

## **Governance Services – Q1 2025/26**

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

#### **Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR)**

The State of the County report was considered by Cabinet in June 2025 and Council in July 2025. The report sets out our latest assessment of the demographic evidence base, the policy context and the most challenging financial position the Council has ever faced, which form the backdrop for planning for 2026/27 and beyond. Pressures on services have continued to grow as the needs in our communities increase and become more complex, and costs have escalated due to national factors beyond our control. Funding for local authorities from Government, as set out in the Spending Review in June, will not grow at the same level as need, and significant reforms are planned to the way this funding is allocated to individual councils. If the multi-year settlement to be announced later in the year does not provide the funding we need, other avenues will need to be sought to meet our legal requirement to set a balanced budget. To address the unsustainable financial position, we have taken every possible step, including instituting strict spending and recruitment controls, reprioritising spend, reducing our office estate and maximising income. We have taken the additional and significant steps of bringing forward further difficult service reductions and drawing on service reserves to balance the budget. However, despite all the action we have taken, fundamentally there remains a large gap between the income we currently expect to receive in the coming years and the costs of providing services. We are refreshing the Council Plan and Portfolio Plans for 2025/26 which include some small changes to performance measures and targets to reflect our yearend position for 2024/25. The updated plans, which set out how we will deliver our priorities in the coming year and beyond, will be available on our website in Q2.

Government consultation on the proposed establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Sussex closed early in Q1, followed by its assessment of the responses received from local people and stakeholders. The consultation followed our successful application, along with West Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council, to join the national devolution priority programme, working on an accelerated timescale towards a mayoral election in May 2026. Subject to further national and local decisions, work will continue to prepare for the creation of the combined authority, including the legislation required. As part of the Government's separate plans for the reorganisation of local government, the Council has continued to work with district and borough council partners to develop a final reorganisation proposal for a single unitary council for East Sussex, which is due to be submitted to Government in September 2025. This included jointly undertaking a public engagement exercise during Q1. If the proposal is accepted by Government, elections to a shadow authority are expected to take place in 2027.

#### **Corporate Lobbying**

Throughout Q1 the Leader and Chief Executive continued to raise issues and priorities for the county with our local MPs, including through a specific update on our State of the County report. This set out the uncertain and stark financial position the Council faces and asked for MPs' support in lobbying Government to recognise the specific and unique needs of East Sussex, which are more acute than much of the rest of the South East, and that these must be appropriately reflected in new funding arrangements.

We continue to draw on broader partnerships and networks at the local, regional and national level to lobby on current priorities, including through the Local Government Association, County Councils Network and South East 7. Chief Officers also continue to influence service specific national policy developments through national professional associations and networks and responses to specific Government consultations within their service areas.

#### **Supporting democracy**

During Q1 we supported 26 meetings including: 1 County Council meeting; 2 Cabinet meetings; 9 Lead Member meetings; 6 Scrutiny Committees and Review Boards and 8 other committees and panels. The webcasts of meetings were viewed 2,770 times in Q1. The most viewed meeting was the Council meeting on 20 May 2025, which received 923 views, either live or as a recording.

In Q1 the Member Training and Development programme continued to deliver a range of courses and briefings in support of Members and the roles they hold. Courses delivered included sessions on Early Help and Children's Social Care, Equality Impact Assessments for Elected Members, Highways, and Managing Grass Verges. Most training sessions continue to be delivered remotely with resources, such as slides and a recording from training sessions, being saved to the Councillors' area of the intranet for future reference. The Member Reference Group also met on 4 June and discussed a number of issues, including, upcoming I.T. developments and forthcoming member training and development sessions.

The Council's scrutiny committees have continued to use a variety of approaches to ensure timely scrutiny input on a range of issues in Q1. A reference group on devolution and local government reorganisation held its first meeting, with participating Members from both Place and People Scrutiny Committees. The group considered and commented on the latest position with both programmes of work and agreed to hold further meetings at key points to provide scrutiny input as these progress. The People Scrutiny Committee held its first reference group focusing on national Children's Services Reforms and the local response to these, and continued its reference group work on the Health and Social Care Integration Programme. The committee also received a briefing from Public Health on the Climate Change Impact Assessment. The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee met in Q1 and considered reports on the NHS Sussex Winter Plan 2024/25 and the Non-Emergency Patient Transport Service.

Health and Wellbeing Board members attended a strategy session on the Life Course Approach as part of the Board's series of 'deep dives' on specific issues which are held 2-3 weeks before each formal meeting to inform the future Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Q1 saw the start of the busiest time of year for school admission appeals, when cases relating to the September school intake are heard by Independent Appeal Panels. During Q1, a total of 434 appeals were worked on, comprising 194 new appeals received in Q1 and 240 carried over from Q4 2024/25.

Of these, 215 appeals were heard over 37 virtual hearings, with 7 of these hearings extending over multiple days. 182 appeals were either withdrawn by families or became unnecessary because a place at a preferred school became available before the hearing. The remaining 37 appeals are scheduled to be heard in Q2. Of the 215 appeals heard, 40 were successful and 175 were dismissed by the Independent Appeal Panels.

The East Sussex School Appeals Service also received 1 Independent Review Panel request during Q1, which was heard by an Independent Appeal Panel in Q1.

### **Legal Services**

During Q1, Legal services assisted Trading Standards in the successful prosecution of a trader for tobacco and alcohol offences (including selling alcohol and nicotine to minors), resulting in a 12 month suspended sentence, a fine of £230, a victim surcharge of £154 and a costs order for £500. In Q1, the Service also provided advice in relation to one judicial review application, which was transferred to the Immigration Tribunal. The case related to a disputed age assessment of an asylum seeker which had determined he was an adult. The Home Office had also determined this asylum seeker to be an adult. The age assessment conducted by the Council was based on a number of factors other than age, including inconsistencies in his account and his demeanour. The Court found the Council's assessment to be procedurally fair and noted that the decision was finely balanced but nonetheless concluded that on arrival he was a child. Consequently, the Council will continue to be responsible for his accommodation and support until he is 21 or until any earlier resolution of his application for leave to remain.

During Q1 the Service advised in relation to 65 Court of Protection cases compared to 67 in Q1 2024/25 and 65 Community Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards applications compared to 79 in Q1 2024/25. The Service also advised on matters relating to safeguarding vulnerable adults and continuing health care, and inquest hearings. In addition, the Service gave legal advice on 46 adult social care matters.

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. At the end of Q1 2025/26, there were 40 ongoing pre-proceedings, this is the same number as at the end of Q1 2024/25. At the end of Q1 2025/26, there were a total of 48 ongoing care proceedings for 85 children compared to 56 for 105 children at the end of Q1 2024/25. In Q1 2025/26 concluded proceedings took on average 46 weeks to conclude per child compared to an average of 45 weeks in Q1 2024/2025.

During Q1, the Service completed agreements to secure financial contributions to the Council of over £1.4m, together with the delivery of additions and improvements to the highway network across the county. The Service also advised on 51 new property matters compared to 66 in Q1 2024/25. In addition, the Service has completed two academy conversions in Q1 alongside the legal property work to enable both Uckfield and Rye leisure centres to remain open. The Service also advised on 62 new contract and procurement matters compared to 59 in Q1 2024/25. The Service assisted Income Recovery in securing the recovery and repayment of debts totalling £48,808 in Q1 compared to £29,214 in Q1 2024/25.

### **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 Q1, 369 deaths were reported to the Coroner compared with 475 in Q1 2024/25. Of those deaths 208 (56%) went on to have a post mortem compared to 232 (49%) in Q1 2024/25. 71 Inquests were opened during Q1 compared to 87 during Q1 2024/25. 66 Inquests were closed in Q1, compared to 102 in Q1 2024/25. This decrease was due to limited disruption to the Service in Q1 where the court rooms were moved to new accommodation at Westfield House. In Q1, 1 inquest with a jury was held, the same number as in Q1 2024/25. In Q1, 12 Inquests in writing were held, which do not require court bookings, compared to 18 in Q1 2024/25. There were 252 open inquests compared to 257 in Q1 2024/25. At the end of Q1 60 Inquests were over 12 months old compared to 43 at the end of Q1 2024/25.

### **Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA)**

There were no Authorisations under RIPA during Q1.

### **Local Government Ombudsman complaints**

The Ombudsman issued 26 decisions in Q1. 9 of these cases related to Adult Social Care (ASC), 12 related to Children's Services (CS) and 5 to Corporate Services (CORP). 18 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 8 cases that were fully investigated 2 related to ASC and 6 related to CS, of which, 7 were closed with the complaint partly or fully upheld as follows:

ASC – The client's mother complained that the Council and its care provider failed to ensure her daughter received all the 1:1 support she had been assessed as needing, resulting in her lacking support with social activities and leading to her becoming withdrawn. The Council accepted the client did not receive all her 1:1 support and offered to pay financial redress for two and a half years. However, the Ombudsman found that the client did not receive all her 1:1 support for three

and a half years from March 2020. The Council has extended the financial redress to cover the period from March 2020.

CS – The client's mother complained that the Council had not provided the education set out in her child's Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP). She said that this impacted her child's education and emotional wellbeing and that it caused her distress and financial strain. The Ombudsman found the Council at fault for a delay of 8 months in providing the education set out in the EHCP. The Council has agreed to apologise in writing to the client for the identified delay and for the impact this had on their education and wellbeing. The Council has also agreed to apologise in writing to the client's mother for the unnecessary and avoidable uncertainty this caused her and to make a payment of £1,900 to remedy the two terms of lost provision.

CS – The client's mother complained that, in respect of the section 17 assessment report regarding her son, the Council failed to arrange a proper assessment visit with them, spoke to the client when he had taken drugs and included inaccurate facts and defamatory information about the client's mother in the report, which it failed to substantiate or correct. The Ombudsman found fault with the Council because it did not arrange a proper assessment visit with the client's mother or allow her the opportunity to comment on negative conclusions reached about her as part of the assessment. The Council has agreed to meet with the client's mother and consider if any further changes to the assessment are possible. The Council has also agreed to apologise to her, pay her £300 and improve its procedures for the future.

CS – The client's mother complained that the alternative provision offered by the Council was not suitable for her son, after he was permanently excluded from primary school. She also complained about delays in reviewing his EHCP. The Ombudsman found no fault in the alternative provision initially offered by the Council. However, there was a delay in reviewing the client's plan which meant the type of interim provision was not changed as quickly as it should have been. The Council has agreed to apologise and pay £200 to the client's mother in recognition of her delayed appeal rights and £1,500 to her son for his educational benefit.

CS – The client's mother complained that her child missed some educational provision. She also complained that there was a delay in holding an annual review and in providing the final EHCP. The Ombudsman found the Council at fault because it did not check that provision was being put in place by a school after it had been told that the child was not attending. The Council has agreed to pay the client's mother £900 in recognition of the uncertainty that this caused.

CS – The client's mother complained that the Council delayed issuing her son's EHCP which meant that she paid school fees for five weeks longer than she otherwise would have done. The Ombudsman found the Council at fault for a delay in issuing the EHCP and it has agreed to apologise for the injustice caused by the delays, pay the client's mother an amount equivalent to the school fees which she unnecessarily privately funded and to pay a further sum of £600 for the child's educational benefit. The Council has also agreed to remind relevant staff of the importance of ensuring EHCPs are issued within the statutory timescales.

CS – The client's mother complained that the Council failed to provide the Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy from her child's EHCP since September 2023. She also complained that the Council failed to provide suitable education for her child while absent from school and declined to complete an early annual review. The Ombudsman found fault with the Council for a delay in providing some of the EHCP provision from June 2024 until November 2024 and Alternative Provision of education in September 2024. The Council has agreed to apologise to the client's mother and pay her a total of £550 to recognise the distress, frustration and lost opportunity caused.

### **Web activity**

There were almost 1.6 million unique pageviews of the Council website in Q1 from over 824,000 visits. At least 55,000 visits were driven to the website from marketing and publicity campaigns.

The jobs section of the website (previously the highest-traffic section) was moved to the Oracle platform during Q1, with the job adverts still publicly available, but no longer included in the

statistics for the Council's main website. The page for school term dates is now the most visited part of the Council site.

### **Media and information work**

The press office issued 25 press releases in Q1, generating 79 stories, of which 5 were on TV or radio. 119 media enquiries were handled. There was positive coverage of the launch of the Lane Rental Scheme designed to reduce roadwork disruption and good coverage of the annual surface dressing programme. Local Government reorganisation continues to generate enquiries and a press release about the start of the consultation received media coverage.

### **Effective publicity and campaigns**

A campaign to stop people using their phones while driving achieved strong public engagement and initial evidence of behavioural change. Adverts ran on radio, social media and on buses, petrol pumps and bus shelters during Q1. There were 68,000 views of the main campaign web page and 45,000 clicks from YouTube adverts alone. Surveys run before and after the campaign (albeit from a limited sample) suggested a decrease in phone use while driving, 15% said they had read a text message while driving before the campaign and 9% after. The campaign was created by the Council but was also run by partners in West Sussex and Brighton & Hove.

Publicity for a residents' survey on local government reorganisation helped drive more than 5,600 responses (comparing favourably to similar surveys in other counties). The Council's communications team produced a video which was viewed more than 50,000 times on social media and the web and the Council's introductory web page on devolution and Local Government Reorganisation has had 8,000 visits from the public.

### **South East 7 (SE7)**

SE7 Leaders and Chief Executives met jointly in Q1 to share information on how councils were responding to common challenges. The Board discussed proposed changes in Integrated Care Board budgets and geographies, reflecting on the significant risks for councils. Other areas of discussion included local government reorganisation (LGR) proposals, pension reforms, and the Connect to Work programme being piloted in East Sussex. SE7 Chief Executives also continue to meet regularly and in Q1 discussed Government proposals for reforming local authority funding, shared pressures in SEND, and devolution and LGR, including with officials from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

When they met in Q1, Leaders and Chief Executives also discussed shared lobbying priorities. In light of the Spending Review on 11 June, the Board agreed that SE7 remained an important voice for the needs of the South East as distinguished from London. This was identified as a key lobbying message alongside specific areas of focus, including the need for Government to address the potential impact of NHS reforms, street works by utilities companies, and bureaucratic burdens exacerbating councils' costs. The partnership continues to work collaboratively to identify opportunities for voicing these messages as effectively as possible.

### **Revenue Budget Summary**

Governance Services' has a net budget of £9.265m and at Q1 is forecast to underspend by £80k. The underspend is mostly on staff costs however staff costs can fluctuate in year especially in the Legal and Coroner services and this position is likely to change.

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

Performance measure	Outturn 24/25	Target 25/26	RAG Q1 25/26	RAG Q2 25/26	RAG Q3 25/26	RAG Q4 25/26	Q4 25/26 outturn	Note ref
None								

### Savings exceptions 2025/26 (£'000)

Service description	Original Target For 2025/26	Target including items c/f from previous year(s)	Achieved in-year	Will be achieved, but in future years	Cannot be achieved	Note ref
Member Services	32	32	32	-	-	
Performance, Research and Intelligence	99	99	99	-	-	
Communications	62	62	62	-	-	
Coroners Offices	40	40	40	-	-	
<b>Total Savings</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	
			-	-	-	
			-	-	-	
<b>Subtotal Permanent Changes <sup>1</sup></b>			<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	
<b>Total Savings and Permanent Changes</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	

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

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

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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 2025/26 (£'000)**

Divisions	Planned Gross	Planned Income	Planned Net	Projected Gross	Projected Income	Projected Net	(Over)/ under spend Gross	(Over)/ under spend Income	(Over)/ under spend Net	Note ref
Corporate Governance	5,790	(115)	5,675	5,728	(115)	5,613	62	0	62	
Corporate Support	3,977	(387)	3,590	3,945	(373)	3,572	32	(14)	18	
<b>Total Governance</b>	<b>9,767</b>	<b>(502)</b>	<b>9,265</b>	<b>9,673</b>	<b>(488)</b>	<b>9,185</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>(14)</b>	<b>80</b>	

**Capital programme 2025/26 (£'000)**[illegible]