

Corporate Peer Challenge – Response to Recommendations

	Peer Challenge Recommendation	ESCC response
1	Work with partners and stakeholders to create a compelling place narrative for East Sussex.	<p>We welcome the recommendation and will discuss this with our partners to determine whether a place-based narrative for East Sussex would add value over and above work already underway, and whether a single narrative would be able to capture the diverse nature of our county.</p> <p>East Sussex is a county of contrasts: coastal and rural, with large towns and small villages, natural beauty, and areas of significant deprivation. How we deliver our vital services, reflects the diversity of the place, with details brought together under our four overarching strategic priorities, as set out in the Council Plan. As an integral part of our financial and delivery planning processes, the annual State of the County report sets out the geographical, demographic, and economic context for the county, providing the place and people focused evidence base on which our services are developed.</p> <p>As set out in our position statement (appendix 3), ESCC brings together and supports a wide range of partnerships across health, education, community safety, economy, and transport as part of our leadership of place. As the peer team notes, there are also a range of existing place-based plans covering thematic areas, many of which are overseen or delivered in partnership in areas such as health and wellbeing, economic growth and environment.</p> <p>The council has a strong track record of leading and working in partnership for the benefit of our place, and we recognise that the council alone cannot address the diverse challenges the county faces or achieve all the outcomes we want for local residents.</p>
2	Produce a detailed multi-year plan for the future council offer which addresses the challenges and uncertainties as outlined in the Medium-Term Financial position.	<p>We concur with the peer team’s analysis of the challenges and uncertainties faced by the council and we support the proposition that multi-year planning is the optimum approach. This has been a key strand of our lobbying. Where possible we will take this forward through our Reconciling, Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) process.</p>

		<p>In East Sussex and across the country, uncertainty continues to define the context within which Local Authorities are working. The challenging national economic environment, including the increased cost of living, continues to affect our residents, and this alongside increasing demand for our services, is generating ongoing cost and resource pressures on the council. The financial outlook for the council remains unclear, with several risks which cannot yet be fully defined, a further one-year financial settlement anticipated for 2024/25 and any significant national reforms to local government funding unlikely before the next general election, which is expected in 2024. In this context, particularly of repeated single year financial settlements, detailed multi-year planning is very challenging. Our lobbying has consistently called for multi-year settlements and a sustainable funding regime for local government to allow for longer term planning which would enable resources to be used as effectively as possible.</p> <p>As the report of the Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) team sets out, there is a significant budget gap identified in 2025/26 and 2026/27, however the scale of this gap is dependent on decisions to be made in central Government, particularly on the continuation of Adult Social Care grant funding, and consequently there is limited certainty around the projection.</p> <p>Work will continue into the autumn to refine our understanding of the medium-term impacts on our services of national reforms, the evolving economic context, changing demand for services and the financial resources that will be available to us in the coming years. We will also consider any further steps we can take to support our future capacity and to manage demands. We will continue work already underway to identify what the ‘future council offer’ across all services will be.</p> <p>We will report back to Members in the autumn with an updated assessment of our service demand and funding expectations to inform more detailed business and budget planning for 2024/25 and beyond.</p>
3	Utilise the strong financial record and consider a greater risk appetite in some areas, in order to meet ambitions on key priorities and challenges.	<p>We welcome the peer team’s recognition of the council’s strong financial management. We agree with the recommendation to consider and review our appetite for risk and we will take this forward through our business planning processes.</p>

		<p>As the CPC report sets out, the council has a good record of financial stability, alongside robust risk arrangements. Decisions are made and risks assessed, based on a well-established set of processes and governance arrangements.</p> <p>Through our Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources process (RPPR), the council completes a full risk analysis including those relating to short term and medium-term projected volume (including demography) cost pressures from demand led services and contract inflation together with service development/investment opportunities and delivery of remaining savings. This is supplemented by the formal section 25 statement from the Chief Finance Officer.</p> <p>In the context of the significant financial uncertainty described above, along with more frequent examples of councils requiring financial interventions, the council will continue to consider its risk appetite for investments and service delivery on a case by case basis, within existing frameworks.</p>
4	<p>Take the opportunity to convene a countywide climate change partnership board. This would enable greater alignment and collaboration in the delivery of climate action (where partners are willing). Consider what capacity, capability, and resources will be required.</p>	<p>We appreciate the peer team’s recognition of the strength of partnerships in East Sussex and the importance the council places on them. We will work with partners to review countywide climate change partnership arrangements.</p> <p>The East Sussex Environment Board is a partnership of private, public and educational sector organisations, which has developed the East Sussex Environment Strategy and steers its implementation. The Board is accountable to Team East Sussex, our East Sussex Growth Board.</p> <p>The Strategy set out the rationale for urgent action on climate change and committed to the aim of ensuring that East Sussex remains within its science-based carbon budget, which requires halving emissions approximately every 5 years.</p> <p>The Environment Board has also produced the county wide Climate Emergency Road Map, which sets out the current level of carbon emissions (the carbon baseline) and the carbon budget for the county, painting a picture of what it would take to get East Sussex to net zero, setting out an electric vehicle strategy for East Sussex and developing a 2–3-year plan of priority partnership actions.</p>

		<p>In addition to the Environment Board, the council works through a range of partnerships to address climate change, in recognition of the collective responsibility for doing so and the benefits in sharing knowledge and limited resources to make faster progress. These include strategic partnerships, such as the Sussex Nature Partnership, the Housing Partnership Board and Sussex Air, which are convened by the council, as well as a range of delivery partnerships, including the East Sussex Energy Partnership, the Blue Heart Project and Sussex Solar Together.</p> <p>The council recognises that the Environment Board has developed important strategies but lacks the mandate and resources to take a lead on climate change across the county. In order to bring together strategic oversight of the many strands of existing work on climate change the council will continue to engage with key partners as to the most appropriate mechanism for area-wide partnership arrangements, learning the lessons from other, established partnerships, such as those in Leeds, Belfast and Edinburgh.</p>
5	<p>Act on the future of office spaces, particularly County Hall, reflecting the move to hybrid working, creating more opportunities for cross-departmental communication and collaboration including partners. Use this decision as an opportunity to stimulate environmental, social, and economic value.</p>	<p>The council is committed to make best use of our assets as outlined in our Asset Management Plan 2020-2025 and will continue to review our use of office space across all our sites to maximise environmental, social and economic value. We agree with the recommendation which accords with and builds on the ambitions of the council.</p> <p>A decision has been taken recently to move to a single hub building in Eastbourne, faster than originally planned (March 2024). Following a fire in one of the council's sites in June 2023, it was decided to not return staff to that site with work underway to identify business requirements to reconfigure one building to make it our permanent combined main base (St Mary's House). This will include health partners also based at the property. This will result in a hybrid working office environment and carbon emission savings as well as reduced office operational costs.</p> <p>In Hastings, a review of office accommodation has been undertaken and the result of this, was to move from a private sector office to a more compact, central Hastings location. This brought several benefits, for example through co-location with other ESCC teams, our NHS partners as well as reductions in energy use and carbon emissions.</p>

		<p>In relation to County Hall, in late 2022 we started work to look at the future of the site in the light of the fact that with more people working at home, it is not as busy as it used to be. Any decision the council makes will be guided by our need to give the best possible services to the county, enhance our place at the heart of the community, and make the best use of our resources. It is important to note that in any decision being taken, we will need to retain a hub in Lewes. Options are being considered at present that will also look at wider economic, social and environmental factors and it is proposed in the autumn more information will be available.</p>
6	<p>Build on the work being done on increasing opportunities for advancement, talent identification, succession planning, and recruitment. Increase diversity, including at senior levels of the organisation.</p>	<p>We welcome the peer team’s recognition of the significant ongoing work in this area and the recommendation to continue to build on this for the future.</p> <p>The council’s current People Strategy 2020- 2023 sets out the actions we are taking to support and develop our managers and staff and to enhance recruitment and retention of talented individuals.</p> <p>One-off additional investment of £270,000 was agreed by Cabinet in September 2022 to support a range of initiatives including the development of an employer brand ‘We Choose East Sussex’ alongside updated recruitment materials to identify the council as an employer of choice. This also includes work to extend our reach into sections of the labour market that are underrepresented and/or face significant barriers to employment, by working in partnership with organisations that support these communities.</p> <p>Our ‘Ladder to Leadership’ programme has been designed to equip leaders in the early stages of their career with the leadership skills and competencies needed to enable them to step into more senior roles.</p> <p>In relation to diversity, our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan has recently been refreshed for 2023-24 and covers four themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership on equality and demonstrating commitment. • Using data and engagement effectively to make improvements. • Quality services taking into account diverse needs of local people.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse workforce with equality confidence, knowledge and skills. <p>A new People Strategy for 2024-27 is currently in development and will include action to support the recruitment of a diverse workforce. It is anticipated that this will be available by March 2024. It is notable that in the last year we have appointed more women to senior roles, and we will build on this for the future.</p>
7	<p>Identify and showcase the many examples of individual and team excellence and celebrate the successes with pride.</p>	<p>We are very pleased the peer team has highlighted the many examples of excellence at ESCC which is testament to the quality of our workforce. The council supports the view of the peer team that we should build on the work that is done to showcase and celebrate our successes.</p> <p>There are a number of ways that successes within the council are shared and celebrated, including through our all-staff newsletters, the Chief Executive’s quarterly webchat and our communities based all staff web platform; Viva Engage.</p> <p>Within Departments there is also significant activity in this area. For example in Children’s Services, staff achievement is recognised through the Outstanding Achievement Award process. Each year anyone can nominate a colleague or a team, and from these around 12 – 15 are selected to receive an award, which is presented at an event attended by the Departmental Management Team and Lead Members. Children’s Services also highlight and celebrate achievements in other ways such as in the weekly Director’s email, at the annual staff conference, in the departmental newsletter; Reach Out, and in other more service specific schemes, such as the social worker of the year awards.</p> <p>We are beginning a review of our internal communications over the next six months, and this will include recommendations for how to showcase and celebrate success at the council, both internally and, where appropriate, publicly.</p>
8	<p>Review the current organic, incremental approach to change, in order to meet the current and future challenges.</p>	<p>The council operates in a rapidly evolving context of changing need, national reforms and resource pressures. We recognise that this demands readiness to adapt, change and improve, or develop responses to new challenges, often at pace. As the peer team recommends, we will consider what approach to change will best equip the council to meet our current and future challenges.</p>

		<p>As recognised in the CPC report, our approach to innovation and development which has worked well to date, is focused on evidence-based, targeted, continuous improvement, rather than more general, large scale transformation programmes. This is underpinned by working in partnership, by our ongoing review and planning through RPPR, and by our use of data, benchmarking, engagement and feedback, to identify where we can improve.</p> <p>Within this, significant programmes of transformation have and are being successfully delivered, led by the relevant Department. For example, ESCC was an early pioneer in health and social care integration, delivering award winning integrated services well ahead of the nationally directed shift in this direction. Our East Sussex Better Together (ESBT) Alliance brought together prevention work, primary and community care, social care, mental health, acute and specialist care across East Sussex.</p> <p>We aim to create a culture where staff feel empowered to suggest areas of improvement and to make the evidence-based case for change, and where leaders and managers are open to different ways of doing things. Our Ladder to Leadership programme is built on this ethos, incorporating a series of work-based projects in areas identified as priorities for change. We will explore how this programme can be used to create additional capacity in areas where real change is required to meet current and future challenges.</p>
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