

Item 5 - Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources – Appendix 7 – Engagement Feedback Young People and Trade Unions

1. Young people

1.1. The Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services joined a meeting of the East Sussex Youth Cabinet on 16 January 2022 to discuss the County Council's budget setting process and young people's priorities for the year ahead. A presentation was delivered 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 2022/23.

1.2. A discussion followed the presentation and members of the Youth Cabinet asked a number of questions. The Children in Care Council also submitted questions in advance of the session, which were asked by the Youth Cabinet throughout the discussion. The following areas were covered:

Youth Opportunities

1.3. The Youth Cabinet asked how the County Council was working to ensure that young people have access to training, activities and employment opportunities.

1.4. The Director of Children's Service answered that ESCC undertakes a range of work to ensure young people have access to opportunities. This includes working in partnership with schools, colleges and training providers to ensure young people are supported during their transition to post-16 education, training, and employment; working closely with the national charity CXK to provide the Youth Employability Service; developing the Careers Hub and the careerseastsussex.co.uk website to include a range of information about careers in East Sussex, including national government schemes for young people; and delivering the ESCC Work Experience Service. Over 3,000 pupils were expected to take part in work experience placements in 2021-22 and in the last academic year, around 1,300 students were able to access the virtual work experience programme.

Environment

1.5. The Youth Cabinet asked what the Council is doing to reduce carbon emissions to net zero and protect the environment.

1.6. The Chief Executive answered that reducing carbon emissions is a key priority for ESCC and the Council is committed to make ESCC's own activities carbon neutral as soon as possible or by 2050 at the latest. ESCC is working to reduce emissions by undertaking a range of projects which include projects to reduce heating and energy usage from our buildings; buying energy from renewable sources and investing in solar panels. Councillors also recently agreed to invest £3.05m into the Council's climate emergency work.

1.7. ESCC are also supporting (with Crowdfunder) communities to deliver projects such as the Crisp Packet Project: a Hastings based organisation with over 40 groups worldwide making blankets for rough sleepers from recycled crisp packets and plastics otherwise destined for landfill. In terms of protecting the environment, it is also a key focus for ESCC, both to prepare for future challenges ahead such as changes to weather but also to help people enjoy the environment in their communities.

1.8. Youth Cabinet fed back that it would be good for local activity opportunities to be created to reduce the need for travel outside East Sussex, such as during school holidays.

Education

1.9. The Youth Cabinet asked how the Council is going to work with schools to ensure that no children and young people fall behind following disruption to education during the pandemic.

1.10. The Director of Children's Services answered that ESCC are working closely with schools and have developed a new strategy – Excellence for All, intended to ensure that no children or young people fall behind following disruption to their education. The strategy sets out the Council's key priorities of developing strong school leaders, improving literacy and oracy and supporting the inclusion and wellbeing of children and young people.

1.11. ESCC have also embedded new Mental Health Support Teams in some schools across the county and are working closely with the NHS to implement a Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing strategy for those services for children and young people in the county.

1.12. Youth Cabinet shared a question from the Children in Care Council who asked whether work would recognise that the long-term impact of lockdowns on young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing may also make learning catch-up more challenging.

1.13. The Director of Children's Services answered that although the Government have delivered funding and programmes which focus on catch-up on learning, this work has mainly focused on tutoring, with the exception of the Holiday Activity and Food Programme. ESCC continue to lobby Government for further investment in mental health support and to highlight the crucial link between mental health and learning.

Domestic Violence

1.14. Youth Cabinet asked what the Council is doing to address domestic violence and prevent violence against women and girls.

1.15. The Chief Executive answered that ESCC's work on domestic violence is delivered in partnership with the police, voluntary sector and schools, and with authorities in Brighton & Hove and West Sussex on a pan-Sussex geography. This work includes providing specialist services for victims of domestic abuse and violence, and their children, and developing a new pan-Sussex strategy on provision of accommodation for those experiencing abuse.

1.16. ESCC is also a White Ribbon accredited authority and had worked with the previous Youth Cabinet on this campaign. The Chief Executive hoped this Youth Cabinet will also work with the Council on this to raise awareness of and tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls. Funding has also been secured as part of a partnership bid to the national Safer Streets Fund, to deliver early intervention measures such as 'Healthy Relationships' sessions for year 8 students and to develop a Sussex Safe Space App to guide women to safe spaces when they feel their personal safety is threatened.

Child Safeguarding

1.17. The Youth Cabinet shared a question from the Children in Care Council who asked what the Council is doing to identify and support children at risk or in need of safeguarding and ensure they get the support they need, including in lockdowns.

1.18. The Director of Children's Services answered that ESCC have held regular meetings throughout the pandemic between colleagues in social care and schools to make sure that children who need additional support are able to get to school and to attend regularly. Any child who was not attending and whom staff were worried about, either in a school or in a social work team, was highlighted so that staff could check this out. East Sussex has had good numbers of children with additional support needs attending school during the pandemic compared with the figures nationally.

1.19. The Council has seen a rise in the numbers of children referred to children's services since the return to school in September. Any child that has been allocated a social worker will have a visiting plan which sets out how often they should be seen. The Council has consistently managed to see more than 90% of children with child protection plans and more than 80% of the wider group of children who have an allocated social worker.

1.20. ESCC are learning from the serious cases that occurred during previous lockdowns to ensure children are as safe as possible. The work the Council undertakes with local partners such as the police and the voluntary sector is key to supporting families and to make sure, as far as possible, that children are kept safe.

1.21. Attending schools remains a crucial part of keeping children safe and the Council has, with the help of Government funding, put in place extra measures to support attendance.

Lobbying

1.22. Youth Cabinet asked how the Council will lobby for the money it needs in future and how they and the Children in Care Council can help.

1.23. The Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services answered that ESCC has built strong relationships with partners as well as a strong reputation for being a place Government should talk to. Following the Government's announcement of a Levelling Up White Paper it will be important for ESCC to set out some clear objectives about the needs and asks for East Sussex. East Sussex is very different from other places in the South East with many areas in need of levelling up. The Council is also part of a group of local authorities that receive the least funding for education nationally. Through this group, ESCC lobby to highlight our needs for further resources to put towards education.

1.24. Lobbying work will focus on highlighting the need for levelling up some areas within East Sussex, for example by drawing parallels to places in the north, particularly in terms of our economy. ESCC will be taking an evidence-based approach and making best use of the strong connections already in place to get the Council's message across. Lobbying work will take place at both a national and local level, to ensure the needs of ESCC are represented throughout national policy as well as in local partnerships such as the new Sussex Integrated Care System, for example.

1.25. Youth Cabinet were encouraged not to underestimate the power of their voice if they wanted to help the Council lobby for the needs of ESCC to be met and for provisions that would improve and protect the Council's services. Their input would be sought by the Chief Executive following the publication of the Levelling Up White Paper to identify and agree the key asks for East Sussex. The Youth Cabinet were encouraged to speak to MPs about priority issues and not to hesitate to get in contact with Chief Officers at ESCC with any ideas or queries they may have.

2. Trade union representatives

2.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 19 January 2022 to consult them on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2022/23.

2.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade union representatives and the staff they represent for their work again 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. The Leader outlined that, overall, the financial position was relatively positive and stable for the next financial year.

This was due to careful budget management over many years and the provision of welcome additional funding for local authorities in the Spending Review. The proposals Cabinet would consider at its meeting on 25 January balanced the budget without needing to seek any new savings and provided an opportunity for some further investment in services. Future years were expected to be more challenging, due to another one-year Local Government Finance Settlement and a range of national policy reforms that create risk and uncertainty. The Council would therefore need to take prudent decisions this year to support services for the future.

2.3. The Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer then delivered a presentation on the plans and proposals outlined in the Cabinet papers, covering the policy context, refreshed Council Plan, revenue budget and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), capital programme, and lobbying priorities.

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

Lobbying

2.5. Trade union representatives were supportive of plans for lobbying outlined in the presentation, particularly plans to lobby for multi-year finance settlements to enable the Council to plan for more than one year at a time. Representatives asked for more information on how the Council would lobby and, noting that the previous Stand Up for East Sussex campaign had been very effective, whether lobbying would involve any activity to explain the Council's financial position to the public.

2.6. The Leader of the Council explained that the Council would continue to lobby through national networks such as the County Councils Network and Local Government Association, as well as with regional partners in the South East 7 (SE7). The Leader had met with leaders of other councils in the SE7 partnership that morning and discussed how they could collectively lobby on local government finance issues and upcoming funding reforms to strengthen the influence of individual councils. The Leader and Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (EISEND) both confirmed they met regularly with local MPs to ensure they were briefed on local issues and understood the impact of national policy changes and decisions on East Sussex and ESCC. The Council also lobbied through links with Government ministers. For example, the Leader had met with Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP when he was Minister for Local Government and had been able to maintain that link with him over time, including when the Chancellor visited Newhaven recently. The Leader and Lead Member for EISEND both noted, however, that lobbying by others on the Council's behalf could often be more effective than the Council making the case to MPs and Government directly.

2.7. The Leader welcomed the positive feedback on the Stand Up For East Sussex Campaign. Although there were no current plans for another public campaign, similar work may need to be considered in future years when further details on policy changes for ASC and planned funding reforms were available and the impact on East Sussex was clearer. In terms of other communication activities, the Council undertook broader engagement on the budget, including with strategic partners and business representatives to ensure they were well informed about ESCC's financial position.

2.8. Trade unions thanked the Leader and Lead Member for the response and confirmed they would also continue to lobby through their networks for sustainable funding for local government and schools.

Early Help and Safeguarding Savings

2.9. Trade union representatives welcomed the deletion of planned savings in the Early Help service. The Leader was also pleased the financial position had enabled them to be removed, as they were savings the Council had not wanted to make unless absolutely necessary. The Lead Member for EISEND noted that it was also positive the Council had been able to delete planned savings in the safeguarding service earlier in the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources planning cycle for 2022/23.

Pay award

2.10. Trade union representatives noted that an estimated pay award increase of 2% had been factored into the MTFP for 2021/22 and 2.5% for 2022/23 and asked if that covered the cost of the planned national increase in the national living wage and the subsequent increases required to maintain pay differentials with other pay grades.

2.11. The Assistant Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development (HROD) confirmed that this was the case. The Chief Finance Officer added that the 2.5% factored into the MTFP was an estimate for planning purposes and the final award would be subject to the outcome of pay negotiations.

Council Tax and Adult Social Care (ASC) Levy

2.12. Trade union representatives fed back that they understood the need to implement the full ASC levy and agreed it was sensible to ringfence some to support the implementation of the ASC charging reforms. However, representatives noted it was frustrating Government announced such provisions one year at a time and that it was challenging to explain to residents the need for an increase in Council Tax as they may not know the extent of the work the Council does unless they required care services. Unison representatives said they would be making this point to MPs.

2.13. The Leader confirmed it was the case that the majority of the Council's funding was spent on providing services for a small proportion of the population because the Council had to focus support on helping the most vulnerable. The Council did still spend a significant amount on universal services and there were pressures beyond social care that the Council recognised needed to be funded. For example, it was challenging to allocate the level of funding needed to maintain highways standards but additional investment had been made.

Libraries Savings

2.14. Trade union representatives asked for further detail on planned back-office savings in the libraries service, noting that efficiencies had already been made. Representatives hoped that the important role libraries had played in the pandemic, for example in providing a public space for people to be to reduce isolation, was recognised.

2.15. The Director for Communities, Economy and Transport agreed that libraries had played an important role throughout the pandemic and noted that when libraries had closed in the first lockdown, library staff had been redeployed to support the continued running of other important services. In terms of the savings, it was the case that the majority of savings previously allocated to the library and information service had already been delivered and the service was now delivering the final steps of its libraries commissioning strategy. Remaining savings would be delivered through a combination of efficiencies such as implementing a new contract for self-service facilities, changes in provision of bibliographic services to take advantage of an increased take-up of e-books, and in reviewing the use of Ropemaker Park and better utilising Polegate Library.

Staff absences

2.16. Trade union representatives noted that the Council Plan set out that work was planned in 2022/23 to maintain or reduce the number of working days lost to sickness absence, and asked how this would be achieved.

2.17. The Assistant Director of HROD outlined that the Attendance Management Team would continue to deliver support for staff to achieve this, building on wellbeing support provided throughout the pandemic, which had been well received, as well as doing targeted work on issues that drove sickness absences such as musculoskeletal conditions. It was noted that staff sickness had been very low over the last year in spite of the pandemic and trade union representatives queried if that was thought to be because staff continued to work from home when unwell. The Assistant Director of HROD thought this could potentially be one factor in the lower number of absences, because staff could work from home when feeling slightly 'under the weather' in a way that was not always possible with the stressors of physically travelling to work.

Ocean House

2.18. Trade union representatives noted plans for Ocean House to be redeveloped and asked for an update on ESCC's plans for services based in the property.

2.19. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that the County Council had engaged with the landlord and been able to extend the lease to secure future occupation of services in that building for the next couple of years. It was the case that the landlord had ambitions to redevelop the property and the Council was therefore actively looking for other appropriate accommodation in the area for the medium-term.

Children's social care placements

2.20. A trade union representative fed back that their experience had been that staff views on suitability of care placements for children were not always taken into account and asked that staff, who often had good knowledge of a child's history, were given greater input.

2.21. The Director of Children's Services agreed that matching children with appropriate placements was very important and staff views needed to be heard and taken into account. The Director noted that the current limited supply/choice of placements sometimes restricted options. The Director committed to feed back to the service the union perspective on this.

School attendance

2.22. Trade union representatives noted that news reports on attendance in East Sussex earlier in the week had highlighted the importance of attendance for attainment and asked what plans the Council had to improve attendance.

2.23. The Director of Children's Services noted that comparatively high school absence rates had been an issue in East Sussex for some time. It was an issue for attainment but also for safeguarding. Both early help workers and social workers worked closely with schools and the police to ensure children were in school and that there were individual plans in place to ensure attendance of vulnerable children. In terms of other steps, the Council had used Control Outbreak Management Funding to target provision of breakfast and after school clubs to areas of deprivation in the County to help encourage the return to school for children following periods of time absent.

2.24. A representative for the National Association of Headteachers noted that schools had also had to use their funding to provide additional services to support attendance. The representative fed back that while schools recognised the financial pressures on the Council, and were managing similarly constrained budgets themselves, when services for children were reduced, often schools stepped in to cover that provision. The Director of Children's Services responded that the Council did continue to provide a range of services for residents across the county, but recognised that due to stretched resources, it was not possible to fund the level of services for children and young people that it had once been able to.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

2.25. Trade union representatives asked what plans were in place to support the increasing number of UASC the Council expected to need to support following the Government's decision to mandate the national transfer scheme.

2.26. The Director of Children's Services confirmed that the Council was currently looking after around 56 UASC, but that number fluctuated and was expected to increase as a result of the transfer system being mandated. It was noted that the Council was supportive of the decision to mandate the transfer scheme as it would support better and fairer dispersal of children among local authorities and help ensure that children were not spending time in inappropriate accommodation.

2.27. The Director confirmed that there was a team within Children's Services that did excellent work to support UASC. Conversations were taking place with supported accommodation providers to provide support to help UASC settle in the UK and there was also good work taking place to support UASC general wellbeing.

Suicide rates

2.28. Trade union representatives noted that a measure in the Council Plan highlighted the disparity in the rate of suicide per 100,000 people between East Sussex and England and asked what drove this.

2.29. The Chief Executive answered that the disparity was driven by Beachy Head in Eastbourne, which was sadly an internationally recognised site for suicide. Darrell Gale, Director of Public Health was Pan-Sussex Lead for Suicide Prevention and there was dedicated work taking place in public health to address the high figures and try to change the perception of Beachy Head.

Staff travel and building occupancy savings

2.30. The trade union representatives asked whether savings from reduction in staff travel during the pandemic had been made and what they would be used for.

2.31. The Chief Finance Officer and Chief Operating Officer confirmed that there had been savings of around £2m over the past two years (confirmed at £2.257m to date, after the meeting) and that these had been ringfenced to support the workstyles programme which was enabling investments to improve Council offices and make them fit for future working arrangements, including hybrid working.

2.32. Trade union representatives also asked if savings had been made from under-occupancy of buildings during the pandemic. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that some savings had been made from reduction of spend on areas such as maintenance. These savings were not significant, however, as most operational buildings had continued to be used throughout the pandemic.

Business Services/ Orbis Savings

2.33. Trade union representatives raised concerns about savings planned in Orbis in 2023/24 and asked for further information on what they would entail.

2.34. The Chief Operating Officer clarified that the Business Services Department (BSD) as a whole, rather than just Orbis, had savings to deliver in 2023/24. It was noted that the savings were a challenging target and detailed plans to deliver them were to be developed. They were, however, BSD's share of Council savings that had been deferred from previous years so it was important that they were achieved so that funding could support front-line services.

2.35. A number of projects to be delivered in the next few years would impact the work and costs of BSD, and support delivery of the savings target. These included the workstyles programme and implementation of the new South East Grid contract which would have a significant impact on running costs. Changes in financial contributions to the Orbis Partnership arising from work done with partners to return some services to their sovereign authorities would also support delivery. The programme to replace the Council's Enterprise Resource Planning system would also have an impact on the work, and therefore the costs, of BSD. The Chief Operating Officer confirmed that the Council would work closely with trade unions as plans to deliver the savings were developed.

Trade Union Engagement

2.36. Trade union representatives fed back that they were appreciative of this annual engagement session and for the information shared in the presentation. Trade union representatives were also grateful for the time officers, including Directors, Assistant Directors and Heads of Service, spent speaking to, and answering question from, trade unions throughout the year. Representatives asked that officers maintain this good communication and continue to share information early.

2.37. 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.