

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

1.1. The People Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 16 December 2022 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2023. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2022;
- a summary of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Local Government Finance Policy Statement 2023/24 – 2024/25; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health and the Children's Services Departments.

1.2 The Board met before the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023 to 2024 was published on 19 December 2022. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer at their meetings on the finance briefings circulated and asked clarifying questions on publication of Council Tax limits and specific grants.

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

Adult Social Care and Health

1.4 The Board received an update from the Director of Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) on the draft ASCH portfolio plan, and noted that the delay to implementation of the planned reforms to Adult Social Care charging would provide greater capacity for the Department to focus on delivery of other priority plans and agendas in the coming year.

These included:

- Working with health partners to deliver the Sussex Integrated Care Strategy and its pan-Sussex priorities to grow and support the health and care workforce, improve the use of digital technology and information, and support stronger partnerships and collaboration at a locality level.
- Developing an integrated community model to strengthen links between community health and social care services, borough and district councils, and voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and ensure a joined up offer in East Sussex.
- Preparing for reintroduction of Care Quality Commission assurance inspections in 2023.
- Working with partners to: maximise financial inclusion and coordinate a cross-sector response to the rising cost of living; provide support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, including through ongoing delivery of the Homes for Ukraine scheme; and build community networks, with this work all brought together under a new Partnerships Team.

1.5 The Board welcomed the draft Portfolio Plan for ASCH and supported the priorities and plans set out within it, which responded to strategic challenges for ASCH (such as around workforce, digitisation and safeguarding) that the Committee had considered in the last year. No changes were requested.

1.6 The Board had concerns about the ongoing real-terms reduction to the Public Health Grant that had been signalled nationally. The Board received assurances that uncertainty around future allocations was factored into planning and any reductions in the grant in 2023/24 would be managed through the Public Health Reserve.

Children's Services

1.7 The Board received an update from the Director of Children's Services, Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability and Lead

Member for Children and Families on the Department's priorities for the coming year, outlined in the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan.

- 1.8 The Board discussed the draft plan and priority areas of work outlined, and asked:
- if health visiting targets were being met, which the Director confirmed was an area of focus and challenge for the service;
 - about challenges with recruitment in, and community access to, schools;
 - questions to understand the Department's strategy around use of Special School Placements and mainstream provision in meeting Special Educational Needs (SEN), and the role of cost and parental choice in determining provision;
 - about mechanisms for assessing the performance of, and inclusion in, academies;
 - about progress with reshaping the internal structures of the Education Division; and
 - about parental concerns around SEN provision potentially driving increasing numbers of children being Electively Home Educated.

1.9 The Board supported the draft Children's Services Portfolio Plan and the plans and priorities within it. No changes were requested.

1.10 The Board agreed that, in light of previous updates the Committee had received on particular challenges with improving school attendance in the county, the Board was supportive of the Department's work to improve school attendance and that this should be a priority area of focus in the coming year.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1. The Place Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 22 December 2022 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2023. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2022;
- a summary of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) Local Government Finance Policy Statement 2023/24 – 2024/25; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Communities, Economy and Transport, Business Services and Governance Services Departments.

2.2. The Board met after the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023 to 2024 was published on 19 December 2022. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer at their meeting on the implications of the provisional Settlement for the Council's financial position and the specific grant allocations, where these were known. The Board were also able to ask clarifying questions on the financial briefings and any implications for the Council.

2.3. The Board reviewed the draft portfolio plans for the three departments within its remit and asked a number of questions about the services and future plans for each department. The Board did not recommend any changes to the draft portfolio plans and considered them within the context of the emerging financial outlook for the Council.

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

Comments to Cabinet

Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement

2.5. The Chief Finance Officer provided the Board with further detailed information on the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement. Overall, this will mean an estimated increase in the Core Spending Power of the Council of 9.8% (assuming that the Council

exercises the option for the maximum increase in Council Tax). This includes an increase of almost £14 million in the Social Care Grant which will go some way to meeting cost pressures the Council is facing in these areas.

2.6. Although the Fair Funding Review has been delayed until after the current Parliament ends in 2025, there is a greater degree of financial certainty regarding the funding position for the Council over next two financial years than had been anticipated.

2.7. The RPPR Board welcomed the relatively positive provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, and that additional grant funding had been provided in a number of areas.

Savings

2.8. No new savings have been planned for 2023/24 whilst awaiting more detail on the Council's future funding position. The Board heard that the information contained in the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement confirms that there will not be a requirement to identify new areas for savings in the next financial year.

2.9. The Board welcomed that there will be no requirement for new savings in 2023/24.

Income Generation

2.10. The RPPR Board notes that income generation as well as savings can help with meeting the budget pressures the Council faces. The Board heard that all Council departments regularly review the opportunities for income generation both through new initiatives and increasing existing fees and charges.

2.11. The Board considers that the Communities, Economy and Transport department should continue to consider the opportunities for income generation, such as the equalisation of some on street parking charges across different Civil Parking Enforcement schemes and use the income to invest in areas such as transport improvement schemes and highways maintenance.

Reserves and one-off investment of Services Grant

2.12. The Board noted that the Government is looking at the level of reserves held by councils. As part of the Council's financial planning Cabinet had previously agreed to hold the majority of the £5.175 million Services Grant in reserves, rather than committing it to one-off investment projects, until there was more certainty about the Council's financial position.

2.13. The Board asks that Cabinet, through the RPPR process, considers re-instating some of the one-off investment proposals such as the speed limit survey and measures to improve road safety to reduce the number of Killed and Seriously Injured (KSI) incidents in the County.

Communities, Economy and Transport (CET) Portfolio Plan - Community Match Fund

2.14. The RPPR Board notes that the Community Match capital fund has been undersubscribed with a lower number of bids submitted by community groups. This is in part due to the cost of some schemes requiring a large amount of match funding to meet the 50% match funding requirement, which can be beyond the capacity of some community groups and smaller Parish Councils. The Board recommends that if the Community Match Fund continues to be underspent, consideration is given to reviewing the contribution level required by community groups and raising the amount the Council contributes (e.g. 50% - 70% funding provided by the Council for larger schemes).

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 6 January 2023. 32 partner organisations were represented in the meeting, from public, voluntary and private sector organisations and service user groups.

3.2 The Leader opened the session and thanked partners for joining, as it was a valuable opportunity for partners to provide feedback, help shape ESCC's planning for the year ahead and ensure our priorities were aligned wherever possible, to achieve the best outcomes for residents and make the best use of collective resources.

3.3 The Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer then delivered a presentation which provided an overview of the evidence base that underpins ESCC's Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) planning for 2023/24; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2023/24 onwards; and updates to the Capital Programme. The presentation explained that following announcements in the Autumn Statement and provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, ESCC expected to be in a stable financial position for 2023/24, and there were no plans to seek any new savings. However, the financial position further ahead was much more uncertain and there was a recognition of the impact that the national economic context and cost of living pressures were having on demand for council services and their cost of delivery, and that partners were experiencing similar pressures. Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, expected policy changes, in particular reforms to adult and children's social care, and repeated one year financial settlements were additional challenges that meant there was long-term financial uncertainty. ESCC remained committed to partnership working wherever possible, and joint lobbying would continue to be very important to ensure ESCC and the county received sufficient funding in future.

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

- The high rate of inflation was noted as a significant challenge and partners asked whether the rise had impacted on the Council's 10-year Capital Programme. It was confirmed that inflation is factored into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and Capital Programme, using indices provided by the Office of Budget Responsibility and industry specific indices. In addition, many of the Council's contracts have price fluctuation clauses included in them which offer protection from some of the impacts of inflation, however the current high inflation rate meant the Council may ultimately not be able to do as much as it had planned to. The inflation rate was a national issue that ESCC was not in a position to solve and which the Government had committed to reducing as a priority. The Chief Finance Officer added that rising interest rates would result in increased returns from investments, generating extra income which could offset some additional costs.
- Partners also noted the impact that the high rate of inflation was having on their costs, in particular in the adult social care sector where a large proportion of staff are paid close to the level of the national living wage. ESCC reassured partners that it was aware that the associated costs of high inflation were putting pressures on their budgets. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health explained that ESCC was prioritising support for adult social care providers as much as possible, but national funding was necessary to ensure the market would be viable for the future. Partners asked what scope there was for ESCC to provide an inflationary uplift to grants and contracts it had with Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector organisations. It was

explained that the MTFP included an allowance for contractual inflationary uplift, however the current rate of inflation was excessively high which meant ESCC could not guarantee an inflation matching uplift to all contracts. Wherever possible, ESCC would engage with partners to discuss any extra support it could provide, as it recognised the importance of the VCSE sector's work in supporting residents and reducing service demand for its own services.

- Partners understood the cost of living pressures people across the county were facing, and noted that this was a significant driver of increased service demand for all. Partners highlighted the importance of welfare and debt advice services and asked for an update on the Council's work to increase financial security and ensure those in need get support. As an individual local authority ESCC could not solve the significant cost of living pressures felt by residents which were driven by national factors, however the work of the Council and partners through the East Sussex Financial Inclusion Group aimed to alleviate some of these pressures. It had worked to signpost residents to financial advice and support services, and maximise benefits claims for those entitled to them. While welfare and debt advice services were under review as part of this work, ESCC recognised that they provided a very important and valuable service at the current time. Responding to concerns on the impact that the rising cost of living was having on families of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the Director of Children's Services also highlighted that the Children's Services Department regularly shared updates on cost of living information, advice and guidance with schools, early years settings and other services, and worked closely with the Financial Inclusion Group.
- In light of the significant service demands and pressures being felt in the NHS and social care sector, partners asked for more detail on ESCC's allocation from the Adult Social Care Discharge Fund and how it was being spent. ESCC was working in close partnership with the NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board (ICB) to jointly use local allocations to improve the flow of patients through the health and social care system. The grant was being used to increase the number of social care beds and home care packages. ESCC was also working to increase the capacity of the independent care sector, particularly addressing workforce challenges by recruiting more care staff from overseas. Challenges in the care market were seen as long-term and would require a whole system response to be adequately addressed.
- The Chair of the East Sussex Parent Carers Forum raised a number of concerns impacting on children and young people with SEND, including disparities in attainment, inclusion and support in education, increases in the number of requests for Education, Health and Care Plans, mental health waiting lists and successful appeals at SEND tribunals, and asked whether ESCC's new SEND strategy would do enough to address these issues and ensure ESCC was seen as a source of support. The Leader gave reassurance that councillors and officers were acutely aware of these issues and remained focused on addressing them. The Director of Children's Services recognised the frustrations felt by many parents and carers of children with SEND and noted that the number of SEND tribunals ruling against ESCC was reflective of the national picture. ESCC aimed to ensure that children were supported both in mainstream schools and in special schools, in the right way to meet their needs. It was committed to working with children, young people, families and schools to ensure that specialist provision was made for the right children and that all children were supported appropriately. The Government had pledged to make a number of reforms to address the current system-wide challenges, and ESCC was keenly awaiting the Government's response to the SEND and Alternative Provision green paper consultation.

- Partners recognised the difficulties in connecting many of the rural parts of the county to the transport network and asked what ESCC was doing to address this. ESCC's Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) aimed to provide better value for money for rural bus services, given that many rural bus routes did not have sufficient demand to make them economically viable. The BSIP featured greater use of demand responsive transport and mobility hubs to provide greater rural connectivity to areas that were not covered by conventional bus routes. Demand led services would also help connect rural communities to schools, hospitals and GP surgeries. Building on successful work to improve access to high speed broadband over a number of years, ESCC would continue work to maximise broadband coverage across the county to further support increasing rural connectivity. This would be particularly important in the context of the county's limited transport infrastructure and the trend towards increased remote working.
- Reflecting on the presentation and the current high demand for business space in the county, the Chair of Team East Sussex asked all partners to assess their property portfolios for underutilised assets that could be reclassified for business use, helping to encourage job creation and boost economic growth in the county. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport was supportive of this suggestion.
- Partners found the presentation and discussion informative and helpful, and welcomed the County Council's commitment to partnership working. The innovative, open and positive relationships partners had with officers across the organisation were strongly valued.

3.5 Partners were thanked for providing a clear message on what their priorities were, and they were encouraged to contact the Leader, Deputy Leader or Chief Officers if they wished to any make further comments on the budget or council plan proposals following the meeting

4. Trade union representatives

4.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 17 January 2023 to consult them on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2023/24.

4.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade union representatives and the staff they represent for their work this year. The Leader noted that, as the report to Cabinet said, the importance of the services provided by the Council had been evident once again this year, and that delivery of those services would not have been possible without the commitment and hard work of staff. 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 Autumn Statement.

4.3. The proposals Cabinet would consider at its meeting on 24 January balanced the budget without needing to seek any new savings. Future years were expected to be more challenging, due to another one-year Local Government Finance Settlement, a range of national policy reforms, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, all of which created risk and uncertainty. The Council would therefore need to take prudent decisions this year to support services for the future.

4.4. 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.

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

Lobbying

4.6. 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 and asked for more detail on how this would be done. Representatives raised that their unions also took the opportunity to lobby for multi-year finance settlements whenever possible in their meetings with ministers.

4.7. These comments were noted, and the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (EISEND) confirmed that in addition to the lobbying done through partnerships such as South East 7 and the County Councils' Network, which had been highlighted in the presentation, Cabinet members also spoke 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.

Pay

4.8. Trade union representatives shared that their unions would be lobbying for staff pay to rise in line with inflation for the coming financial year and commented that the provision that had been made for a pay award in the proposed budget did not allow for such a pay rise, given the current high rate of inflation. Representatives raised their concerns that staff would look for alternative sources of employment if pay failed to keep up with inflation. The Leader commented that in previous years the Council had worked constructively with the unions to reach an agreed pay settlement and he hoped that this would continue. The Assistant Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development (HR&OD) reassured representatives that ESCC closely monitored salaries and work was being undertaken to assess ESCC's market position with regards to staff pay.

Cost of living

4.9. Trade union representatives noted that average full-time earnings in East Sussex were below the England average, and reflected that there would be ESCC staff and contractors claiming benefits because of the rising cost of living. Representatives raised that there had been a substantial increase in the number of members reaching out to them in relation to financial support. Trade union representatives also raised their concerns that the combined 4.99% increase in council tax, alongside any potential increases in contributions to district and borough councils, Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner and East Sussex Fire Authority, would further increase cost of living pressures being felt by staff and residents.

4.10. The Leader said he understood the significant challenges faced by residents, including staff, and explained that the proposal to increase council tax by the maximum amount was to ensure that ESCC could continue to provide all the services it currently provides. He highlighted that the Council had had to make a number of savings in previous years in order to have a balanced budget, which had involved reducing the number of services delivered by the Council. The Leader shared that Cabinet did not wish to have to make further reductions to the services that were part of ESCC's Core Offer, and therefore

the recommendation to increase council tax would help ensure that would not be necessary in the coming financial year.

Staff recruitment and retention

4.11. Representatives noted ongoing challenges with recruitment and retention and raised their view that the increase in remote working presented additional challenges in this area, as individuals were able to continue living in East Sussex while working for other local authorities or organisations. Representatives were supportive of promoting staff internally as a way of improving staff retention rates. Trade union representatives raised that terms for staff were also important and another aspect of addressing recruitment challenges. Representatives recognised that there had been significant work undertaken to address recruitment and staff retention challenges and noted that the Council would not be able to deliver all the services residents relied upon without addressing these workforce challenges in the long term.

4.12. The Leader was aware of the importance of making East Sussex an attractive place to live and work and remarked that there was a significant amount of work being done to attract people to the county. The Assistant Director of HR&OD responded to points raised by representatives and noted that the Council was very aware of the significant workforce challenges. There was a large amount of work currently being done to try and address workforce shortages, including the recently launched We Choose East Sussex recruitment campaign, which had been well received. The average number of applications for ESCC job vacancies had increased since the campaign's launch and there would be a full assessment of the campaign in the future to understand where it had been successful and learning that could be taken forward from it. It was noted that many employers were increasing asking employees to return to regular office working, and ESCC would be well placed to benefit from these changing working arrangements if it continued to offer flexibility. There were ongoing assessments of the approach to workstyles at ESCC, the results of which would allow the Council to present a clear message to current staff and those applying for jobs with the Council on its hybrid working offer.

4.13. Both the Leader and Assistant Director of HR&OD noted the positive work done around apprenticeships, with many apprentices staying in the county at the end of their apprenticeships, and shared their hopes that unions could be involved in further promoting and expanding this work. The Lead Member for EISEND added that it was important to upskill the East Sussex workforce and welcomed extra funding that was going to schools and £1.5m that would help improve school attendance.

Trade union engagement

4.14. 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 spent speaking to, and answering questions from, trade unions throughout the year. Representatives asked that officers maintain this good communication and continue to share information early.

4.15. Trade union representatives welcomed the fact that the proposals going to Cabinet were for a balanced budget that had been produced without the need to make any new savings, and commended the work of officers in achieving this. The Leader thanked representatives for the positive feedback and for their input in the session, and confirmed Members and officers would continue to maintain open engagement with trade unions as doing so was important for working together effectively to deliver services. Representatives

were encouraged to submit any further comments or feedback before the Full Council meeting where the budget would be agreed.

5. Young People

5.1. The Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and Chief Operating Officer met with the East Sussex Youth Cabinet, Children in Care Council (CICC) and Young Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Ambassadors (the Youth Voice Groups) on 21 January 2023 to discuss the County Council's budget setting process and young people's priorities for the year ahead. Following presentations from the Youth Voice Groups on their work and priorities, 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 2023/24.

5.2. A discussion followed the presentation and members of the Youth Cabinet, CICC and Young SEND Ambassadors asked a number of questions. The following areas were covered:

Cost of living

5.3. Young people asked how the County Council was working to ensure children and families were supported with pressures related to the increasing cost of living.

5.4. The Director of Children's Service answered that ESCC had undertaken a range of work to support children and families with the rising cost of living. This included the Early Help service in Children's Services which offered families debt and money advice, and the development of Family Hubs, designed to enable families to seek support and gain information on a variety of issues, including those related to cost of living. The Chief Executive added there was also wider work that ESCC had undertaken to support residents, including bringing together 'support with the cost of living' webpages and a communication strategy to promote this. The multi-agency Financial Inclusion Steering Group was working with partners across the county to maximise income for vulnerable residents and awareness of the advice and support available. The Council had also allocated some funding to create, in partnership with Sussex Community Foundation, a grant fund for not-for-profit organisations to support people affected by cost of living issues.

Training and employment

5.5. Young people asked how the Council was supporting young people to have access to training, activities and employment opportunities.

5.6. The Director of Children's Services responded by outlining the range of careers and employment support available to young people. This included the Council's Careers Hub which worked with all schools, special schools and colleges to help improve their careers provision, and also included the Work Experience team. Other support available included the Careers East Sussex Web Portal providing information about different careers and training, as well as the East Sussex Youth Employability Service, commissioned by the Council to support young people not in education, employment or training. ESCC had also partnered with Hastings Borough Council and CXK charity on a new youth-led peer research project into youth unemployment in Hastings. As an employer, ESCC was also an active recruiter of apprentices.

Bus Services

5.7. Young people asked how plans to improve bus services would impact on young people.

5.8. The Chief Executive answered that the Council had received £41m funding from Government to deliver its Bus Service Improvement Plan which would provide a number of benefits. All residents would benefit from improved bus services, going to more places later and at the weekends, more demand responsive transport, bus priority measures and improved information provision. Young people would also benefit from specific fare reductions, including a flat rate of £1 for a single trip after 6pm on weekdays and at weekends, as well as free travel for up to four under-19s when travelling with a fare-paying adult or concessionary pass holder. The Chief Executive invited young people to be involved in these planning discussions.

Activities

5.9. Young people asked how the Council was helping organisations across the county to offer more and better clubs and activities in holiday and term-time.

5.10. The Director of Children's Services responded that the Council had received additional money from the Government for another two years to deliver the Holiday Activity and Food programme, which was used to fund local community activity providers to offer activities such as sport, dance and drama, as well as providing children with good quality food during sessions. In addition, the Council, through additional funding from NHS and Government, was going to provide activities for disadvantaged children during term-time through social prescribing in some parts of the county, which would fund voluntary sector organisations to encourage young people to participate in positive activities in the community.

Family Hubs and Community Networks

5.11. Young people asked what the plans for development of Family Hubs and Community Networks meant for young people and families.

5.12. The Director of Children's Services explained that ESCC had been selected for Government funding to develop Family Hubs, which were designed to be a place for families to drop into to seek support and gain information on a variety of issues including finances, debt advice, misuse of drugs and alcohol, domestic abuse, mental health. Other areas of focus would be infant feeding, perinatal mental health, parenting support and improving children's home learning environment.

5.13. The Chief Executive added that, when established, Community Networks were expected to provide information, advice and signposting to services and support for residents experiencing issues such as with cost of living or loneliness. Recently completed work had informed Community Network planning which would identify one neighbourhood in each district and borough area and recruit Local Leads to develop a 'prototype' network in each location.

Education

5.14. Youth groups raised the issue of school attendance, and asked what the Council had heard from young people about what would make them attend school more regularly. Additionally, they asked how the Council worked with schools to improve school attendance and how it distinguished between genuine sickness and other reasons for non-attendance, such as emotional reasons.

5.15. The Director of Children's Services was aware, based on feedback from young people, that they needed to feel safe and understood in school, and that there needed to be a trusted adult in school that children felt they could go to, particularly when they were not attending for reasons outside school. It was also important that lessons were not too hard or

too easy, as children sometimes stopped attending when they were worried about keeping up or they were not feeling challenged enough. It was always important to get children and young people's voices when supporting a child and their family, as that was how the Council and schools could put the right support in place to overcome any barriers to school attendance.

5.16. ESCC was proposing to allocate more funding to work better with schools on improving attendance. The Council was working with children and families to develop detailed plans on how this would be achieved, and these would be shared once they were developed.

5.17. Young people also asked what plans were in place around education catch-up for those who had missed a year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.18. The Director of Children's Services raised the importance of teachers adapting the curriculum to every young person's starting point, and knew that teachers were taking account of where learners were following the lockdowns. Staff also made reasonable adjustments for any SEND or additional mental health and wellbeing needs of learners, which the Council supported schools in doing. ESCC worked with Headteachers and Principals to make sure they identified any gaps in knowledge and adapted their curriculum to make sure those gaps were filled.

5.19. Young people asked the Director of Children's Services what she believed was the most important issue facing Children and Young People with SEND, and what ESCC was doing to tackle it.

5.20. The Director of Children's Services responded that it was difficult to choose only one issue given the importance of all the issues raised by young people, however, did say that ESCC was particularly concerned that young people with SEND were more likely to be suspended or excluded than young people without SEND. This was worrying because young people with SEND were already more likely to need additional learning support, and also because it was sometimes the case that young people with SEND were suspended because their needs were not being met and their behaviour was communicating that they needed help. ESCC was working with school leaders and partners to prevent suspension and exclusion of young people with SEND through the SEND Strategy 2022-2025, which was focused on improving the consistency of inclusive practice and provision for children and young people with SEND.

Safeguarding

5.21. Young people asked what the Council was doing to identify and support children at risk in their homes or communities and who are in need of safeguarding.

5.22. The Director of Children's Services emphasised that safeguarding was one of the Council's most important areas of work and ESCC provided a strong offer of social work and family keywork so that children and families could be provided with help to ensure safety and security at home. It was important that safeguarding work was undertaken through partnerships, in particular the Safeguarding Children's Board which brought together numerous organisations to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. There were clear processes ESCC had for identifying risks and training to staff was available to ensure they understood this. 'Family safeguarding' was the Council's priority to ensure family difficulties did not become more severe, and the Council had investment proposed in the 2023/24 budget to focus on this and support families earlier.

Healthcare

5.23 Young people asked how ESCC was working with the NHS so that children and families could get earlier help for their mental and physical health.

5.24 The Director of Children's Services explained that much like safeguarding, work to provide early support with children and families' mental and physical health was undertaken in partnership. The Children and Young People Health and Oversight Board was a particularly important example of such partnership work, as it brought together people from the health sector who delivered services, as well as senior decision makers. The Director of Children's Services was also the current chair of a Sussex-wide Children's Board, which allowed for there to be learning across East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove City Council.

Climate Change

5.25 Young people raised that the Council had put more money towards involving young people in its climate strategy work and asked what were the key things ESCC was doing in the next year to help reach the goal of net zero.

5.26. The Chief Operating Officer responded that since declaring a climate emergency in 2019, the Council had been working hard to deliver on its target of halving its carbon footprint every five years. Steps already taken included the publication of a Climate Emergency Action Plan, which had recently been updated to run up to 2025, buying electricity from renewable sources, improving energy efficiency in our buildings and of street lighting, installing low carbon heating in our buildings and investing an extra £10m to support this work. Work was also being done with residents and businesses to support and encourage reduction in their emissions, such as grants for businesses to implement energy efficiency measures and support for residents to buy solar panels.

5.27. ESCC had also invested extra money in engaging with young people on climate change, which included carrying out a survey of schools, working with the Youth Cabinet to encourage pupils to carry out energy audits of schools and training school site managers to improve energy efficiency.

Local government funding

5.28 Young people reflected that it had previously been said that ESCC sometimes did not get the funding it needed from central Government, and asked for an explanation of this.

5.29 The Chief Executive explained that ESCC relied on a mix of council tax, business rates and grants from Government in order to fund local services. Despite receiving some specific grants from Government, the discretionary Revenue Support Grant had almost stopped completely and had not been replaced, so ESCC increasingly relied on council tax to raise revenue and fund services. At the same time, the demand for the services provided by the Council had increased, meaning there had needed to be a reduction in some services in recent years in order for the Council to have a balanced budget, although, fortunately, that was not the case for the coming financial year.

Lobbying

5.30 Young people asked how the Council would lobby Government to ensure that ESCC received the money it needed and asked how they could help in achieving this.

5.31 The Chief Executive answered that ESCC had been effective in its lobbying in the past by making use of all the connections it had, including local MPs, Government ministers and officials, and regional and national partnerships. ESCC would continue to lobby for a

multi-year financial settlement from Government to meet the needs of East Sussex and provide sufficient funding for services, as well as on a range of other policy areas.

5.32 The Chief Executive added that young people should not underestimate the power of their voice, as it was important to have youth voice included when lobbying Government, particularly on the potential impacts of planned Children's Social Care reforms and SEND reforms. Youth groups were encouraged to write, jointly with ESCC where applicable, to MPs or ministers regarding any concerns or other priorities for East Sussex that they wanted to raise with decision makers. Young people were encouraged to connect with youth voice groups in other parts of Sussex, as part of the wider partnership between local authorities and NHS.

6. Business Representatives

6.1. The Leader and Lead Member for Economy, supported by officers, held a remote meeting with business and culture representatives on 23 January 2023 to consult on the Council's budget proposals and draft Council Plan for 2023/24. 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 2023/24; and revenue and capital spending proposals.

6.2. A discussion followed, in which business and culture representatives welcomed the briefing provided and the stable budget position for 2023/24. The following issues were also discussed:

New Economic Strategy Development

6.3. Plans to develop a new economic strategy for East Sussex were noted and welcomed. Feedback was given that it was important for there to be a focus on inward investment because of its importance for bringing new businesses and jobs into the county, as had been successfully achieved through Locate East Sussex, and that this should be coupled with support for growing indigenous businesses. Budget constraints were acknowledged but it was felt that a focus on both areas was required to deliver growth.

6.4. The Assistant Director for Economy agreed that it was important to be mindful of these priorities during the future development of the new economic strategy and looked forward to working with partners and maintaining discussions on what was best for growing the East Sussex economy.

Lobbying

6.5. It was noted that small businesses were facing a similar challenge in terms of financial uncertainty beyond the coming financial year. The Federation for Small Businesses fed back that they would continue to support ESCC in its lobbying for financial certainty, as well as maintaining their own lobbying to secure certainty for small businesses in terms of Government funding and assistance.

6.6. The Leader agreed that it was important, and most effective, for ESCC and partners to work together to deliver key messages on our priorities for East Sussex services and the local economy.

Budget Savings

6.7. The proposed balanced budget for 2023/2024 and the need not to seek further savings was welcomed by participants. However, it was recognised that it was important for ESCC as an organisation to have a culture of always looking for areas in which efficiencies,

improvements and savings could be made, particularly given the projected budget gap in the medium term. Further information on how ESCC would extract the additional savings required to balance the budget in future years was requested.

6.8. The Leader noted the importance of ESCC's positive work over a number of years which had resulted in a sustainable financial position. The RPPR process enabled ESCC to plan effectively to meet the needs of the local population within available resources. ESCC had also made difficult but necessary decisions to achieve savings previously that had assisted in the current position. The Leader noted what an enormous challenge this had been and continued to be, particularly as Council Tax - as a result of national policy - now formed such a significant part of ESCC's income which it was acknowledged created pressures for residents.

6.9. The Chief Executive emphasised the changes ESCC had made in terms of the practical delivery of services (e.g. through employing use of digital) which contributed to the balanced budget and that ESCC's ability to look ahead beyond the yearly finance settlement using scenario planning would be key to meeting the future financial challenge. The Chief Executive also noted the importance of having autonomous and empowered staff that had the space, capacity and power to explore innovation being done elsewhere and work to apply it in East Sussex to make the best use of resources. Partnership working had always been a great strength for ESCC and supported the search for ways to do things better or differently. Additionally, the Chief Executive noted the importance of investing in prevention and a having clear evidence base for meeting people's needs within restricted resources. ESCC did not have a 'transformation programme' to deliver savings, as transformation and innovation was embedded in ESCC's way of working. All of this would be key to balancing future budgets.

6.10. The importance of investing to drive economic growth locally to increase income and reduce the need for savings was noted.

Bus Services Improvement Plan

6.11. Further information on the proposed Bus Services Improvement Plan for East Sussex that was mentioned in the presentation was requested. A link to information about the Plan and its expected improvements was shared.

Interest Rates

6.12. Information on how the County Council was being affected by increased interest rates was requested.

6.13. The Chief Finance Officer outlined that ESCC was not affected in a directly negative way because Public Works Loan Board debt was fixed, no new borrowing was planned and income from investments had increased as rates rose, enabling a £6 million contribution to the Medium Term Financial Plan.

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