

Governance Services – end of year 2024/25

Summary of progress on Council Priorities, issues arising, and achievements

Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR)

Planning for 2025/26 and beyond culminated with the agreement of the budget and the Council Plan by the County Council in February 2025. The plan and budget were informed by engagement events with strategic partners, young people, business and culture representatives and Trade Unions as well as input from scrutiny committees. The Council Plan and Portfolio Plans 2025/26, which set out our priority and delivery outcomes for the coming year and our plans for delivering them, have been published online.

The plans and the budget reflect the immediate financial position facing the Council, with the authority facing very tough choices in order to continue making the necessary investments to sustain essential services in light of growing demand and complexity of need. The agreed budget is reliant on the delivery of substantial further savings, on top of the £140m identified since 2010, all of which represent hard choices which will impact on local people, our staff and partners.

However, the savings identified do not fully bridge the funding gap, and a draw from service specific reserves of £11.4m was required to present a balanced budget for 2025/26. The size of the gap in the medium term far outstrips our remaining reserves. It is essential that planned national reforms to local government funding accurately recognise the real need for services in East Sussex, and the true cost of delivering them, if we are to find a sustainable way forward beyond the coming year.

Our integrated planning process, RPPR, has allowed us to continue to focus and protect our spending where it will deliver our priority objectives most effectively. Through the process we have ensured that we have the demographic trends and performance information to monitor progress through the year, as well as the evidence we need to support proactive lobbying at a local, regional and national level. We began the planning process for 2026/27 in Q4 in preparation for State of the County and are continuing to review our processes to ensure that we are maximising the value for money that we deliver.

In December 2024 the Government published its English Devolution White Paper outlining plans to devolve greater powers to newly established Strategic Authorities, alongside a programme for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The Government invited expressions of interests from upper-tier and neighbouring unitary authorities in joining the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) which would see progress happen at an accelerated pace. In January 2025, following a discussion at Full Council, Cabinet approved a response to Government's invitation which confirmed a commitment to work with partners in West Sussex County Council, and Brighton & Hove City Council to develop a proposal for a Mayoral County Combined Authority (MCCA). Confirmation was received in February that Sussex was one of six successful areas accepted on to the DPP and expected to undergo reorganisation and devolution at an accelerated speed. In March, following debates at Full Council, Cabinet agreed a response to Government consultation on the establishment of an MCCA in Sussex and agreed an interim proposal for unitary local government in East Sussex developed jointly with district and borough council partners.

Corporate Lobbying

Throughout 2024/25 corporate lobbying work focussed on using our partnerships and networks at the local, regional and national level to influence policy development in a range of areas, with a focus on the reforms needed in response to growing demand and financial challenges. Significant lobbying in 2024/25 has emphasised the acute need for sustainable resources to meet increasing demand and local government funding reform to ensure the unique needs of the population of East Sussex are recognised and can continue to be met now and in the future. In Q4, this included the Council responding to consultations on local authority funding reform and the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, which highlighted that allocations of the new Recovery Grant did not account for population need in East Sussex.

The Leader and Chief Executive have continued to actively raise issues and priorities for the county with our local MPs during 2024/25, including, in Q4, through specific updates on our Council Plan and budget for 2025/26. This included the Leader meeting, along with group leaders, with a number of East Sussex MPs in Q4 to brief them on proposals included in the budget for 2025/26 and ask for their continued support in lobbying Government. Chief Officers also continue to influence service specific national policy developments through national professional associations and networks.

Supporting democracy

During 2024/25 we supported 160 meetings (46 in Q4) including: 6 County Council meetings (3 in Q4); 11 Cabinet meetings (5 in Q4); 46 Lead Member meetings (13 in Q4); 51 Scrutiny Committees and Review Boards (11 in Q4); and 46 other committees and panels (14 in Q4). We also despatched agendas for a further 21 meetings (5 in Q4). We supported 6 Whole Council Forums (3 in Q4). The webcasts of Council meetings were viewed 12,914 times (7,028 times in Q4). The most viewed meetings were the Full Council meeting in February 2025, which was watched 1,203 times and the Cabinet meeting in February 2025, which was watched 1,045 times, either by live view or as a recording.

The Member Training and Development Programme delivered a wide range of training and briefing sessions to Members throughout 2024/25, with a total of 18 sessions being delivered. Courses included sessions on Economic Development, Cost of Living and Financial Inclusion, Climate Change, Migration Schemes and the Council's Property Assets. To help ensure courses continue to meet the needs of Members, a survey of training needs was undertaken in Q1. Feedback from that survey was used to inform the development of the training offer for Members for the year.

To help make participation as easy as possible, most training sessions will continue to be delivered remotely with resources, such as slides from training sessions, being saved to the Councillors' area of the intranet for future reference. The Member Reference Group met on three occasions in 2024/25 and discussed a range of issues including the content of the Member training and development programme, proposed arrangements relating to the induction process for returning and newly elected Members following council elections, and developments relating to information technology that might be of interest/assistance to Members.

The Council's scrutiny committees have continued to use a variety of approaches to ensure timely scrutiny input on a range of issues throughout the year, including completing two scrutiny reviews which were reported to the County Council in Q4. During Q4, scrutiny comments were reported to Cabinet and Council as part of budget and Council Plan setting for 2025/26, following the Place and People Scrutiny RPPR Boards held in December which are the culmination of scrutiny's input throughout the annual RPPR cycle. In addition, People Scrutiny Committee held a Pre-decision Board to consider Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) savings proposals prior to decisions by Cabinet in February.

Three call-ins were considered by People and Place Scrutiny Committees in Q4, two relating to decisions on ASCH savings and one relating to a decision on introducing a booking system for Household Waste Recycling Sites. During the year scrutiny committees have undertaken work to influence key service developments including the updated Local Transport Plan, preventative approaches in Children's Services and the Care Quality Commission assessment of Adult Social Care. During Q4, this work included an initial meeting of the Place Scrutiny Asset Management Strategy Working Group and a meeting of the People Scrutiny School Attendance Reference Group.

The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee has continued to scrutinise the commissioning and delivery of local health services; in Q4 this included considering reports on access to NHS dentistry services, the ophthalmology transformation programme at East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust, and improvements at South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust. The

Committee also agreed the report of its review of audiology services in East Sussex and made recommendations to the local NHS for consideration.

The Health and Wellbeing Board met in Q4 and considered the Draft East Sussex Housing Partnership Strategy, a report on the Wellbeing Approach to Prevention in Adult Social Care and an update on the East Sussex Health and Social Care Shared Delivery Plan (SDP) Integration Programme. During 2024/25, the Board also considered annual reports from the Director of Public Health, Healthwatch, Sussex learning from lives and deaths report, the East Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership and Safeguarding Adults Board and well as regular updates on the SDP. The Board has also held informal 'deep dive' strategy sessions ahead of each formal Board meeting to inform the future Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the outcomes of which are reported as part of SDP update reports.

The East Sussex School Appeal Service received 54 in-year appeals from families during Q4, with a total of 68 appeals being heard in Q4 (as 14 appeals submitted in Q3 were also heard during the period). This resulted in 10 virtual appeal hearing sessions taking place. Of the 68 appeals, 13 were successful, 18 were dismissed by an Independent Appeal Panel and a further 22 were either withdrawn by the families or were not needed because a place became available at their preferred school before the hearing. The remaining 15 are set to be heard in Q1 2025/26. A total of 291 appeals have been received for the September 2025 secondary school intake. Of this, 240 will be heard in Q1 2025/26, the remaining 51 do not need to be heard as they have now been either withdrawn by the families or are not needed as place has now become available at their preferred school.

Across the whole of 2024/25, a total of 665 school admission appeals were received. Of this total, 217 were not heard due to either the appeal not needing to be heard as a result of a place becoming available at the preferred school or the appeals being withdrawn by the families. A total of 50 Independent Appeal Panels were convened across the year to hear the remaining 448 appeals. A total of 4 school exclusion review hearings were also conducted.

Following earlier development work and testing, enhancements to the in-house secure online digital appeal management system also went live during Q4. These enhancements have made the system more useable for both parents and the service, have improved General Data Protection Regulation compliance and improved use of the system when remote working.

Legal Services

During Q4, Legal Services assisted Trading Standards to obtain a successful conviction against a fraudulent trader for counterfeit goods offences, resulting in a fine of £200, a victim surcharge of £80 and an order to pay prosecution costs of £200.

The Service provided advice in relation to 2 judicial review applications issued against the Council in 2024/25, compared to 2 in 2023/24. The first application issued in 2024/25 related to a failure by the Council to issue an Education, Health and Care Plan, which had been amended by the First Tier Tribunal (FTT). The Council had not issued the Plan because it had submitted an appeal to the FTT regarding two parts of the Plan. Following grant of permission to judicially review, the FTT resolved the appeal and the Council issued a plan to include the disputed parts. The Council paid the Claimant's costs of £15,000 and the claim was settled by way of a consent order on 31 January 2025. The second application disputed the Council's assessment of an asylum seeker as an adult and not a child and has been transferred to be dealt with by the Immigration Tribunal, so is no longer a judicial review claim.

During 2024/25 the Service advised in relation to 241 Court of Protection cases and 89 matters involving safeguarding vulnerable adults (compared to 268 and 84 in 2023/24). The Service also advised in relation to 206 Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards applications in the Court of Protection (compared to 232 in 2023/24).

The Service continues to work closely with Children's Services, providing advice and representation, including in pre-proceedings and court applications for care proceedings. Our

priority is to keep children within their family when it is safe to do so, and for public law applications to be a necessary and proportionate response to achieve the best outcome for the child. The Service continues to work with Children's Services on pre-proceedings engagement with families being undertaken with increased focus and in shorter timescales, with the aim of decreasing the number of care proceedings issued, completing all necessary assessments prior to issue of care proceedings and reducing the length of time children are subject to care proceedings. This has resulted in less pre-proceedings and care proceedings being open to the Service at any one time. At the end of 2024/25, there were 36 families open in pre-proceedings compared to 52 at the end of 2023/24. In 2024/25, the Service applied for care proceedings in respect of 71 families, compared to 72 in 2023/24. At the end of Q4, there were a total of 49 ongoing care proceedings compared to 59 proceedings at the end of Q4 2023/24. In 2024/25, we concluded 81 sets of care proceedings which is the same as in 2023/24. Of the concluded proceedings, 37% of children were placed in the care of family under special guardianship or child arrangements orders, 39% were made subject to care orders and 24% were subject to orders giving permission to place for adoption. Concluded proceedings in East Sussex in 2024/25 took an average 43 weeks per child, this is 5 weeks less than in 2023/24 and in keeping with national averages.

During 2024/25, the Service completed agreements to secure financial contributions to the Council of over £2m, together with the delivery of additions and improvements to the highway network across the county. The Service also advised on 203 new property matters compared to 187 in 2023/24. During 2024/25, the Service advised on 225 new contract and procurement matters compared to 241 in 2023/24. In addition, the Service has completed two academy conversions.

During Q4, the Service assisted Income Recovery in securing the recovery and repayment of debts totalling £19,765, compared to £74,671 in Q4 2023/24. The Service secured recovery and repayment of debts totalling £140,575 in 2024/25 compared to £216,907 in 2023/24.

Coroner Services

The Council provides staff and accommodation to the East Sussex Coroner in undertaking the judicial role of investigating violent, un-natural or sudden deaths of unknown cause and deaths in custody. Accommodation includes the provision of mortuary, pathology, histology, toxicology and body removal services, as well as court and office accommodation and relevant hardware, software and information technology support. As an independent judicial officer holding office under the Crown, the Coroner operates entirely independently to the Council in making decisions about post mortems and inquests.

During Q4 2024/25, 396 deaths were reported to the Coroner compared with 585 in Q4 2023/24. Of those deaths 217 (55%) went on to have a post mortem compared to 269 (46%) in Q4 2023/24. 64 Inquests were opened during Q4 2024/25 compared to 86 during Q4 2023/24.

During Q4 2024/25, 67 inquests were closed compared to 65 in 2023/24. There were 253 open inquests at the end of Q4, compared to 297 at end of Q4 2023/24. 50 Inquests are over 12 months old compared to 63 at the end of Q4 2023/24.

In total during 2024/25, 1,832 deaths were reported to the Coroner compared to 2,201 in 2023/24. 52% (959) of deaths reported to the Coroner required a post mortem compared to 46% (1,009) in 2023/24. In 2024/25, 334 Inquests were opened (compared to 339 in 2023/24) and 339 Inquests were concluded in 2024/25 (compared to 265 in 2023/24). The introduction of the Medical Examiner (ME) system in September 2024 has seen a decrease in the number of referrals to the Coroner. Deaths that do not fall under the Notification of Death Regulations are now reportable to MEs. In most cases, deaths can now be certified without referral to the Coroner to allow the death to be registered. MEs alert the Coroner where certain deaths may require further investigation which previously would have been registered as natural, and this has led to a higher percentage of post mortems in 2024/25 compared to 2023/24.

Since 1 April 2025, the East Sussex Coroner's Office has moved to Westfield House, County Hall, Lewes from the Innovation Centre in Hastings. In addition, courtrooms previously based at Muriel Matters House, Hastings and Eastbourne Town Hall have also moved to Westfield House, bringing the service together and helping to make savings through the more efficient use of space. The change will also improve and streamline the service, with access to courtrooms five days a week reducing the waiting time for inquests to be heard. The change will provide a single point of contact for the public and will improve the quality of service to bereaved families and friends.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA)

There were no active RIPA Authorisations during Q4. On 31 March 2025, the Lead Member approved the Policy for the year ahead with only minor amendments to the existing Policy.

Local Government Ombudsman complaints

The Ombudsman issued 28 decisions in Q4. 17 of these cases related to Adult Social Care (ASC), 9 related to Children's Services (CS) and 2 to Corporate Services (CORP). 19 cases were closed before a full investigation for a variety of reasons. This included insufficient evidence of fault, complaints being out of the Ombudsman's jurisdiction, because the complaint had not been through our internal complaint process or because the Ombudsman had sufficient information to uphold the complaint.

Of the 9 cases that were fully investigated 7 related to ASC and 2 related to CS, of which, 4 were closed with the complaint partly or fully upheld as follows:

ASC – The client's husband was dissatisfied with the financial remedy of £300 offered by the Council, in acknowledgement of his complaint about the care provided to his wife. The Ombudsman found that the Council had acknowledged its failure to properly deal with the complaint before it was escalated to them. It had apologised and offered a satisfactory remedy. The Ombudsman found no outstanding injustice that required their intervention.

ASC – The client complained that the Council did not provide her with the care and support to meet her needs, which she said impacted her wellbeing. The Ombudsman found the Council at fault for a delay in completing and issuing the client's reviewed care and support plan, which caused the client limited injustice. The Ombudsman also found fault with the Council's handling of the complaints. The Council has agreed to apologise and make a payment of £100 to the client in acknowledgement of its unsatisfactory complaint handling.

CS – The client's mother complained that the Council failed to provide suitable alternative education for her daughter, since it was agreed that she was unable to attend her allocated school. As a result, her daughter missed out on appropriate education and her mental health deteriorated. Furthermore, the client's mother had to give up work to look after her daughter which caused avoidable financial hardship and distress. The Ombudsman found fault because the Council did not review its original alternative education decision in the light of new evidence available. The Council has agreed to review its decision.

CS – The client's father complained that the Council failed to act in his child's best interests when choosing a suitable secondary school, arranging alternative education, and arranging school transport. The Ombudsman found no fault in the Council's decision-making on these issues and did not investigate the Council's earlier decision to name a mainstream school in the client's Education Health and Care Plan, as this came with appeal rights. The Ombudsman did find the Council at fault for refusing to reimburse fees the client's father paid to an independent school to secure his child's place. The Council has now agreed to reimburse the fees.

Web activity

There were 6.6m unique page views of the Council website in 2024/25. During Q4, there were 1.9 million unique page views. The satisfaction of residents using the East Sussex highways website has improved, with the number of website visitors saying their experience of the site was satisfactory, good or excellent increasing from 12% in May 2023 to 45% in February 2025. This

follows research, testing and development of the site to remove obstacles for users and make it easier to report highways issues, track progress and find information.

Media and information work

In Q4, the press office dealt with 179 media enquiries and issued 24 press releases which generated 112 stories. Coverage in Q4 was dominated by devolution and budgets, but other press releases achieving good coverage include the introduction of smokefree spaces on beaches in Bexhill beach and Camber Sands, the library amnesty which saw the return of a book missing for more than 27 years, and discussions around future plans for Exceat Bridge.

In 2024/25 the press office dealt with 510 media enquiries and issued 107 press releases generating 344 stories, 37 of which were from TV and radio. Press releases achieving the most coverage included the additional investment in road patching, budget press releases issued July, September, October, November and February, devolution and local government reorganisation and a review of speed limits.

Effective publicity and campaigns

Requests for our on-demand bus service (Flexibus) have risen from 4,232 in March 2024 to 6,523 in March 2025, an increase of 54%. Passenger requests have risen sharply during periods of marketing activity, which have included social media advertising, radio advertising, leafletting, and public display boards.

Local advertising campaigns to recruit staff for supported living homes for people with learning disabilities drew high numbers of applicants. The campaigns, which began in Q4, on Facebook and Nextdoor targeted people in a 5–10-mile radius of the homes in Crowborough and Battle, and saw 102 applications in the first two weeks of the campaign.

South East 7 (SE7)

Throughout 2024/25, the SE7 partnership continued to provide a valuable forum for sharing intelligence on the rapidly evolving national policy context following the General Election, as well as developing joint lobbying messages in response. The SE7 partnership has also helped provide understanding on how neighbouring councils are responding to shared challenges. This year they have particularly focused on demand and cost pressures in Adult Social Care and Children's Services, including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Home to School Transport; devolution and local government reorganisation; and the asylum system.

SE7 Leaders and Chief Executives met jointly in Q4 to discuss latest issues and priorities for all councils, including plans for devolution and local government reorganisation, issues emerging from budget setting for 2025/26, and significant national reforms in children's services. SE7 Leaders also met in March and discussed developments on these issues as well as shared lobbying priorities, including funding reform, SEND, and utilities company street works. Chief Executives continue to meet regularly to discuss the latest policy developments.

Revenue Budget Summary

The Governance Service's net budget is £9.847m and at the end of the financial year there is an underspend of £86k. The underspend in Corporate Governance is mainly due to staff vacancies and the early implementation of savings targets for the forthcoming year. The overspend in Corporate Support is mostly due to the additional cost of locums to cover maternity leave and other vacancies in the Legal Services team.

Performance exceptions (See How to read this report for definition)

Performance measure	Outturn 23/24	Target 24/25	RAG Q1 24/25	RAG Q2 24/25	RAG Q3 24/25	RAG Q4 24/25	Q4 24/25 outturn	Note ref
None								

Savings exceptions 2024/25 (£'000)

Service description	Original Target For 2024/25	Target including items c/f from previous year(s)	Achieved in-year	Will be achieved, but in future years	Cannot be achieved	Note ref
There are no savings for 2024/25	-	-	-	-	-	
	-	-	-	-	-	
Total Savings	0	0	0	0	0	
			-	-	-	
			-	-	-	
Subtotal Permanent Changes ¹			0	0	0	
Total Savings and Permanent Changes	0	0	0	0	0	

Memo: treatment of savings not achieved in the year (£'000)	Temporary Funding ²	Part of reported variance ³	Total	Note Ref
	-	-	-	
	-	-	-	
	-	-	-	
Total	0	0	0	

¹ Where agreed savings are reasonably unable to be achieved other permanent savings are required to be identified and approved via quarterly monitoring.

² Temporary funding will only replace a slipped or unachieved saving for one year; the saving will still need to be made in future years (or be replaced with something else).

³ The slipped or unachieved saving will form part of the department's overall variance - it will either increase an overspend or decrease an underspend. The saving will still need to be made in future years (or be replaced with something else).

Revenue Budget 2024/25 (£'000)

Divisions	Planned Gross	Planned Income	Planned Net	2023/24 Gross	2023/24 Income	2023/24 Net	(Over)/ under spend Gross	(Over)/ under spend Income	(Over)/ under spend Net	Note ref
Corporate Governance	5,844	(196)	5,648	5,583	(173)	5,410	261	(23)	238	
Corporate Support	4,003	(413)	3,590	4,192	(450)	3,742	(189)	37	(152)	
Total Governance	9,847	(609)	9,238	9,775	(623)	9,152	72	14	86	

Capital programme 2024/25 (£'000)[illegible]