

Feedback from Engagement Exercises

1. People Scrutiny Committee

1.1 The People Scrutiny Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) Board met on the 13 December and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent committee, for its consideration in January 2022. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of relevant extracts of the Local Government Association's briefing on the Autumn Budget and Spending Review and the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health Department and the Children's Services Department.

1.2 The comments of the People Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board are set out below:

Adult Social Care and Health

1.3 The Board received an update from the Director of Adult Social Care on the reforms to Adult Social Care (ASC) announced in 2021, focussing particularly on the most recent announcements made in the ASC Reform white paper. The Board clarified the Council's latest understanding on the detail of the reforms and expected implementation in East Sussex.

1.4 The Board were concerned that important detail was still awaited from Government on how the ASC reforms to charging announced earlier in the autumn would be implemented in practice, as this is needed to undertake informed budget and service planning, particularly given the potential impact the reforms could have on ASC. The Board also questioned whether the ambitions of the latest ASC reform White Paper, particularly the ambition to deliver tailored care, were achievable in light of the underlying service and workforce pressures facing the Department and wider care system.

1.5 The Board welcomed the draft Portfolio Plan for Adult Social Care and Health and supported the priorities and plans set out within it. No changes were requested. In discussing the plan and the Department's work, the Board:

- highlighted the importance of ensuring new and existing housing was accessible to enable people to stay in their own homes for as long as possible;
- encouraged consideration of options for alternative models of care, which the Director confirmed the Department and care providers actively explore;
- sought assurance on the latest position in face-to-face delivery of ASC services following disruption earlier in the pandemic; and
- discussed measures to improve workforce recruitment and retention, welcoming recent success in recruiting Newly Qualified Social Workers.

Children's Services

1.6 The Board received an update from the Director of Children's Services on the Department's priorities for the coming year, including in responding to national policy changes and delivering priorities and programmes outlined in the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan. The Board discussed these areas and:

- requested information on the potential impact of the Government's ambitions for all schools to join a multi academy trust and remove school improvement grants to local authorities;

- asked about the mechanisms in place to ensure inclusion and the roles of schools in the community was upheld when schools joined academies trusts; and
- sought assurance social workers had manageable and safe case-loads, which the Director confirmed the Department monitored closely and took steps to address when they were too high.

1.7 The Board agreed to report to Cabinet that they are very concerned about the potential for savings to be made in the Early Help service.

1.8 The Board supported the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan and the plans and priorities within it.

General comments to Cabinet

1.9 The Board were disappointed the Levelling Up White Paper has not been published in line with the Government's original timeline, as it was expected that the further detail this would provide on the levelling up agenda would have a range of implications for the County Council that the Board were keen to understand.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1 The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board met on 16 December 2021 to discuss the comments it wished to make to Cabinet on the draft Portfolio Plans, Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), Savings Plan and the announcements regarding the Local Government Financial Settlement for 2022/23.

2.2. The Place Scrutiny Committee RPPR Board made the following observations and comments:

2.3 The RPPR Board is supportive of the work being done by the departments within its remit and did not propose any changes to the draft Portfolio Plans. The Board commented that it was difficult to make comments on the budget without knowing the impact of the Local Government Provisional Settlement on the Council's MTFP. The Board may make further comments after the details of the Settlement are available and the impact is known.

2.4 The Board discussed the relationship between capital and revenue spending on highways maintenance, and whether a case could be made for further investment in highways in order to improve the condition of roads and pavements. The Board also noted the role of highway drainage in preserving and maintaining roads in good condition.

Summary Comments to Cabinet

2.5 The comments that the Place RPPR Board would like to make to Cabinet are:

- The Place RPPR Board is supportive of the work being carried out by Governance Services, Business Services and the Communities, Economy and Transport departments as outlined in the draft Portfolio Plans and has no suggested changes to the Portfolio Plans.
- The Board discussed the case for making further capital investment in highways maintenance, and the relationship with ongoing revenue budget expenditure, in order to improve the condition of roads and pavements in East Sussex. This may be something that the Place Scrutiny Committee may wish to explore further in the future.

- The Place RPPR Board has found it difficult to make detailed comments on the budget without knowing the impact on the Council's MTFP of the Local Government Provisional Settlement.

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 5 January 2022. 29 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 East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) 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 RPPR planning for 2022/23; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2022/23 onwards; and updates to the Capital Programme. The presentation explained that although following announcements in the autumn Spending Review and provisional Local Government Finance Settlement ESCC expected to be in a stable financial position for 2022/23, future years were much more uncertain. This was due to planned changes to the way local authorities are funded, uncertainty regarding the long-term impact of COVID on service demand, and an expectation that new pressures would arise from planned policy changes, particularly in ASC. For this reason, partners were updated that joint lobbying would continue to be very important to ensure ESCC and the county received sufficient funding in future.

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

- Partners were supportive of - and acknowledged the need for - joint lobbying, recognising the challenge the Council and county faced in advocating for the particular needs of East Sussex (which were distinctive to large parts of the wider South East region) to ensure they were met as part of the Government's levelling up agenda. Partners suggested that producing a short summary of opportunities, challenges and asks for the county could be useful and support partners in lobbying they undertook through their networks. The Council welcomed the offer and agreed that partners' voices could be particularly powerful and bolster the County Council's lobbying. It was agreed that development of a summary of opportunities, challenges and asks for the county would be best developed following publication of the Levelling Up White Paper so that it could be positioned effectively within that agenda.
- The opportunity to link up with health partners and others on the planning and delivery of overarching agendas that all were working on, such as increasing the use of digital technology and delivering carbon neutrality, was noted. ESCC was confident that it was well-aligned in its planning with partners on areas where services worked closely together or were commissioned/ delivered jointly (for example, health and social care integration) but recognised there could be more opportunities to align on broader agendas and would ensure this was picked up in future Council planning.

- The Chair of the East Sussex Parent Carers Forum highlighted the response from parent carers to engagement undertaken as part of the recent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) Comprehensive Needs Assessment of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in East Sussex. This had highlighted that the current system of provision was not seen by parent carers to be working effectively to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. The opportunity and need to invest now to support the needs of children and young people with SEND to ensure that challenges and disadvantage they face were not amplified by the pandemic was also emphasised. The Leader gave assurance that the delivery of the national SEND Review was a priority lobbying ask for the Council. The Council was feeding into extensive work taking place nationally to inform the SEND Review, including through the Leader's role as spokesperson for Children's and Young People's issues on the County Councils Network. The Director of Children's Services said that it was often challenging for the Council to meet the expectations parents had for their children within resources available. The Council also wanted to ensure children with additional needs were provided for in mainstream education where appropriate to support better outcomes for children. The Government had provided additional funding for SEND through schools funding and ESCC was providing additional placements in special schools which was expected to help to address pressure on resources while the outcome of the SEND Review, and more fundamental reform to the system, was awaited.
- Recent increases in inflation and the related increase in the cost of living was noted, along with the challenges this presented for meeting staff pay requirements and recruitment and retention of staff across all organisations. Partners asked how the Council planned for and addressed this. It was confirmed that inflation is factored into the MTFP, using indices provided by the Office of Budget Responsibility, and within specific contracts. ESCC recognised it would need to review and consider how inflation was factored into contracts tendered in light of the expected increases in inflation in 2022/23, longer term budget pressures and uncertainty of future funding. ESCC also agreed that focus on retention of staff would be needed in the coming months and knew that pay was an important part of staff satisfaction in their jobs. However, the Council also knew pay was only one of a number of factors that contributed to job satisfaction and staff also needed to be well-trained, supported, connected to the community they served and to partners, so this was also a focus of work to maintain retention.
- The recognition in the presentation of the significant challenges facing the social care sector was welcomed, as partners confirmed the coronavirus pandemic had been tremendously difficult and had a huge impact on the sector, particularly on the recruitment and retention of staff. The forthcoming ASC reforms to charging were expected to have a further significant impact on the sector so partners confirmed the need for lobbying to ensure the impact of the changes were appropriately understood and funded by Government, and were committed to continued partnership working on this. ESCC agreed that the challenges in recruitment and retention of staff in social care were significant and difficult to address as they related to a labour shortage for care work.
- Partners welcomed the comprehensive presentation, the information on ESCC's financial position provided and the positive financial position the Council expected to be in for 2022/23. ESCC acknowledged this position was only possible as a result of prudent financial management over many years. This had required very difficult decisions and delivery of significant savings in the last decade to maintain balanced budgets, which the Council knew had had an impact on partners and residents, but had ensured stability now.

- Challenges facing Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners in continuing current levels of service following the end to one-off COVID funding in March were outlined. ESCC recognised the challenges facing the VCS, really valued the work the sector delivered in the county and had worked hard to ensure one-off COVID funding allocated by Government was distributed to the sector as quickly as possible for this reason throughout the pandemic. While ESCC could not commit to continue the one-off funding when the allocations from Government ended, the challenges facing the sector would continue to be considered by ESCC in its future planning.
- Further detail on the saving planned in Children's Services in 2022/23 was requested. It was explained that the saving planned was to reduce spending in the early help service. This saving had originally been identified when the Council developed its Core Offer and had been deferred over a number of years since, in recognition of the pressure families and communities were under. This, and other planned savings, would be reviewed in developing the final budget proposals.
- The County Council's commitment to partnership working was welcomed by partners, and the innovative, open and challenging, but positive, relationships partners had with officers across the organisation was strongly valued.

3.5 Partners were encouraged to contact the Leader, Deputy Leader or Chief Officers if they wished to any make further comments on the budget or council plan proposals following the meeting.

4. Young people

4.1 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 RPPR 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.

4.2 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

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

4.4 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

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

4.6 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.

4.7 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.

4.8 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

4.9 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.

4.10 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.

4.11 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.

4.12 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.

4.13 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

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

4.15 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.

4.16 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

4.17 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.

4.18 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.

4.19 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.

4.20 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.

4.21 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

4.22 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.

4.23 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.

4.24 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.

4.25 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.

5 Trade union representatives

5.1 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.

5.2 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.

5.3 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 MTFP, capital programme, and lobbying priorities.

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

Lobbying

5.5 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.

5.6 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.

5.7 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.

5.8 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

5.9 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 RPPR planning cycle for 2022/23.

Pay award

5.10 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.

5.11 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 ASC Levy

5.12 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.

5.13 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

5.14 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.

5.15 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

5.16 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.

5.17 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

5.18 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.

5.19 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

5.20 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.

5.21 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

5.22 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.

5.23 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.

5.24 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)

5.25 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.

5.26 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.

5.27 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

5.28 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.

5.29 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

5.30 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.

5.31 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.

5.32 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

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

5.34 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.

5.35 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

5.36 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.

5.37 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.

6. Business Representatives

6.1 The Leader, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Economy, supported by officers, held a remote meeting with business and culture representatives on 24 January to consult on the Council's budget proposals and draft Council Plan for 2022/23. 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 recovery and development in 2022/23; and revenue and capital spending proposals.

6.2 Following the presentation, the Lead Member for Economy commented that it was positive to be able to balance the budget with limited savings and with plans for investment; and highlighted the successful work by Skills East Sussex in the last few years as a real achievement, particularly in stimulating opportunities for young people.

6.3 A discussion followed, in which business and culture representatives welcomed the stable budget position for 2022/23. The following issues were also discussed:

Opportunities for businesses and growth

6.4 Representatives noted, and welcomed, that the Council's plans featured a strong focus on economic recovery, skills development and creating opportunities for businesses in the county. However, representatives also noted that the presentation and report highlighted a great deal of future uncertainty; in terms of future funding allocations for local authorities and in Government's plans for local growth funding and support arrangements across the country. Representatives noted that clear communication and messaging to businesses was required to emphasise that despite this uncertainty, there would continue to be opportunities for growth in the county.

6.5 The Leader agreed that the Council did face significant uncertainty in the future and it was disappointing that a multi-year funding settlement had not been provided by the Government. However, the Council was in a positive position this year and had been able to strike a good balance in the budget to take advantage of opportunities while also preparing for the years ahead. The Leader agreed it was important to recognise that there would continue to be opportunities to secure investment and asked that business and culture partners continue to share innovative ideas, to enable rapid responses to national funding opportunities and maximise investment in the county.

Ways of working

6.6 Representatives asked if the pandemic would lead to the Council adopting long-term changes to its ways of working. The Chief Executive responded that COVID has had a profound impact on the way the Council works. Investment made before the pandemic enabled many staff to shift relatively quickly and easily to remote working and that has brought benefits in productivity, including from reducing the need for staff to travel.

6.7 However, it was also important to recognise that around half of all staff worked in services where it remained important that in-person visits and meetings take place. Remote working also created challenges, such as in losing more informal opportunities for collaboration between staff and for training new staff and integrating them into teams. ESCC was therefore focussed on embedding working arrangements where the benefits of remote working and technology were maximised, but staff were well-supported and connected to their teams. To assist this, staff had been asked to complete team agreements to ensure teams were working in a way that supported staff wellbeing and ensured they stayed connected.

Impact of COVID on demographics

6.8 Representatives also enquired whether the Council expected the county to be impacted by other trends emerging from the pandemic. For example, could we expect to see a change to the age-profile of the county as remote working created new opportunities for young people to move out of cities.

6.9 The Chief Executive responded that it was too early to know what long-term effects the pandemic may have on the demographic profile of the county. The Council trusted that East Sussex would continue to be an attractive place for people to live, particularly considering its strong cultural and environmental offer. In terms of the County Council's

experience, it was the case that the option of remote working in some roles had created new opportunities for recruitment as greater numbers of candidates were applying for vacancies.

6.10 Business and culture representatives thanked councillors and officers for taking the time to engage representatives and for the detailed presentation on the budget and business planning for the year ahead. The Leader thanked participants for their input.