

Feedback from Engagement Exercises**1. People Scrutiny Committee**

1.1. The People Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 15 December 2023 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2024. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- an RPPR Board overview report;
- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2023;
- an interim report on the responses to the public survey; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) and the Children's Services Departments (CSD).

1.2. The Board met before the provisional local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025 was published and therefore the Board was not able to comment in detail on the Council's budgetary position. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer on the finance briefings circulated and the Government's local government finance policy statement published on 5 December.

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

Financial outlook

1.4. The Board expressed its concern about the financial challenges facing the Council, particularly ASCH and CSD, following the Autumn Statement and subsequent local government finance policy statement. Whilst the Board welcomed the increase to the national living wage and its benefit for local workers, there was also recognition that this would generate additional financial challenges, particularly for ASCH in relation to care fees.

Interim public survey report

1.5. The Board discussed the interim results of the public engagement survey and also noted that, as a snapshot of local views from those who responded, the survey needed to be viewed as part of wider stakeholder engagement. The Board discussed approaches to engagement which were noted by Officers. The Board noted that the results highlighted a preference to prioritise spending on roads, however Members commented that this did not necessarily show the full picture and conversations with residents about care services, for both adults and children, often led to an agreement that spending in this area was also a priority. The Board agreed that more work needed to be done to promote to communities the work and priorities of ASCH and CSD, to raise awareness of the range of services they offer as well as current pressures.

Adult Social Care and Health draft portfolio plan

1.6. The Board received an update from the Director of ASCH on the draft ASCH portfolio plan and the key developments and challenges facing the Department for 2024/2025.

1.7. The Board recognised the impact of the changing demography in East Sussex, most notably the projected ongoing increase in the number of older people, including those with long term illnesses, which was contributing to increased pressures on local services and the ASCH budget.

1.8. The Board wished to acknowledge the ongoing challenge of recruitment in adult social care services and the potential impact of this on service delivery. However, the Board was reassured that this remained a priority area and that targeted work on this had recently reduced the number of vacancies.

1.9. The Board recognised the increasing resources needed to support migrants, and the complexity of the various schemes in place for different migrant groups and welcomed the work the Department was doing to respond to this, working with local partners.

Children's Services draft portfolio plan

1.10. The Board received an update from the Director of CSD on the draft CSD portfolio plan and the key developments and challenges facing the Department for 2024/2025.

1.11. The Board noted the range of responses to social care challenges reflected in the Department's plans and specifically welcomed the recently agreed increase in foster carer payments and viewed this an investment which would result in savings elsewhere through supporting the availability of in-house foster care placements.

1.12. The Board recognised the need for strong mental health support for young people and were reassured that this remained a priority for the Department, as seen through their ongoing work with partners, including the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, and ongoing funding to support mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools.

1.13. The Board recognised the ongoing challenges in education around school attendance and welcomed the prioritisation of work in this area within the Department's Portfolio Plan, including work to reduce the number of pupils on part-time timetables and the number of families electing to home educate (EHE). The Board noted the progress in this area to date, including work from a pilot EHE early intervention programme which had seen a significant reduction in the number of new elective home education applications.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1. The Place Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 6 December 2023 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2024. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- an RPPR Board overview report;
- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2023;
- the draft portfolio plans for the Communities, Economy and Transport (CET), Business Services (BSD) and Governance Services (GS) Departments; and
- an interim report on the responses to the public survey.

2.2. The Board met before the provisional local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025 was published and therefore the Board was not able to comment in detail on the Council's budgetary position.

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

Financial outlook

2.4. The Board noted the impacts of the announcements made in the Government's Autumn Statement on council finances, in particular that there was no further funding for Children's Services where there were particular pressures, and the confirmation of existing grant arrangements for social care. The Board understood that the announced increase in the National Living Wage was likely to have an impact on the Council's financial position through increased wage costs particularly for commissioned services in Adult Social Care.

2.5. The Board noted that the Autumn Statement included an announcement on plans for public sector productivity measures and the expectation to increase productivity growth by at

least half a per cent a year. The Board suggested that Cabinet seeks to clarify what this might mean for local authorities and any potential financial impact on the Council.

2.6. The Board also noted the Government's announcement on offering Level 2 devolution powers to some councils that cover a whole county area. The Board suggested that the Council keeps a watching brief on developments in this area.

Communities, Economy and Transport draft portfolio plan

2.7. Footway Maintenance - The Board discussed whether there was potential to add a performance target for footway (pavement) maintenance, similar to the one used for roads, and the practical constraints in relation to this. The Board suggested that the Place Scrutiny Committee give further consideration to this as part of its ongoing work programme.

2.8. Artificial Intelligence (AI) – The Board noted the potential opportunities and risks of increasing the use of AI in providing council services. The Board suggested that Cabinet explores the opportunities for AI to achieve further efficiencies and improvements in the delivery of services. The Place Scrutiny Committee would wish to be involved in any future work to explore the increased use of AI.

2.9. The Board noted that the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge made a number of recommendations to which the Council has published a response. The Board suggested that actions to address the Peer Challenge recommendations are included in the relevant Portfolio Plans where appropriate (e.g. a review of the partnership arrangements for countywide action on climate change).

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 8 January 2024. 23 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 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.

3.4. Ahead of preparing the budget for 2024/25, ESCC had run a public survey to gather residents' views on the Council's priorities. Although the demography of respondents was not representative of the county as a whole, the overwhelming majority had supported the priorities and favoured lobbying Government to provide more funding to East Sussex. The survey identified highway maintenance and education as particular spending priorities for those that responded. 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.

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

- Partners noted the difficult financial position ESCC was in, reflecting that the challenges seemed starker than they had in previous years. Partners asked what residents could expect from the Council in the face of these challenges, and whether the public survey had informed what residents would accept as a reasonable service level. The Chief Executive said that the public survey was one of many sources, alongside other consultations and engagement work, that the Council used to ensure that its priorities aligned with those of the wider county and its residents. A particular challenge arose from the fact that over 70% of ESCC's budget was spent on the most vulnerable residents, whereas the services available to everyone such as roads and libraries received a much smaller proportion of funding but were more visible. It was therefore difficult to communicate some of the challenges to residents who were not often aware of the scope of services the Council provides. The Director of Children's Services explained in further detail what was behind some of the increasing challenges for the Children's Services Department. ESCC was not unique in the problems it faced in this area, which were largely driven by wider national pressures and changes. These included rising cost of living pressures for families, an unsettling of expectation around regular school attendance since the beginning of the pandemic, increased understanding and awareness of mental health and neurodiversity, and a decline in the number of foster carers. While there was a drive to recruit more foster carers, the decline had increased the Council's exposure to the independent care market which was widely regarded as dysfunctional and subject to profiteering. ESCC remained committed to supporting and getting the best outcomes for all children and young people in the county.
- Partners noted that the public survey had shown that respondents wanted to reduce spending in adults' and children's services in favour of increased investment in roads, and asked whether this was similar to feedback from previous public engagement exercises. The Chief Executive responded that this response reflected that the budgets for adults and children's services were by far the largest, and therefore there was perhaps a perception that there were savings that could be made in these departments, rather than a specific desire to reduce spending in those areas. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health added that everyone is affected by funding to universal services, while most people do not see the areas where the majority of council budget goes. It was also noted that a lot of people were not aware of where funding for some services came from, and local authority care services were often confused with the NHS. The Leader of the Council added that very few residents were aware of how many vulnerable children and adults the Council supported and partners commented that there may be value in developing a narrative to explain to residents that supporting the most vulnerable was to the benefit of the whole county.
- Partners asked about the prospects of the Council's ongoing lobbying work. The Leader of the Council commented that there had been disappointment across the local government sector due the lack of additional funding in the Autumn Statement or Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement despite significant lobbying on the costs of children's social care placements and SEND. ESCC had no intention of reducing the scale or ambition of its lobbying work and would be responding to the consultation on the provisional settlement which remained open. The Chief Executive added that in most previous years the Government had responded to lobbying ahead of the provisional settlement, so it was unfamiliar to have to be lobbying on the same points at this point of the budget setting cycle, but there remained a strong lobbying push in partnership with others. Partners offered to support in lobbying efforts including to try and increase investment into the county via direct Government funding, grants and philanthropy.

- The representative from East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust noted that the pressures being experienced by ESCC were similar to ones in the NHS and the NHS also expected it to be a very difficult financial year. The Leader of the Council commented that there was a strong plan for continued health and care integration in East Sussex and hoped that budget pressures would not reduce the momentum for partnership working.
- Partners expressed their concerns that the ESCC's difficult financial position may result in a further reduction of key preventative services which would have a knock-on impact with increased demand for acute services. In particular partners highlighted their concern on how financial challenges would impact on vulnerable children and young people, and committed to working in partnership to support children and young people and achieve the best outcomes for them in both the short and long term.
- Partners asked whether ESCC could further encourage utility companies to hasten and improve their reinstatement works on the county's road network, noting that this was a source of increasing frustration for many residents, a lot of whom were not aware that it was not ESCC who was responsible for the repairs. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport explained that presently, utility companies had too long a timeframe to complete reinstatement work, and these reinstatements were often done to a standard below ESCC's expectations, but that the Council had limited powers of enforcement due to the low level of fines it could levy on utility companies. To improve this ESCC had submitted a lane rental scheme proposal to the Department for Transport which was awaiting approval, and the Leader of the Council had jointly signed a letter with other local authority Leaders that lobbied for more local powers and oversight that would help local authorities maintain the highway network better.
- Partners asked whether, through the Integrated Care Board (ICB), the NHS had provided additional funding to support adult social care services. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health explained that part of integration of health and social care was moving away from the NHS and social care working and deploying resources separately, and instead use funding collectively to maximum effect. Through the ICB a lot of services were now being jointly planned, delivered and commissioned by ESCC and the NHS, and a proportion of the funding the ICB received for winter had been spent on social care services to help improve hospital discharge rates. The Better Care Fund was another example of NHS funding that was pooled with local authority care budgets to spend on improving social care where appropriate to support the whole system.
- Partners fed back that they had found the presentation and discussion informative and helpful, and welcomed the County Council's ongoing commitment to partnership working. The innovative, open and positive relationships partners had with officers across the organisation were strongly valued. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Global and Civic Engagement at the University of Sussex highlighted the university's Civic University Agreement that aimed to strengthen and improve the university's connections to local communities across Sussex and which he hoped would be a helpful additional forum for partnership working.

3.6. 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 proposals following the meeting.

4. Youth Voice Group Representatives

4.1. 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.

4.2. 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.

4.3. 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.

4.4. 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

4.5. 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.

4.6. 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.

4.7. 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.

4.8. 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

4.9. 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.

4.10. 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.

4.11. 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

4.12. 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.

4.13. 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.

4.14. 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

4.15. 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.

4.16. 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.

4.17. Officers described how CSD was 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.

4.18. 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.

5. Trade Union Representatives

5.1. 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.

5.2. 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.

5.3. 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.

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

Staff recruitment and retention

5.5. 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.

5.6. 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.

5.7. 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

5.8. 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.

5.9. 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.

5.10. 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

5.11. 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

5.12. 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

5.13. 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 preventive work the Council would be able to undertake, and its benefits, if it had sufficient funds.

5.14. 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

5.15. 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

5.16. 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

5.17. 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

5.18. 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.

5.19. 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.

5.20. 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.

5.21. 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

5.22. 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.

5.23. 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.

6. Business Representatives

6.1. The Leader and Deputy Leader, supported by officers, held a remote meeting with business and culture representatives on 22 January 2024 to consult on the Council's budget proposals and draft Council Plan for 2024/25. The Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer

and Assistant Director for Economy delivered a presentation on the policy context and evidence base informing the proposals; the Council's priorities and plans to support economic development in 2024/25; and revenue and capital spending proposals.

6.2. Business and culture representatives welcomed the briefing provided and asked questions and made comments which are outlined below:

Economic Growth

6.3. Attendees welcomed the Council's focus on economic growth, which was felt to be a long term solution to the financial difficulties facing local authorities.

6.4. The development of the new Economic Growth Strategy was welcomed by attendees who noted it was important to consider how the implementation would be funded given the difficult economic situation, particularly when considering the lack of additional funding for upper-tier local authorities, as outlined by the Chief Finance Officer during the presentation. There was concern that financial pressures would limit the level of investment into the local economy outlined in the strategy. The Leader outlined that the Economic Growth Strategy was important and agreed that the implementation required resources, and there was uncertainty around future funding but that the Council would continue to deliver as many of the projects outlined in the strategy as possible.

6.5. The Assistant Director for Economy outlined the importance of external funding in delivering such projects, noting that one of the key aspects of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) transition plan was establishing the Council as an accountable body to deliver new Government funding programmes, and the resources required to deliver them. Similarly, much of the Economic Growth Strategy focused on securing funding from external sources and, most importantly, contained detailed plans which established a strong position to secure this external funding.

6.6. Attendees noted the lack of inquiry into the disparity between previous funding from the European Union (EU) and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which was designed to replace the funding from the EU.

Use of Reserves

6.7. Representatives expressed concerns about the need for the Council to use reserves to balance the budget for 2024/25 and asked about the sustainability of this for future years.

Budget Planning

6.8. Attendees recognised there was continued uncertainty in terms of funding and the national economic situation, and therefore alternative routes for investment would need to be explored.

6.9. It was acknowledged that the Council had made some difficult decisions about service provision in recent years and representatives enquired about any potential future cuts to frontline services to help ease immediate financial pressures. The importance of ESCC's positive work over a number of years had resulted in a better financial position than many other local authorities. It was noted that no changes to service provision were currently planned for 2024/25 as the Council had already implemented the Core Offer and there were implications of below that level.

6.10. Representatives welcomed the Council not seeking further savings in 2024/25, however, attendees noted the difficult and unstable international economic situation which was likely to continue for at least the next two years and which could have an impact on the delivery of local services due to increased costs. Supply chain issues and the decline in international trade were noted as having an impact locally, with a decline in the number of

local businesses trading internationally. These factors also impacted on the amount of foreign direct investment and new jobs locally.

Devolution and Partnership Working

6.11. The focus on partnership working, particularly the Visitor Economy Partnership outlined in the presentation (where ESCC will be forming a partnership with Brighton & Hove City Council and West Sussex County Council), was welcomed by representatives and more information about whether the Council was seeking other opportunities for partnership working was requested, with specific reference to inward investment services. The Leader agreed that any opportunity for partnership working was welcomed when it was effective, however it was important to recognise when this was best achieved at a local level.

6.12. The Assistant Director for Economy noted that the Council had a strong record of partnership working. In terms of the work on inward investment, the economies of neighbouring local authorities were very different with different needs, which needed to be considered in any partnership work, and that each would effectively be competing with each other for inward investment opportunities.

6.13. Business and culture representatives thanked councillors and officers for the detailed presentation on the budget and business planning for the year ahead. The Leader thanked participants for their input.

7. Public Survey Results Summary

7.1. ESCC held an engagement exercise with the public using an online survey which outlined the priorities for the next three years. The survey asked for views on whether the public agreed these are the right priorities and, if not, what suggestions they might have for better ones and, by definition, better use of the Council's budget. The survey was available on the ESCC Citizen Space platform and was also available in other formats, including paper, if required.

7.2. Care should be taken when reading the results as, due to its nature as a self-selecting online survey, the sample is not demographically representative of East Sussex.

7.3. The survey ran for 6 weeks from the 30 October to 10 December 2023. This report is based on 2153 completed questionnaires. The findings were as follows:

- Nearly three quarters (70%) agreed the Council were focussing on the right priorities.
- However, when asked for agreement on the way the Council split the budget, respondents were undecided. Nearly a third (31%) agreed and almost a quarter (24%) disagreed. The highest figure, though, was those saying they neither agreed nor disagreed (39%) which, when combined with the don't knows (6%) results in almost half (44%) of respondents being unsure.
- Of the 516 who disagreed with the way Council proposed to split the budget, well over half (63%) felt Roads was a priority for increased funding, with Schools and Education some distance behind at 33%, followed by Community Safety (25%) and Children's Social Care and early help (24%), the latter also coming second in the choice for reduced funding (22%). The first choice for reduced funding was Adult Social Care (33%).
- Asked to rank four suggestions for reducing the gap between funding and the cost of producing services, Asking the Government for more funding was the option most favoured by respondents, with 1635 (76%) ranking it as first choice. Charging for Council services was first choice for 271 (13%) whilst Reducing Council Services (126) and Increasing Council Tax (121) were first choice for just 6% of respondents.

- Household Waste Recycling Sites (1638) and Roads (1630) were the top two service used by respondents over the past 12 months with just over three quarters of respondents (76%) having used them followed by Countryside Footpaths (58%), Buses within the County (54%) and Libraries (50%)

Demographics

7.4. The report is based on 2153 completed online interviews, comprising:

Eastbourne area	351	16%
Hastings area	217	10%
Lewes area	506	24%
Rother area	378	18%
Wealden area	472	22%
Post code not given	229	10%
	2153	100%

7.5. Care should be taken when comparing responses from the East Sussex areas above as a significant proportion of respondents did not supply the level of postcode detail required. Post codes entered by respondents have been used to allocate their response to the area they live in on a 'best fit' basis. 52% entered their postcode in sufficient detail to confidently allocate to a district or borough. 38% have been allocated to the district or borough area in which the majority of the given postcode sector population lives, due to the response only containing the first part, or less, of the postcode, and some postcodes at this level cutting across district and borough boundaries. The remaining 10%, where the post code was not given at all, have been allocated to a "Not Answered" group.

7.6. 97% of respondents said they lived in East Sussex, 13% said they work or own a business in East Sussex and 1% said they were visiting East Sussex. Respondents could select more than one answer if applicable and 86 respondents said they both lived and worked/owned a business in the county.

7.7. The age breakdown of respondents was:

- 16-24 – 1%
- 25-44 – 9%
- 45-59 – 18%
- 60-74 – 37%
- 75+ – 18%

Which, perhaps unsurprisingly, resulted in 83% of respondents not having any dependent children. 17% of respondents preferred not to give their age.

7.8. 56% of respondents were female and 36% male, 8% preferring not to say and 6 were non-binary.

7.9. 90% of respondents were white and 80% identified as heterosexual, whilst 39% said they didn't have a religion and 44% were Christian.

7.10. These results are influenced by the majority of respondents being in the 60+ age brackets and should not be taken as representative of East Sussex as a whole.

7.11. The full survey report is available as part of the supplementary engagement and equality impact assessment pack alongside the County Council agenda.

