

Feedback from Engagement Exercises

1. People Scrutiny Committee

1.1. The People Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 15 December 2023 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2024. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- an RPPR Board overview report;
- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2023;
- an interim report on the responses to the public survey; and
- the draft portfolio plans for the Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH) and the Children's Services Departments (CSD).

1.2. The Board met before the provisional local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025 was published and therefore the Board was not able to comment in detail on the Council's budgetary position. The Board received an update from the Chief Finance Officer on the finance briefings circulated and the Government's local government finance policy statement published on 5 December.

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

Financial outlook

1.4. The Board expressed its concern about the financial challenges facing the Council, particularly ASCH and CSD, following the Autumn Statement and subsequent local government finance policy statement. Whilst the Board welcomed the increase to the national living wage and its benefit for local workers, there was also recognition that this would generate additional financial challenges, particularly for ASCH in relation to care fees.

Interim public survey report

1.5. The Board discussed the interim results of the public engagement survey and also noted that, as a snapshot of local views from those who responded, the survey needed to be viewed as part of wider stakeholder engagement. The Board discussed approaches to engagement which were noted by Officers. The Board noted that the results highlighted a preference to prioritise spending on roads, however Members commented that this did not necessarily show the full picture and conversations with residents about care services, for both adults and children, often led to an agreement that spending in this area was also a priority. The Board agreed that more work needed to be done to promote to communities the work and priorities of ASCH and CSD, to raise awareness of the range of services they offer as well as current pressures.

Adult Social Care and Health draft portfolio plan

1.6. The Board received an update from the Director of ASCH on the draft ASCH portfolio plan and the key developments and challenges facing the Department for 2024/2025.

1.7. The Board recognised the impact of the changing demography in East Sussex, most notably the projected ongoing increase in the number of older people, including those with long term illnesses, which was contributing to increased pressures on local services and the ASCH budget.

1.8. The Board wished to acknowledge the ongoing challenge of recruitment in adult social care services and the potential impact of this on service delivery. However, the Board was reassured that this remained a priority area and that targeted work on this had recently reduced the number of vacancies.

1.9. The Board recognised the increasing resources needed to support migrants, and the complexity of the various schemes in place for different migrant groups and welcomed the work the Department was doing to respond to this, working with local partners.

Children's Services draft portfolio plan

1.10. The Board received an update from the Director of CSD on the draft CSD portfolio plan and the key developments and challenges facing the Department for 2024/2025.

1.11. The Board noted the range of responses to social care challenges reflected in the Department's plans and specifically welcomed the recently agreed increase in foster carer payments and viewed this an investment which would result in savings elsewhere through supporting the availability of in-house foster care placements.

1.12. The Board recognised the need for strong mental health support for young people and were reassured that this remained a priority for the Department, as seen through their ongoing work with partners, including the NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, and ongoing funding to support mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools.

1.13. The Board recognised the ongoing challenges in education around school attendance and welcomed the prioritisation of work in this area within the department's Portfolio Plan, including work to reduce the number of pupils on part-time timetables and the number of families electing to home educate (EHE). The Board noted the progress in this area to date, including work from a pilot EHE early intervention programme which had seen a significant reduction in the number of new elective home education applications.

2. Place Scrutiny Committee

2.1. The Place Scrutiny RPPR Board met on the 6 December 2023 and agreed comments to be put to Cabinet, on behalf of the parent Committee, for its consideration in January 2024. The information supplied to the Board to support its discussions comprised of:

- an RPPR Board overview report;
- a Local Government Association (LGA) briefing on the Autumn Statement 2023;
- the draft portfolio plans for the Communities, Economy and Transport (CET), Business Services (BSD) and Governance Services (GS) Departments; and
- an interim report on the responses to the public survey.

2.2. The Board met before the provisional local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025 was published and therefore the Board was not able to comment in detail on the Council's budgetary position.

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

Financial outlook

2.4. The Board noted the impacts of the announcements made in the Government's Autumn Statement on council finances, in particular that there was no further funding for Children's Services where there were particular pressures, and the confirmation of existing grant arrangements for social care. The Board understood that the announced increase in the National Living Wage was likely to have an impact on the Council's financial position through increased wage costs particularly for commissioned services in Adult Social Care.

2.5. The Board noted that the Autumn Statement included an announcement on plans for public sector productivity measures and the expectation to increase productivity growth by at

least half a per cent a year. The Board suggested that Cabinet seeks to clarify what this might mean for local authorities and any potential financial impact on the Council.

2.6. The Board also noted the Government's announcement on offering Level 2 devolution powers to some councils that cover a whole county area. The Board suggested that the Council keeps a watching brief on developments in this area.

Communities, Economy and Transport draft portfolio plan

2.7. Footway Maintenance - The Board discussed whether there was potential to add a performance target for footway (pavement) maintenance, similar to the one used for roads, and the practical constraints in relation to this. The Board suggested that the Place Scrutiny Committee give further consideration to this as part of its ongoing work programme.

2.8. Artificial Intelligence (AI) – The Board noted the potential opportunities and risks of increasing the use of AI in providing council services. The Board suggested that Cabinet explores the opportunities for AI to achieve further efficiencies and improvements in the delivery of services. The Place Scrutiny Committee would wish to be involved in any future work to explore the increased use of AI.

2.9. The Board noted that the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge made a number of recommendations to which the Council has published a response. The Board suggested that actions to address the Peer Challenge recommendations are included in the relevant Portfolio Plans where appropriate (e.g. a review of the partnership arrangements for countywide action on climate change).

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 8 January 2024. 23 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 2024/25; the national policy context and public service reforms planned for the year ahead; the anticipated financial position for 2024/25 onwards; and updates to the Capital Programme.

3.4. Ahead of preparing the budget for 2024/25, ESCC had run a public survey to gather residents' views on the Council's priorities. Although the demography of respondents was not representative of the county as a whole, the overwhelming majority had supported the priorities and favoured lobbying Government to provide more funding to East Sussex. The survey identified highway maintenance and education as particular spending priorities for those that responded. 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.

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

- Partners noted the difficult financial position ESCC was in, reflecting that the challenges seemed starker than they had in previous years. Partners asked what residents could expect from the Council in the face of these challenges, and whether the public survey had informed what residents would accept as a reasonable service level. The Chief Executive said that the public survey was one of many sources, alongside other consultations and engagement work, that the Council used to ensure that its priorities aligned with those of the wider county and its residents. A particular challenge arose from the fact that over 70% of ESCC's budget was spent on the most vulnerable residents, whereas the services available to everyone such as roads and libraries received a much smaller proportion of funding but were more visible. It was therefore difficult to communicate some of the challenges to residents who were not often aware of the scope of services the Council provides. The Director of Children's Services explained in further detail what was behind some of the increasing challenges for the Children's Services Department. ESCC was not unique in the problems it faced in this area, which were largely driven by wider national pressures and changes. These included rising cost of living pressures for families, an unsettling of expectation around regular school attendance since the beginning of the pandemic, increased understanding and awareness of mental health and neurodiversity, and a decline in the number of foster carers. While there was a drive to recruit more foster carers, the decline had increased the Council's exposure to the independent care market which was widely regarded as dysfunctional and subject to profiteering. ESCC remained committed to supporting and getting the best outcomes for all children and young people in the county.
- Partners noted that the public survey had shown that respondents wanted to reduce spending in adults' and children's services in favour of increased investment in roads, and asked whether this was similar to feedback from previous public engagement exercises. The Chief Executive responded that this response reflected that the budgets for adults and children's services were by far the largest, and therefore there was perhaps a perception that there were savings that could be made in these departments, rather than a specific desire to reduce spending in those areas. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health added that everyone is affected by funding to universal services, while most people do not see the areas where the majority of council budget goes. It was also noted that a lot of people were not aware of where funding for some services came from, and local authority care services were often confused with the NHS. The Leader of the Council added that very few residents were aware of how many vulnerable children and adults the Council supported and partners commented that there may be value in developing a narrative to explain to residents that supporting the most vulnerable was to the benefit of the whole county.
- Partners asked about the prospects of the Council's ongoing lobbying work. The Leader of the Council commented that there had been disappointment across the local government sector due the lack of additional funding in the Autumn Statement or Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement despite significant lobbying on the costs of children's social care placements and SEND. ESCC had no intention of reducing the scale or ambition of its lobbying work and would be responding to the consultation on the provisional settlement which remained open. The Chief Executive added that in most previous years the Government had responded to lobbying ahead of the provisional settlement, so it was unfamiliar to have to be lobbying on the same points at this point of the budget setting cycle, but there remained a strong lobbying push in partnership with others. Partners offered to support in lobbying efforts including to try and increase investment into the county via direct Government funding, grants and philanthropy.

- The representative from East Sussex Healthcare NHS Trust noted that the pressures being experienced by ESCC were similar to ones in the NHS and the NHS also expected it to be a very difficult financial year. The Leader of the Council commented that there was a strong plan for continued health and care integration in East Sussex and hoped that budget pressures would not reduce the momentum for partnership working.
- Partners expressed their concerns that the ESCC's difficult financial position may result in a further reduction of key preventative services which would have a knock-on impact with increased demand for acute services. In particular partners highlighted their concern on how financial challenges would impact on vulnerable children and young people, and committed to working in partnership to support children and young people and achieve the best outcomes for them in both the short and long term.
- Partners asked whether ESCC could further encourage utility companies to hasten and improve their reinstatement works on the county's road network, noting that this was a source of increasing frustration for many residents, a lot of whom were not aware that it was not ESCC who was responsible for the repairs. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport explained that presently utility companies had too long a timeframe to complete reinstatement work, and these reinstatements were often done to a standard below ESCC's expectations, but that the Council had limited powers of enforcement due to the low level of fines it could levy on utility companies. To improve this ESCC had submitted a lane rental scheme proposal to the Department for Transport which was awaiting approval, and the Leader of the Council had jointly signed a letter with other local authority Leaders that lobbied for more local powers and oversight that would help local authorities maintain the highway network better.
- Partners asked whether, through the Integrated Care Board (ICB), the NHS had provided additional funding to support adult social care services. The Director of Adult Social Care and Health explained that part of integration of health and social care was moving away from the NHS and social care working and deploying resources separately, and instead use funding collectively to maximum effect. Through the ICB a lot of services were now being jointly planned, delivered and commissioned by ESCC and the NHS, and a proportion of the funding the ICB received for winter had been spent on social care services to help improve hospital discharge rates. The Better Care Fund was another example of NHS funding that was pooled with local authority care budgets to spend on improving social care where appropriate to support the whole system.
- Partners fed back that they had found the presentation and discussion informative and helpful, and welcomed the County Council's ongoing commitment to partnership working. The innovative, open and positive relationships partners had with officers across the organisation were strongly valued. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Global and Civic Engagement at the University of Sussex highlighted the university's Civic University Agreement that aimed to strengthen and improve the university's connections to local communities across Sussex and which he hoped would be a helpful additional forum for partnership working.

3.6. 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 proposals following the meeting.

4. Public Survey Results Summary

4.1. ESCC held an engagement exercise with the public using an online survey which outlined the priorities for the next three years. The survey asked for views on whether the

public agreed these are the right priorities and, if not, what suggestions they might have for better ones and, by definition, better use of the Council's budget. The survey was available on the ESCC Citizen Space platform and was also available in other formats, including paper, if required.

4.2. Care should be taken when reading the results as, due to its nature as a self-selecting online survey, the sample is not demographically representative of East Sussex.

4.3. The survey ran for 6 weeks from the 30 October to 10 December 2023. This report is based on 2153 completed questionnaires. The findings were as follows:

- Nearly three quarters (70%) agreed the Council were focussing on the right priorities.
- However, when asked for agreement on the way the Council split the budget, respondents were undecided. Nearly a third (31%) agreed and almost a quarter (24%) disagreed. The highest figure, though, was those saying they neither agreed nor disagreed (39%) which, when combined with the don't knows (6%) results in almost half (44%) of respondents being unsure.
- Of the 516 who disagreed with the way Council proposed to split the budget, well over half (63%) felt Roads was a priority for increased funding, with Schools and Education some distance behind at 33%, followed by Community Safety (25%) and Children's Social Care and early help (24%), the latter also coming second in the choice for reduced funding (22%). The first choice for reduced funding was Adult Social Care (33%).
- Asked to rank four suggestions for reducing the gap between funding and the cost of producing services, Asking the Government for more funding was the option most favoured by respondents, with 1635 (76%) ranking it as first choice. Charging for Council services was first choice for 271 (13%) whilst Reducing Council Services (126) and Increasing Council Tax (121) were first choice for just 6% of respondents.
- Household Waste Recycling Sites (1638) and Roads (1630) were the top two service used by respondents over the past 12 months with just over three quarters of respondents (76%) having used them followed by Countryside Footpaths (58%), Buses within the County (54%) and Libraries (50%)

Demographics

4.4. The report is based on 2153 completed online interviews, comprising:

Eastbourne area	351	16%
Hastings area	217	10%
Lewes area	506	24%
Rother area	378	18%
Wealden area	472	22%
Post code not given	229	10%
	2153	100%

4.5. Care should be taken when comparing responses from the East Sussex areas above as a significant proportion of respondents did not supply the level of postcode detail required. Post codes entered by respondents have been used to allocate their response to the area they live in on a 'best fit' basis. 52% entered their postcode in sufficient detail to confidently allocate to a district or borough. 38% have been allocated to the district or borough area in which the majority of the given postcode sector population lives, due to the response only containing the first part, or less, of the postcode, and some postcodes at this level cutting across district and borough boundaries. The remaining 10%, where the post code was not given at all, have been allocated to a "Not Answered" group.

4.6. 97% of respondents said they lived in East Sussex, 13% said they work or own a business in East Sussex and 1% said they were visiting East Sussex. Respondents could select more than one answer if applicable and 86 respondents said they both lived and worked/owned a business in the county.

4.7. The age breakdown of respondents was:

- 16-24 – 1%
- 25-44 – 9%
- 45-59 – 18%
- 60-74 – 37%
- 75+ – 18%

Which, perhaps unsurprisingly, resulted in 83% of respondents not having any dependent children. 17% of respondents preferred not to give their age.

4.8. 56% of respondents were female and 36% male, 8% preferring not to say and 6 were non-binary.

4.9. 90% of respondents were white and 80% identified as heterosexual, whilst 39% said they didn't have a religion and 44% were Christian.

4.10. These results are influenced by the majority of respondents being in the 60+ age brackets and should not be taken as representative of East Sussex as a whole.

4.11. The full survey report is available as part of the supplementary engagement and equality impact assessment pack alongside the Cabinet agenda.