainage and heating which was important to reduce impacts on

residents. The Director of CSD also noted that the Council had worked with the Youth Cabinet to produce a charter for schools for action to reduce carbon emissions.

2.20 The Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Resources and Climate Change noted that the Council had a clear strategic approach to carbon reduction, and included schools in those targets, which not all local authorities did. He also noted the positive work in procurement and the work of the Environment Board, which worked with partners on a range of approaches, including work on local nature recovery and biodiversity issues, to reduce carbon emissions.

2.21 Representatives commented on the need to develop local public transport as this had a greater impact than promoting the use of electric vehicles. The Leader noted numerous projects in place, including work with Transport for the South East and the Local Transport Plan currently out for consultation. The Director for CET added that, whilst investment in public transport was a priority, this was still a challenge for rural areas where people were more reliant on their cars. However, initiatives such as the Flexi Bus which aimed to increase opportunities to use public transport, and work on Active Travel to encourage people to walk and cycle, were delivering improvements. Representatives agreed that the benefits of walking and cycling should be promoted and that this relied on continued maintenance of cycle paths to ensure they were safe.

#### Trade Union engagement

2.22 Representatives fed back that they were appreciative of this engagement and felt they were kept informed of changes. Representatives welcomed the updates and noted they would continue to respond to consultations.

2.23 The Leader thanked representatives for the positive feedback and for their input in the session, and confirmed Members and officers would continue to maintain open engagement with trade unions as doing so was important for working together effectively to deliver services. Representatives were encouraged to submit any further comments or feedback before the Full Council meeting where the budget would be agreed.