

## **National and Local Policy Outlook 2025**

### **1. Introduction and contents**

1.1. This appendix provides an overview of the key developments in the national and local context that will influence and inform our future service and financial planning through the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) process for the 2026/27 financial year and beyond. It also provides an update on work to deliver the County Council's local priorities and summarises key strategic challenges for our services.

1.2. Recent developments in national policy and the Council's broader operating context have been the most significant in several years. There have been rapid policy shifts since the general election in 2024 which we continue to respond to, both in terms of immediate impacts and implications for future planning. The Government has brought forward far-reaching reforms to local government as a whole through the English Devolution White Paper as well as in major service areas experiencing significant pressures, such as children's social care. This context will continue to evolve as the Government's plans in other key areas, such as adult social care and special educational needs and disabilities, are clarified. While many of these developments are in welcome alignment with our own priorities, they present delivery challenges in the context of serious pressures on funding and capacity.

1.3. Significant work is taking place locally, as an organisation and with our partners, to respond to these developments, progress our local priorities, and prepare for future challenges. The Government's ambitions for local government reorganisation and devolution have significant potential to facilitate reform and integration of local public services and provide increased flexibility to respond to local priorities in the future. More immediately, major national reforms already impacting on our partners, particularly district and borough councils and the local NHS, will affect how we work together on key areas such as social care, planning and infrastructure, and waste. Detail on this work is set out below.

1.4. This appendix has been written to be easily navigable to specific sections for future reference (using the below contents list), as well as providing a comprehensive single overview of developments. It includes information on:

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## **2. Overall Context**

2.1. The following section provides an overview of the overall economic, fiscal and policy context the County Council is operating and planning within.

### National political context

2.2. The Government's overarching priorities were set out in December 2024 in the Plan for Change, which detailed the milestones Government aims to achieve by the end of this Parliament to deliver on the five long-term missions outlined in its manifesto. The Plan for Change milestones are to: raise living standards in all parts of the UK through increased economic growth; build 1.5 million homes in England; end hospital backlogs; increase the number of police on the street; give children the best start in life, with 75% of 5 year olds ready to learn when they start school; and secure home-grown energy, with at least 95% clean power by 2030.

### National economic outlook

2.3. The UK's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) performance stagnated in the second half of 2024. In its March 2025 economic forecast, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) halved its forecast for real GDP growth for 2025 from 2% to 1%. In May 2025 the International Monetary Fund slightly increased its 2025 UK GDP growth forecast from 1.1% to 1.2%, however this remained a downgrade from earlier forecasts and reflects ongoing global economic instability. Consumer Price Index inflation rose to 3.5% in the 12 months to April 2025, impacted by rises in utility bills. The OBR forecasts that monthly inflation will rise to a peak of 3.8% in July this year, but the rate is expected to fall to the Bank of England target of 2% from 2026 onwards. In response, the Bank of England has continued to cut interest rates, with a reduction to 4.25% in May 2025, and potential for further cuts to the base rate in coming months.

2.4. Over the last few years, a series of significant shocks has contributed to falls in labour market participation, weak productivity growth, and high consumer price inflation. Following historic falls in living standards linked to sharp increases in residents' cost of living, the OBR now expects real household disposable income to grow by an average of around 0.5% each year from 2025-26 to 2029-30.

2.5. Data on the East Sussex economy, cost of living, and labour market are set out in Appendix 1 – Focus on East Sussex. Output of the East Sussex economy remains below the national average; Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour in East Sussex (a measure of the goods or services produced in an area per hour worked in that area) was 20.8% below the England level in 2022, the latest available data (£31.90 per hour, against £40.30 per hour in England). The unemployment rate for March 2025 was 3.8% for East Sussex, lower than the

national average of 4.3%, but above the regional average of 3.3%. The youth unemployment rate (those 18-24 claiming unemployment related benefits) was 6.4%, higher than the England rate of 5.7%. Further information on the national labour market picture, and the recruitment and retention challenges this presents for ESCC, are set out at 10.8-10.13.

### Local government finance outlook

2.6. The outlook for local government funding remains uncertain and very challenging. In light of ongoing pressures on the public finances and commitments to protect spending in areas such as the NHS and defence, the recent national Spending Review confirmed that funding for the sector as a whole will be constrained, with growth in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's funding for local government expected to average 1.1% annually over the period to 2028/29, below anticipated increases in demand and costs in key services, together with a continued reliance on Council Tax rises to increase councils' core spending power by an average 2.6% per year overall. Funding that ESCC will receive from central Government for 2026/27 onwards will be impacted by plans to reform funding allocation formulas, which are subject to consultation ahead of a multi-year financial settlement towards the end of the year. However, Government has indicated that the direction of travel will be towards increasing the focus on levels of deprivation within local authority areas. This was reflected in the distribution of the 2025/26 Recovery Grant, from which ESCC, along with most other shire counties, received no allocation. Individual grant streams may also be subject to review and potential consolidation within the settlement. This creates significant uncertainty about the level of funding the County Council will receive in the future. The Government is also pursuing reform of business rates. This is expected to entail more frequent revaluations and redistribution of income across authorities, creating additional risk to East Sussex.

2.7. Other key uncertainties include future levels of inflation and interest rates, Government-determined increases to the National Living Wage and the nationally negotiated local government pay award. These variables, though outside of ESCC's control, have a significant impact on the Council's costs and future financial position. Locally, key risks for the Council relate to ongoing growth in demand and complexity in children's and adults' social care and special educational needs and disability. The resulting increases in costs are also largely outside of local control, particularly given market conditions in these sectors and the impact of national policy on pay and taxation, including the unfunded increase in employers' National Insurance contributions. Coupled with increased costs across other services, and the uncertain impact of national reforms, we can expect to see sustained pressures on services and budgets which will impact our Medium Term Financial Plan and ability to meet needs.

2.8. The past two years have also seen the level of debt continue to rise, particularly for adult social care contributions, and it is expected that this trend will continue. We will continue our work on debt management and maximising income as part of our response to financial pressures. Ongoing impacts on the collection of business rates and Council Tax continue to be fully assessed, as do the impact of changes to district and borough Council Tax Reduction Schemes and the potential income from their introduction of Council Tax for second homes following the national change in policy which enabled this.

2.9. The financial impact of potential devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR) is yet to be quantified. The final year of the Medium Term Financial Plan will be impacted by LGR and, subject to Government decisions on the future unitary structure for East Sussex, work will be undertaken with district and borough councils to model the collective financial position as part of wider transition planning. In the short term, both devolution and LGR will entail additional costs to support transition, with the level of Government financial support still to be determined. Any potential financial benefits will be

seen in the longer term, resulting from service transformation and consolidation following the move to a new structure. These are expected to be limited given the scale of savings already made across councils and will not be a solution to the immediate funding gap ESCC faces. Unless sufficient funding is received to support our statutory service provision, the Council will need to explore all options to set a balanced budget for 2026/27, including further service reductions and the potential to seek Exceptional Financial Support from Government. Our options and approach will be informed by the financial assurance review we have commissioned from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

2.10. In relation to the capital programme, the level of investment in assets which support the objectives of the Council Plan must be considered in the context of its impact on the revenue budget and wider financial position. The challenging revenue budget position for 2025/26 therefore required a full review of the capital programme during 2024/25. The review reduced and re-profiled programmes and schemes over the 10 year programme to minimise borrowing costs within Treasury Management and the revenue budget. Further review will be required in light of the significant financial gap over the medium term.

2.11. Insufficient Government funding to address pressures and increased costs in social care, requiring councils to use reserves to mitigate pressures, means that we have allocated substantial reserves to balance the budget for both 2024/25 and 2025/26, which significantly impacts on the Council's ability to use reserves to manage future financial risk. While the Council's reserves have been applied within a robust reserve policy, work to set a balanced budget for 2026/27 will take place in the context of significantly depleted reserves and increased risk.

### Devolution

2.12. The [English Devolution White Paper](#), published in December 2024, sets out the Government's plans to extend devolution to local government in England both geographically and in terms of the range of functions devolved to Strategic Authorities – the term used to describe combined authorities exercising devolved powers across multiple local authority areas. The updated framework within the White Paper details the powers available to local areas through devolution arrangements linked to different governance models, reserving the majority for areas taking up a mayoral model. The White Paper also highlights an ambition to align public service boundaries with Strategic Authorities, including across health, police, and fire services as well as councils, and for the Authorities to drive wider public service reform. Further detail is awaited in the English Devolution Bill due in the coming weeks which is expected to set out the new framework in legislation, enshrining the 'devolution by default' approach. The Bill is expected to progress through Parliament ahead of new Mayoral Strategic Authorities coming into being from spring 2026.

2.13. To maximise the potential of devolution for East Sussex and ensure the full benefit of Government support through this process, ESCC successfully applied to the Devolution Priority Programme, alongside West Sussex County Council and Brighton & Hove City Council, enabling devolution to be progressed on an accelerated timescale. Following a Government consultation on establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) as the Strategic Authority for Sussex, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is due to confirm later in summer 2025 whether it will proceed. Subject to Government approval, it is anticipated that legislation for the establishment of the MCCA will be laid out in the autumn and take effect in early 2026, ahead of a mayoral election in May 2026.

2.14. Should Government approval be received, the timescales for the establishment of the MCCA are ambitious. To take forward transitional governance arrangements consideration is being given to the establishment of a Devolution Joint Committee. The Joint Committee

would be for a limited period, until the establishment of the MCCA, and have oversight of the development of the combined authority and the successful devolution of functions to ensure that it is established in accordance with the Directions and relevant Statutory Orders issued by the Government.

2.15. Devolution in Sussex, and the establishment of a Sussex MCCA, would have significant implications for functions currently delivered by upper tier local authorities in the area, including ESCC. Areas such as strategic transport planning, economic growth and skills are expected to come under the remit of the new authority and be subject to extended powers devolved from Government. In addition, new MCCA roles in relation to spatial planning, housing and environment will require ESCC's engagement and form part of our wider operating context. Further detail on potential impacts in these areas, and how we are taking these into account in our planning, is set out in sections 7-9 below.

### Local government reorganisation

2.16. To support the Government's devolution plans, the White Paper also outlined a programme of reorganisation for two tier areas and some existing smaller unitary authorities. The Government's aim is for the creation of new unitary councils that are of sufficient size to be able to withstand financial shocks, achieve efficiencies and improve capacity. These areas were invited in February 2025 to submit proposals for reorganisation, with criteria including that new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more as a guiding principle, and that existing district and borough areas should be considered as the building blocks for proposals. Alongside this, Government has set out that proposals should prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services; meet local needs and be informed by local people; support devolution arrangements; enable stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment.

2.17. Following the submission of the East Sussex interim plan in March 2025, jointly by ESCC and the five district and borough councils, a full proposal is being developed in partnership for agreement by all six councils ahead of the deadline of 26 September 2025. The proposal that is being developed is a single unitary council on the existing County Council boundary. The interim plan also outlined that the councils remained open to other options should the Government indicate flexibility in the current criteria, or if residents demonstrate a clear desire for us to consider an alternative configuration. The full proposal will be informed by the feedback received from Government on the interim plan and take account of feedback from resident and stakeholder engagement.

2.18. Following submission of a full proposal, Government will give consideration to all relevant proposals that have been made. It is then anticipated that the Government will launch a consultation on the preferred proposal with a view to making a decision in the first quarter of 2026 and subsequently preparing and laying the necessary legislation in the latter half of 2026 to enable a unitary shadow authority to be elected in May 2027. Once a final Government decision on the model for unitary local government in East Sussex is made, work to establish transitional arrangements and prepare services for structural change can begin.

## **3. Adult Social Care and Public Health**

3.1. Since the 2024 general election, the Government has set out its intention to significantly reform the NHS and social care through the development of a 10 Year Health Plan and a National Care Service, both of which will impact on how adult social care is delivered locally. We will contribute to shaping these reforms as well as continuing to respond to national and local developments, set out in more detail in this section. These include working with health partners to progress local health and social care integration,

implementing a number of key local strategies and progressing initiatives to facilitate hospital discharge.

### National adult social care reform

#### *National Care Service and Independent Casey Commission*

3.2. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has indicated three priorities for the development of the adult social care sector:

- a 'home first' approach that supports people to live independently for as long as possible;
- a relentless focus on ensuring high-quality care; and
- close involvement between people receiving care and their families and carers.

3.3. These priorities will influence the development of the Government's 10 Year Health Plan and will involve close partnership working between adult social care, the NHS, the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector and other partners.

3.4. The Government has also stated that adult social care reforms will run alongside the health plan and will include the development of a National Care Service (NCS) and Fair Pay Agreement (FPA) for staff working in social care. An NCS could lead to a radical shift in how residents' care is funded – we would need to see adequate funding for staffing to process applications. The FPA would need to be adequately funded centrally to ensure providers can maintain their staffing levels. If properly resourced, the FPA would likely positively impact recruitment and retention, improving our ability to commission and provide high quality services.

3.5. Baroness Louise Casey is chairing an independent commission into adult social care which will inform both medium and long term reforms to adult social care. Opposition political parties have been invited to take part with the aim of creating a cross-party consensus.

3.6. The commission will take place over two phases. The first phase will focus on identifying critical issues facing adult social care and is due to report in 2026 with recommendations for medium term reforms. These will aim to be tangible and pragmatic recommendations that can be implemented in a phased way and that make adult social care more productive, preventative and give people who draw on care, and their families and carers, more power in the system. The second phase will look at the model of care needed to address the ageing population; consider how services should be organised to deliver this model; and consider how best to create a fair and affordable adult social care system for all. This is due to report in 2028 with recommendations for long term reforms.

3.7. The commission is expected to provide the Council with opportunities to feed into the national conversation around adult social care reform with the aim that the outcomes of the commission will lead to positive changes nationally, which could in turn improve the long-term sustainability of the adult social care system and market in East Sussex. We will continue to advocate with our partners for reforms that will meet the needs of people who draw on care and support, and their carers, in East Sussex.

3.8. However, the timescale of the commission indicates that significant reforms, including funding reforms, are unlikely to take place before 2028. Due to the significant pressures facing adult social care, inaction in the short term poses risks to the continuation of some services and support to residents who need them most.

## National NHS reform

### *NHS 10 Year Health Plan*

3.9. Following Lord Ara Darzi's rapid independent review of the NHS in England in 2024, the Government intends to publish a new 10 Year Health Plan imminently, after undertaking a significant consultation with the public and staff working across health and care. Building on the previous NHS long term plan, it aims to create a modern health service to meet the changing needs of the population, address health disparities across the country and improve mental health. It is anticipated the health system reforms will be structured around three shifts:

- moving care from hospitals to communities;
- making better use of technology; and
- focusing on preventing sickness, not just treating it.

3.10. These shifts provide opportunities for adult social care reform and align with local priorities including prevention. It will be important that any national changes in models of care and support, or service delivery, are sufficiently funded and resourced locally.

### *Changes to NHS England and the role of Integrated Care Boards in England*

3.11. NHS England (NHSE) is responsible for leading the NHS through a range of statutory functions and regulatory powers to oversee and support the delivery of effective and high-quality NHS care. It also supports the commissioning of healthcare services with local Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and acute, community, mental health and primary care providers delivering local services. It directly commissions some highly specialised services.

3.12. The Government intends to return NHSE, currently an executive non-departmental public body, to direct oversight within the DHSC. It is expected to significantly reduce in size through this transition. The Government intention is that this will improve efficiency by reducing bureaucracy and allowing healthcare professionals to focus more directly on patient care. This transition will require primary legislation and is expected to take place over a two year period.

3.13. Concurrently, ICBs in England are required to reduce their operating budgets by half by autumn 2025; this is in addition to a recent 30% reduction to running costs. NHS Trusts in England also have a requirement to reduce corporate services budgets back to pre-pandemic levels. As well as impacts on local NHS staff, these proposed changes are expected to have significant implications for the role the NHS Sussex ICB has within the Sussex Integrated Care System (ICS), and the way the Council works in partnership with the NHS to transform, commission and deliver health and care services.

## Mental Health Bill

3.14. The [Mental Health Bill](#), if given royal assent, will impact how the Council delivers mental health support, particularly in relation to autistic people and people with a learning disability. The following changes in the Bill will apply to autistic people and people with a learning disability:

- they are no longer able to be detained (sometimes referred to as being 'sectioned') for treatment in a mental health hospital unless they also have a defined mental health condition;
- aftercare services currently required under section 117 of the Mental Health Act will therefore not be available in these cases;



- if they have been detained, care and treatment reviews will be required to ensure they are receiving the right support; and
- local authorities will be required to keep a Dynamic Support Register (DSR) of those people more likely to be detained ('sectioned') to try and prevent them being admitted to hospital.

3.15. DHSC has stated that the reforms for people with a learning disability and autistic people will commence once systems are able to demonstrate sufficient levels of community support as an alternative to hospital based care.

3.16. In response, the Council may need to conduct additional assessments for autistic people and people with a learning disability to ensure alternative provision is in place, such as for those detained under the Mental Health Act 1983 who are no longer eligible for aftercare. We will review policies and procedures to ensure people are not wrongfully detained under the Act. New DSR duties mean the Council, when exercising its market function, will need to ensure that necessary adult social care services are available for people with a learning disability and autistic people who are at risk of admission.

#### CQC assurance developments

3.17. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) is assessing local authority adult social care departments on how they are discharging their duties under the Care Act 2014. Following a national review into the operational effectiveness of the CQC, it has been suggested local authority assessments will continue as planned, but the scoring evidence will be more transparent and there will be a strengthened focus on nationally agreed priorities.

3.18. Following ESCC's assessment, which concluded in February 2025, a report is expected imminently and a work programme and action plan reporting to the Council's Adult Social Care and Health Improvement and Assurance Board will be updated to reflect any newly identified priorities.

3.19. We await further detail on future CQC assessments but anticipate that the Council will continue to be subject to assurance by the CQC and that our planning at both a strategic and operational level will need to be informed by the outcomes of CQC findings.

#### Local priorities and projects

3.20. Our five agreed local priorities for adult social care are:

- Prevention
- Waiting times
- Safeguarding
- Quality
- Value for money

3.21. The priorities will help drive a range of work to deliver positive outcomes for residents and have been informed by our CQC assurance work, including our Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review of adult social care, and the financial context for the Council.

#### *Social Care Future*

3.22. Social Care Future (SCF) is a movement which aims to change the way people think about adult social care. The SCF community, which supports local authorities, is helping us to gain inspiration, support, ideas and methods to plan and act locally. The Council has adopted the SCF vision as a future where we want everyone in East Sussex to "live in the

place we call home, with the people and things we love, in communities where we look out for each other, doing the things that matter to us”.

3.23. We will continue to embed the following SCF themes into our work in 2025/26 and beyond, including through our work driven by the Council’s priorities for adult social care and our ‘What Matters to You’ and prevention strategies:

- Co-production: sharing power with people within our communities who draw on care and support.
- Person-centred practice: transforming how we do assessments and support planning ‘with’ and not ‘to’ the person.
- Prevention and early action: hearing what matters to people, working with carers, and understanding our local resources, such as faith groups, lunch clubs and transport options.

3.24. Learning from and collaborating with SCF will support the Council to take further opportunities to maximise people’s wellbeing, utilise resident insight and prevent the need for some forms of care and support.

#### *‘What Matters to You’ Strategy*

3.25. Based on the priorities of the Council’s adult social care strategy [‘What Matters to You’](#), a two year action plan was developed and is currently in its second year of delivery. Upcoming actions will focus on working with the independent and VCSE sectors, improving the information and advice available to residents throughout their care journey, and supporting people to stay at home and healthy for longer.

#### *Prevention strategy*

3.26. The Council has also produced a prevention strategy focusing on adult social care, having developed a strategic approach with the VCSE, residents, and provider stakeholders. The strategy seeks to maintain and maximise people’s wellbeing to prevent, reduce, and delay the need for care and support. This approach supports the Government’s aims to shift towards more preventative activity in health and social care.

3.27. Implementation of the strategy started in early 2025 and we are considering how we can integrate and strengthen preventative work in Adult Social Care and Health. Initial strategic priorities include focusing on physical wellbeing; community wellbeing; and the knowledge, skills, connections and other resources people have to maintain their wellbeing and independence. Work to increase preventative capability and wellbeing will seek to complement and add value to related work across the Council, for example, supporting and being influenced by transformation programmes within Children’s Services.

3.28. The ‘What Matters To You’ strategy and the prevention strategy are now aligned and an action plan developed to support both sets of strategic aims. This means that work in response to the priorities of our residents will also support the wider national shift to building preventative capacity alongside work that improves current care and support.

3.29. Delivery of these strategies over the next three years will consider how we take forward and assess existing work, population priorities, resources, and how the landscape of providing care and support and working preventatively will evolve through reforms to local government structures. Plans for local government reorganisation may change, for example, strategic interaction between housing and adult social care, and thus how the aims of the ‘What Matters to You’ are best achieved.

### *Waiting times programme*

3.30. Waiting times are one of our five priorities for adult social care. The effective management of our waiting lists will help the Council to manage increasing demand for our services and target resources at those who need them the most over the coming years.

3.31. We continue to develop our relationships with organisations such as the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and programmes such as Partners in Care and Health to ensure we are up to date with national developments linked to waiting times and can respond to these locally. The Council supported the DHSC to develop the [‘Operating Model Toolkit for Local Authority Assessments’](#). We will use the toolkit to self-assess where we are as a local authority and use the outcomes to identify ways to streamline our adult social care assessments and reduce waiting times.

### *Safeguarding Adults Board and workstreams*

3.32. The East Sussex Safeguarding Adults Board (SAB) is a multi-agency statutory partnership which provides leadership and strategic oversight of adult safeguarding work across East Sussex. Its strategic plan priorities for 2024-2027 are:

- Self-neglect - improve and develop multi-agency working and practice.
- Prevention and early intervention - ensure unpaid carers have an understanding and awareness of adult safeguarding and what support they, and the person they are caring, for can access.
- Safeguarding and homelessness - promote positive practice with professionals working at the interface of multiple exclusion homelessness and adult safeguarding.

3.33. We will continue to build on our safeguarding practice and outcomes through safeguarding workstreams, which will introduce better checks and reporting. This includes audits linked to self-neglect, improving decision-making, and the contact adults or their representatives receive from the Council as part of safeguarding enquiries. We will be working with the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector and carers to support their understanding of adult safeguarding. We will also be introducing new safeguarding reporting arrangements and oversight to enable us to continually monitor and improve our performance.

### *Safeguarding - Health and Social Care Connect pilot and review*

3.34. In response to the LGA Peer Review feedback, the Council commissioned an independent review of our safeguarding triage function within Health and Social Care Connect (HSCC). We are running a pilot to increase management oversight of referrals linked to safeguarding, improve sign-off for referrals leading to safeguarding enquiries, and develop how we gather information and communicate with adults, their representatives, and to referrers as part of our ‘make safeguarding personal’ initiative. The learning from this pilot is being used to develop a new operating model for the management of safeguarding screening and triage to improve consistency of safeguarding decision making across Adult Social Care and Health, and to ensure timely review of referrals. We will introduce a standardised and streamlined way to manage, process and respond to safeguarding contacts across all operational teams.

3.35. The new operating model, safeguarding processes and governance arrangements will help the Council meet its statutory duties while making best use of the resources required to keep people safe.

### *Quality practice and assurance framework*

3.36. The Quality Practice and Assurance Framework describes the elements of good practice and assurance and how these support the promotion of the Council's vision for ASCH. Using the framework, we will enable staff across Adult Social Care and Health to know and develop social work and care, best practice and provide opportunities to assure we are providing good quality responses to people who draw on support and make better use of Council and partner resources. This includes supporting staff to continually develop, make specific practice improvements in the quality of their assessment, care and support planning, and use data and insight to identify how to provide more personalised support.

### *Equality, diversity and inclusion*

3.37. Our Adult Social Care and Health [equality, diversity, and inclusion \(EDI\) strategy](#) sets out ambitions to transform care and support services so that everyone feels they belong, have a voice and an equal opportunity to thrive. Following the strategy launch, we are working to improve outcomes for people from seldom heard communities, conducting a review of our approach to implementing actions from equality impact assessments as well as delivering a range of EDI learning opportunities for staff.

3.38. As part of the implementation of the recommendations from the [scrutiny review of equality and inclusion in adult social care](#), we are improving engagement with people from seldom heard groups and their representation on our engagement forums. Informed by the diverse range of people who live and work in East Sussex, this work will help us to identify and plan any improvements required to support people and services that Adult Social Care and Health delivers and commissions.

3.39. We will also enhance our approach to EDI through improving our use of data to identify areas of focus and to monitor impact and outcomes for local people.

### *All-Age Autism Action Plan*

3.40. Following consultation with autistic people and wider stakeholders across the county, the East Sussex Autism Partnership Board has produced an [East Sussex All-Age Autism Action Plan](#). The plan, which will be implemented over the next three years, aims to improve the lives of autistic people, their families, carers, and wider support networks in our county. The priorities in the plan are:

- improving the health and wellbeing of autistic people;
- improving autistic children and young people's access to education and supporting positive transitions into adulthood; and
- supporting autistic people into employment and helping them sustain their employment.

3.41. The Council and partners will use the Action Plan to support autistic people to find support earlier and lead independent lives, preventing crisis and increased need for support in the future. This includes increasing autism awareness and improving education, employment, wellbeing and life opportunities. The plan has been produced in the context of funding challenges for the Council, the NHS Integrated Care Board, and other partners, and focuses on priorities considered achievable whilst delivering meaningful change for the East Sussex autistic community.

### Adult social care workforce

3.42. The adult social care workforce is undergoing significant changes, and as with all local authorities, we need to make substantial savings and efficiencies. However, it is crucial that we maintain a trained and knowledgeable workforce with the right values and skills. This commitment is encapsulated nationally in the [Skills for Care strategy](#), and locally in our Workforce 2030 programme.

3.43. As the needs of our community continue to become more complex and more people require adult social care support, we will adopt new technologies and ways of working. Through demographic analysis, we will also consider what our workforce needs to look like in 2030 and beyond. This is significant to our planning and budgeting as our workforce is central to the Council and our providers' capability to meet the needs of people in East Sussex.

3.44. The national care workforce pathway will guide the Council's efforts to attract more people into the workforce, including a focus on young people and succession planning. Our training offer will reflect the need for a skilled workforce capable of meeting changing demands. Whilst we will prioritise our budget on mandatory and statutory training, we will also continue to support succession planning and career development initiatives. Additionally, we will continue to support the development of a skilled workforce by maximising the use of artificial intelligence and implementing our local Adult Social Care and Health workforce strategy.

#### Carers Partnership Plan

3.45. The Council and NHS Integrated Care Board, Care for the Carers, Amaze and Imago have signed a public 'Commitment to Carers' setting out priorities to meet the needs of carers in East Sussex.

3.46. As part of this commitment, a multi-agency [Carers' Partnership Plan](#) for East Sussex with eight key themes has been developed and will progress with partners and carers using a phased approach across five years.

3.47. Initial actions will consist of developing a multi-agency communications plan with partners to co-ordinate messaging during Carers Week and the Care for the Carers Annual Carers Voices Conference. This supports work linked to the Carers' Partnership Plan themes of 'caring about equality' and 'how health and social care can work better for carers'. It supports aspirations of the Council to reach out to more carers (including those who are seldom heard) and highlight the needs of carers to our partners. We will also develop peer support for carers.

#### Adult social care market

3.48. Financial pressures continue for the social care sector and recent increases to employer's National Insurance contributions and the National Minimum Wage will impact on adult social care providers' business sustainability. Many providers are small to medium sized local businesses and will have limited ability to absorb these cost increases. Significant workforce, recruitment and retention challenges remain, whilst upcoming changes to international recruitment visa requirements may further impact provider capacity.

3.49. In May 2025, as part of the [Restoring Control over the Immigration System White Paper](#), the Government announced the social care visa route will be ending. A transition period will be in place until 2028, allowing people already in the UK on this scheme to continue to extend their stay, change sponsors, and apply to settle, although this will be kept under review. Responses from the adult social care sector have highlighted concerns

regarding recruitment and retention of care workers following the announcement, as the sector relies on international recruitment to fill vacancies.

3.50. The Council will continue to engage providers on how these changes are affecting the market and offer a range of support to help mitigate the impact on service sustainability.

3.51. The East Sussex allocation of the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund for 2025/26 will be used to support ongoing sustainability of the adult social care market through our annual fee uplifts to providers, which DHSC has confirmed as one of the target areas for the fund. In a change for 2025, the Market Position Statement now forms part of the submission for the fund. Our [Market Position Statement](#) will be updated dynamically to set out market position changes and recommissioning opportunities for providers.

#### *Provider payment policy: net to gross*

3.52. We are piloting a change to how the Council pays residential and nursing home providers - from paying net to paying gross of the client contribution. Moving to gross would mean we pay the provider the full cost of the resident's care and collect any client contributions directly from the people drawing on care and support, or their representatives. The pilot evaluation will inform a recommendation in autumn 2025 on whether to pay all residential and nursing home providers in this way.

3.53. If the Council does go ahead, it will represent a change in policy and processes for provider payments and align our approach with most other local authorities (including neighbouring authorities). This would increase market sustainability and reduce the administrative burden on providers through changes such as transferring invoicing of adults from providers to the Council. The change would also support Adult Social Care and Health to secure residential and nursing home placements with providers who might previously have been deterred by our payment terms.

3.54. Transferring the collection of client contributions to the Council would however increase and expedite our exposure to some levels of financial risk. This would be mitigated through work to assess and improve our debt management processes (see below) and a research project to better understand how to support adults to pay for care and support on time.

#### Financial Services

3.55. A programme of change is currently underway within Adult Social Care and Health Financial Services which involves a strategic review of key documents and processes, such as the charging for care and support policy and disability related expenditure procedure. One option under review is the introduction of administrative fees for support set up by the Council on behalf of adults who have been financially assessed as able to fully fund their care. This work is subject to a public consultation taking place between May and July 2025. The work will support the Council to maximise efficiency within the service, respond to national changes in case law and explore opportunities to fulfil what we can legally charge for under the Care Act, whilst minimising levels of debt.

#### *Debt management project*

3.56. We will undertake a strategic review of debt recovery processes linked to how service users make payments, looking at both secured and unsecured debt, and explore opportunities to improve our recovery success. This is important given the context of financial pressures and the impact cost of living is having on residents and the Council, as



well as the potential change to care home provider payments from net to gross outlined above, which poses a risk of increased debt exposure for the Council.

### Health and social care integration

#### *Sussex integrated care strategy and shared delivery plan*

3.57. The Council continues to play a lead role in the Sussex Integrated Care System (ICS). This includes having a seat on the NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board (ICB), co-leading the Sussex Health and Care Assembly, a formal joint committee set up with West Sussex County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council and NHS Sussex ICB, and hosting the Independent Chair. The Sussex Health and Care Partnership Executive oversees shared system challenges and risks, for example around hospital discharge.

3.58. Shared priorities are set out in the five-year Sussex integrated care strategy [Improving Lives Together](#) and the subsequent supporting Sussex shared delivery plan. Both are built on our understanding of population health needs in East Sussex, and the Health and Wellbeing Board strategy. An annual refresh of the shared delivery plan takes place to ensure it is updated and progress towards shared objectives can be built on.

#### *Better Care Fund policy framework and plan*

3.59. [The Better Care Fund \(BCF\) policy framework](#), in line with the Government's plans for health and care, sets out the Government's vision for funding, oversight and support arrangements for the Better Care Fund (BCF) for 2025 to 2026. It is focused on overarching objectives linked to the 10 Year Plan, including a focus on prevention, providing more care at home, and using technology to transform care. BCF plans now include use of additional national discharge funding, promoting a joint approach to care and support required for timely hospital discharges.

3.60. East Sussex BCF plans will continue to support these objectives through close alignment to the East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board strategy, Healthy Lives, Healthy People. We will work closely with system partners, including on our shared focus on hospital discharge. Our BCF plans include significant consideration of how adequate community resources can support people after they return home and to remain independent within their communities. The recent Spending Review indicated that there will be an increase to the NHS' minimum contribution to adult social care via the Better Care Fund in future years and we await further details.

#### *Hospital discharge initiatives*

3.61. As part of our Integrated Care System (ICS) we will continue to work with NHS Sussex and provider trusts to improve performance and outcomes in hospital discharge. This includes developing a common NHS and social care discharge data set and a clear escalation framework for patients with complex needs waiting a long time in acute hospitals.

3.62. Successful improvements in hospital discharge initiatives can avoid prolonged stays in hospital for people awaiting assessment or commissioned services and make effective use of the resources available to the Council, NHS and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) partners.

#### *Neighbourhood health*

3.63. NHS England published [Neighbourhood health guidelines](#) to help NHS Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), local authorities and health and care providers progress plans for

neighbourhood health in 2025/26 with local partners. The guidelines include progress on the three shifts in advance of the publication of the 10 Year Health Plan and a framework for action that can be tailored to local needs, building on the local developments and integrated service provision already in place.

#### *Integrated community teams*

3.64. As a shared ambition in the Sussex integrated care strategy Improving Lives Together and the Shared Delivery Plan, integrated community teams (ICTs), which bring together a 'team of teams' focused on local communities in a fixed footprint, are a key development to deliver the Government's shifts for health and care and vision for neighbourhood health. The programme will be supported by data and insight to better coordinate delivery of an integrated offer of health, care and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. Over time, ICTs will help strengthen the way we deliver prevention as well as proactive, integrated care better suited to supporting independence and wellbeing.

3.65. In East Sussex there are five ICTs coterminous with local borough and district council footprints. Following our launch of [ICT Profiles](#), development sessions with partners and connections with the wider network of support in each ICT area will continue to co-design our model for multi-disciplinary teams to support people with complex needs. Leadership groups are now being formalised in each ICT footprint to develop their plans for implementation during 2025/26.

#### Health and Wellbeing Board

3.66. The East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board is undertaking a programme of informal development sessions on topics from our East Sussex Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), including looking at the long-term health outlook for our population, improving healthy life expectancy and wider determinants of health. This programme aims to support understanding of our population's needs and priorities and will link to Shared Delivery Plans and the next refresh of the [East Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board strategy](#) Healthy Lives, Healthy People which is due in 2026/27.

3.67. These discussions are helping to strengthen relationships and mutual accountability for whole system collaboration on shared priorities, particularly the challenging financial context being experienced by our organisations. This is contributing to a shared vision for the Health and Wellbeing Board's unique stewardship role for the system and unlocking the added value of partners collaborating at 'Place'. In 2025/26 the Council and partners will further embed this way of working throughout our East Sussex Health and Care Partnership to support improved outcomes for our population.

#### Housing

##### *Place based housing strategy*

3.68. The East Sussex Housing Partnership continues its work to develop a place-based housing strategy which will provide a framework for cross sector working to reduce health inequalities linked to housing and make the best use of capacity and resources across the system. The partnership priorities are:

- homelessness prevention;
- housing, health and care integration;
- improving housing management and standards;
- increasing housing supply, climate change and retrofit; and



- the private rented sector.

3.69. The strategy includes work to tackle financial challenges such as the rising cost of temporary accommodation and the need to increase supply of affordable housing. It will guide preparations for upcoming legislative changes, including the Renters' Rights Bill, which will impact on households living in the private rented sector, and the Supported Housing Regulations which will apply to support accommodation and will require local housing authorities to work with Adult Social Care and Health and Children's Services to develop plans to address gaps in provision.

3.70. The partnership is seeking feedback to help refine the strategy before it is adopted in September 2025.

### *East Sussex Mental Health and Housing Strategy*

3.71. Our Mental Health Commissioning team will lead on the delivery of the East Sussex Mental Health and Housing Strategy. This has four priority areas for development over 2025/26 - 2027/28:

- Improve integration between housing and mental health services;
- Review the effectiveness and impact of 'discharge to assess' and develop support models prepared for emerging funding in East Sussex;
- Improve supply and flexibility of the current support offer; and
- Improve the quality and inclusiveness of the current supported housing offer across the system.

3.72. The priorities in our plan aim to strengthen the availability, quality and effectiveness of accommodation and housing support in East Sussex. The plan will support the Council and partners to drive integration and collaboration to enable a recovery focused accommodation and housing provision, helping people to live their best life whilst reducing the likelihood of illness and crisis developing.

### *Housing retrofit programme and strategy*

3.73. People's homes and their energy efficiency are one of the building blocks of health. Homes are also one of the largest sources of carbon emissions in the county, with climate change expected to exacerbate challenges with inefficient houses due to extreme heat, cold and weather events. The East Sussex Housing Partnership Board's housing retrofit programme aims to accelerate housing retrofit across the county. Time-limited Public Health funding is supporting the creation of a strategic plan in collaboration with partners, building on work to future-proof homes, reduce people's energy bills, and improve indoor air quality and ambient comfort. The programme aims to unblock local challenges and increase the county's capacity to achieve retrofit at scale, draw in more external funding, improve the supply of trained tradespeople and address poor consumer trust in the sector and misconceptions about retrofit.

## Public Health

### *Tobacco and Vapes Bill*

3.74. The [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#) raises the age of sale for all tobacco products by one year every year from 2027 onwards. The Bill also introduces Government powers to halt the branding and marketing of vapes and other nicotine products, such as nicotine pouches, to

appeal to children and young people. The ban on smoking in public may be extended to some outdoor spaces along with the introduction of vape free areas.

3.75. The Council will respond by reaching key smoking populations with innovative support and smoking cessation interventions which are responsive to needs. This includes our Public Health team working with colleagues in Trading Standards to disrupt the supply of illegal tobacco and underage vape sales, as well as working with local businesses during the transition period in which disposable vapes are banned.

#### *Gambling related harm and statutory levy*

3.76. The gambling sector is seeing substantial growth. This is being fuelled by the rise in smartphone use, targeted advertising, and sophisticated technology. Gambling-related harm carries hidden economic costs in healthcare expenditure, welfare support, criminal justice and homelessness services. The Government has reviewed legislation set in 2005 and plans to introduce a new levy on all operators to be collected during 2025/26. Detailed plans are not yet available but the anticipated £100m to be raised will fund treatment, prevention and research.

3.77. Locally we are working with partners to raise awareness and assess the risk to residents of both land based and online gambling. We will learn from good practice in other authorities to develop a local action plan to address the availability, accessibility, advertising, awareness and environment of gambling products.

## **4. Children's Services**

4.1. This section and section 5 below outline significant reforms in both children's social care and education, including those outlined in the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#). They also outline local priority focus areas for Children's Services, including reshaping the delivery of early help and social care services in line with national policy and the ongoing response to demand pressures, work to improve educational outcomes and to develop support for special educational needs and disabilities, and on home to school transport.

### **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill**

4.2. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was introduced to Parliament in December 2024 and is currently nearing its final stages in Parliament. Through 39 new policies, it sets out significant reforms for children's social care and education which aim to enhance child welfare and educational standards across England. ESCC Children's Services has been working towards these reforms for some time. This includes work to strengthen partnerships between councils, schools, health services, and other agencies; to drive a strong focus on prevention; and holistic family support. We believe that this approach will achieve better outcomes for children and families and deliver the most effective use of limited resources. However, the Bill is more prescriptive than expected, and the timeline for delivery is challenging. The following paragraphs detail reforms, and local responses, in social care. Education reforms are outlined in section 5.

### **National reforms to children's social care**

4.3. The majority of the social care reforms set out in the Bill were foreshadowed in the policy paper [Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive](#), published in November 2024. This built on previous work including the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, published in 2022, which proposed a variety of reforms aimed at improving the care system for vulnerable children, and the subsequent strategy published by the previous Government in response to this review, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, in 2023.

4.4. In March 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) launched the Families First Partnership Programme (FFPP), the Government's umbrella initiative for the major children's social care reforms. It aims to provide early support to families, helping them to overcome challenges before problems escalate. This includes, for Early Help and Social Care, changes to working more preventatively with children and families, setting up new Family Help services and Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams, and optimising use of family networks and kinship care.

4.5. In East Sussex, we are building upon existing strengths as we adapt services to meet the key priorities of this programme. These priorities are designed to achieve four main outcomes:

- Children and families stay together, reducing the need for children to enter the care system.
- Children and families are supported by an extended family network.
- Children and families are safe inside and outside the home – addressing risks in both domestic and community settings.
- Children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes.

4.6. The Government's strategy will reshape the delivery of early help and social care services by integrating targeted early help with social work teams (Family Help teams) to drive improvements in outcomes and ensure that families receive the right help at the right time. The aim is to create a more responsive, seamless system for families and ensure efficiencies in the provision of services.

#### Local service pressures and developments

##### *Transformation Programme*

4.7. Locally we are working with our partners to take forward the national reforms and a Transformation Board, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, has been established to oversee the delivery of these key changes. This will support our vision of providing help when problems emerge, tilting the balance from statutory intervention to one of prevention and support, by:

- enhancing the prevention offer at a much earlier stage;
- planning for the integration of early help and social care teams into a Family Help service;
- creating a Multi-Agency Child Protection Team with police, health and education colleagues;
- strengthening our kinship offer, including strengthening family-led plans and family group conferencing and embedding the kinship national guidance and support;
- establishing clearer leadership and accountability for multi-agency safeguarding, including an enhanced role for education and wider corporate parenting responsibilities for health and police; and
- developing the workforce, improving data systems, and ensuring services are responsive to local needs through better multi-agency information sharing.

##### *Care placements*

4.8. A key pressure for Children's Services continues to be care placements for looked after children. Increased demand and complexity of needs, coupled with significant limitations on the availability of suitable placements and dysfunction in the care market, has led to a substantial increase in the cost of placements over the past two years. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill sets out measures to address these pressures,

including increased transparency, improvements to local authority commissioning, and boosting the supply of provision. The Bill also sets out Government's intention to address excessive profit making by including a backstop law to potentially cap the profit providers can make. However, this will only come into effect if the other measures introduced do not have an impact.

4.9. Our focus remains on taking forward programmes of work to address this, including:

- refreshing our sufficiency strategy to continue to broaden the range of high-quality placement options for our looked after children, particularly those with complex needs;
- playing a leading role in the South East Regional Care Cooperative to improve placement sufficiency across the whole region;
- working more closely with our neighbouring local authorities on foster carer recruitment through a hub model; and
- further developing an integrated commissioning approach to ensure the best use of our shared resources to support our looked after children.

4.10. These areas of work are included as part of the wider transformation programme in Children's Services and progress and impact is driven through the Transformation Board.

#### *Service demand*

4.11. Children's Services nationally and locally continue to see a sustained high level of demand and complexity in the needs of children and their families. We are seeing a lasting impact from Covid, particularly with regards to growing levels of mental health need (with increasing issues relating to neurodiversity), heightened inequalities, and cost of living challenges. There has been an increase in the number of families in temporary accommodation, increases in domestic abuse and substance misuse, rising school exclusions and behaviours that challenge, developmental delay in younger children, and an increase in overlapping complexities of need.

4.12. Over the past two years, ESCC has experienced a 17% increase in the number of social care assessments undertaken with children and families, and a 5% increase in the number of looked after children (not including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children). Positively there has been a 7% decrease in children subject to child protection planning over the same period. This demand is contributing to increased pressure on Children's Services and wider partners and we need to ensure we have sufficient capacity to meet our statutory duties. We are continuing to address these demands through our early help services and a range of preventative approaches and interventions.

#### Youth service developments

4.13. Funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) via the Youth Investment Fund allowed us to upgrade two outdated youth centres in 2024/25. Heathfield Youth Hub and the JOFF Youth Hub in Peacehaven are due to reopen in the summer of 2025. Capital funding has also been secured through the national Levelling Up programme for a major refurbishment and extension of facilities for the Hollington Youth Hub in Hastings. The Hub closed at Easter 2025 and will reopen in March 2026.

### **5. Education and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)**

#### National education reforms

5.1. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill contains significant reforms related to education which will impact locally on ESCC and schools. It aims to reshape key aspects of England's education system, provide clarity on key areas of work and strengthen the role of local authorities. The Bill also contains important provisions for children not in school, who are often amongst the most vulnerable.

5.2. The Bill also includes a commitment to a national rollout of free breakfast clubs in every primary school in England. The first phase began in April 2025. Schools in Hastings, Seaford and Eastbourne were among those chosen to pilot the new scheme, which is expected to be expanded in summer 2025.

### *Elective Home Education*

5.3. The number of electively home educated children in East Sussex continues to rise, reflecting a national trend. In the 2023-2024 academic year, 2,636 children were home educated, a 25% increase from the previous year. The majority of these children are secondary aged. Urban areas and areas with economic disadvantage continue to have higher proportions of elective home education children.

5.4. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will introduce mandatory registration for electively home educated families, replacing the current voluntary system. Local authorities will have clearer responsibilities for tracking and supporting home educated children. In preparation, we will:

- review our existing related infrastructure, policies, and procedures;
- ensure our case management systems track electively home educated registrations and assessments; and
- continue to build trust and transparency with the home education community and engage proactively with families.

### *Approach to academies*

5.5. The Bill also contains key reforms related to academisation. Academies will lose some of their current flexibilities and be required to align more with local authority maintained schools. Academies will also be required to follow the national curriculum. The Bill will repeal the duty to issue academy orders for maintained schools that are judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted. This will allow the Secretary of State the flexibility to determine what the most appropriate action is to drive school improvement in each individual case. The presumption that any new school is an academy will also be removed.

5.6. The Bill also outlines new duties for local authorities and schools to cooperate on areas such as admissions and place planning and will give local authorities the ability to direct academies to admit a child. It focuses on the role of local authorities to ensure that children can attend their local schools and brings more alignment between academies and maintained schools. We will continue to work through our strong school partnerships to ensure that all schools are meeting the needs of their school communities.

### Small schools strategy

5.7. Working with our school leaders and the Dioceses, we believe that the future of our schools is best safeguarded through groups of schools working together in partnership, within their locality. We will continue to encourage small schools to work together, developing a variety of strong partnership models which contribute to the broader school-led system across the county.

## Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reforms

5.8. There have been a number of reviews of the SEND system in recent years, leading to the publication of a [Green Paper in March 2022](#). As a result, the SEND Change Programme was established to look at different areas that could be reformed to make improvements to the system. Along with the other Sussex local authorities and Portsmouth City Council, East Sussex has been part of the South East Change Programme.

5.9. The current Government has indicated that it views SEND reform as a priority. Since the autumn of 2024, there has been a shift in the work of the Change Programme with greater focus on improving inclusive practice in mainstream schools. This shift, along with proposed changes to the school inspection framework, will support improvements to inclusion, outcomes and financial viability across the SEND system. However, we are still awaiting a clear policy direction from the Department for Education (DfE) on the broader issues around SEND and how the system will be funded sustainably in the future. At the Spending Review in June 2025 it was confirmed that details of the Government's intended approach to SEND reform will be set out in a Schools White Paper in the autumn. Further details on supporting local authorities with the transition to a reformed system are also expected as part of the upcoming local government funding reform consultation.

## East Sussex Area SEND Inspection and SEND Strategy

5.10. In November 2024, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) undertook an Area SEND (ASEND) inspection of the East Sussex Local Partnership (ESCC and NHS Sussex Integrated Care Board). The local area was given the middle outcome. The [ASEND inspection report](#) highlighted what the area partnership is doing well, including areas of good practice and examples of multi-agency working with professionals to provide holistic support for children and young people and their families.

5.11. The report also identified some areas for improvement, including:

- Improving the quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) to better identify the provision that children and young people require to meet their needs. This should include:
  - improving joint working of practitioners, particularly health, to contribute to EHCPs; and
  - ensuring a more timely and precise annual review process.
- Taking further action to reduce overall waiting times in relation to neurodevelopmental pathways, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) interventions and the provision of wheelchairs and ensuring that support provided to families while waiting is well used and beneficial.
- Developing and embedding work with education settings on improving inclusion.
- Ensuring that there is sufficient and suitable alternative provision and post-16 options for children and young people with SEND.

5.12. As a partnership, we have published a new [ASEND Inspection Improvement Plan](#) to address these areas. This further builds on our work and aligns with the Ofsted and CQC requirements. We have also extended our [SEND strategy](#) for an additional year, to run until the end of the 2025-26 academic year, whilst the national direction of travel is clarified.

5.13. In line with the national picture, East Sussex continues to see significant increases in demand for statutory assessments and specialist provision for children and young people with SEND. Improving outcomes for children with SEND is a key priority for the Partnership and focused work is underway with schools and partners through our SEND Strategy. We

continue to monitor the impact of increased demand on SEN funding and sufficiency of provision.

### Educational attainment

5.14. The Council has a statutory duty to promote high standards in education. This currently is discharged within the context of the removal of the DfE grant for school improvement and the expectation that schools themselves should lead improvement. In East Sussex, we deliver this duty through working collaboratively with all schools through our partnership structures and supporting a school led system of improvement.

5.15. Children and young people in East Sussex achieve above the national average for Early Years Good Level of Development, however, at other key stages results remain below the national average.

5.16. Despite results remaining below the national average, there have been improvements and encouraging performance by several schools/trusts. Partnerships with and across schools are a strong feature of education in the county.

5.17. Actions we will take to improve primary school attainment include reviewing and analysing data collaboratively with school leaders to help us identify joint priorities and plan accordingly, and targeting school improvement resources through the Primary Board, including using our alliance partner programme to deliver bespoke support as needed.

5.18. Actions we will take to improve secondary school attainment include targeting school improvement resources through the Secondary Board, including using our external adviser programme to deliver bespoke support as needed, focusing on improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, and embedding a programme of 'Study Visits' for headteachers and senior leaders. Attendance is a critical factor when considering attainment and progress outcomes for all key stages and pupil groups. We continue to support all secondary schools to implement the statutory guidance on attendance (see section 5.22 below).

### *SEND attainment*

5.19. Attainment for pupils with SEND is above the national average for Early Years Good Level of Development for children with SEN support but not for children with EHCPs. At Key Stage 2 performance is below the national average. At Key Stage 4 attainment for East Sussex pupils with SEN support is below the national average and for pupils with an EHCP it is slightly above the national average.

5.20. We will continue to take action to improve SEND attainment including continuing to develop capacity in early years providers, primary and secondary schools to support children with EHCPs effectively, and continuing to improve identification and planning for children, including better joining up working across teams. We will also continue to champion young people with SEND, ensuring that the outcomes and needs of young people with SEND are central to the plans of our school partnerships and our work with multi-academy trusts.

### School attendance

5.21. The impact of the Covid pandemic continues to significantly impact school attendance locally and nationally. Whilst we have seen some marginal gains, East Sussex continues to have high levels of non-attendance, suspensions, and exclusions. School leaders are experiencing increased levels and complexity of need in their school populations and the demand for support services remains high.

5.22. In accordance with the national statutory guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#), which clarifies roles for local authorities, schools, and families, we continue to strengthen oversight of attendance through regular individual dialogue with all schools and by providing early help and support to schools and all families of children whose attendance is less than 50%. We will continue to collaborate with schools to monitor attendance and identify pupils at risk from persistent absence.

### Home to School Transport

5.23. Home to school transport (HTST) is under significant budgetary pressure, primarily due to increases in the number of children and young people eligible for HTST and increased costs associated with providing transport. The majority of spend for HTST relates to children with SEND and there has been an increase in the number of children with SEND with more complex needs. The number of pupils with an EHCP is currently forecast to rise in East Sussex by 22.7% over the next three years, having increased by 32.2% in the last three years.

5.24. In addition, some children are transported to schools some distance from their home; this can be due to local schools being unable to meet their needs or because of tribunal decisions. This results in children being transported further distances at greater cost.

5.25. Updated national guidance on home to school transport is expected and we will consider the implications when this is issued. Children's Services will work with Communities, Economy and Transport to maintain the delivery of the Council's statutory responsibilities and continue to look at ways we can reduce costs, including:

- Conversion of solo transport to shared routes.
- Route optimisation.
- Implementing a new strategy for an enhanced personal transport offer where this is cost effective.
- Promoting independent travel training.
- Increasing the number of pupils travelling on public transport to school.

## **6. Communities**

6.1. The following section outlines the Council's ongoing partnerships and work with local communities and the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector to connect people and places, build and develop a thriving VCSE sector and meet community needs, including keeping communities safe.

### Financial Inclusion and the Household Support Fund

6.2. The multi-agency Financial Inclusion Steering Group continues to oversee a programme of activities to improve financial wellbeing and help residents with the cost of living. Priorities include maximising resident income, building capacity in the system and improving the inclusivity of services.

6.3. To achieve this we continue to maintain the Council's [cost of living webpages](#), as a central information source for residents and partners, promote information through non-digital communications, and design and deliver targeted welfare benefits campaigns to enable residents to access support.

6.4. Our East Sussex Money Guiders training programme, delivered in partnership with the Money and Pensions Service, offers training and resources to workers across all sectors



to build capacity, ensure the correct information, guidance and advice is given, and enable residents to access the right services.

6.5. The Department for Work and Pensions has extended the Household Support Fund (HSF) for a further full year to March 2026. The fund supports households in the most need with essential costs including food, energy and water bills, and helps manage demand on services provided by the Council and other partners. HSF in East Sussex is delivered through a wide range of partners including Adult Social Care and Health, Children's Services, Warmer Homes, foodbanks and food partnerships, district and borough councils, and twenty VCSE partner organisations. At the recent Spending Review the Government set out its intentions to reform crisis support, including a multi-year settlement to transform the HSF into a new Crisis and Resilience Fund incorporating Discretionary Housing Payments. Further details are awaited and we will continue to administer these funds whilst they are made available by Government.

#### VCSE support, development and infrastructure

6.6. The Council has renewed our investment in the [VCSE Alliance](#) for a further three years from 2025. The Alliance brings together organisations to share insight on community needs and to enable the VCSE sector to increase its influence, voice and trust amongst partners.

6.7. A new three year programme funded by the Council has been developed to support VCSE capacity building, infrastructure support and asset based approaches to resident and community wellbeing. This programme will support the shift to more person and community centered approaches to improve health and wellbeing. This will include mobilising assets within communities, encouraging equity and social connection, and increasing people's control over their health and lives. VCSE partners in each of the five district and borough council areas will work together with residents, groups and organisations to support all communities to be connected and thrive.

6.8. In 2025, the Council is collaborating with the Alliance and Sussex Community Foundation to commission a new research project on the state of the VCSE sector. A refreshed understanding of the sector is essential to the Council and partners given the range of pressures and demands on the system in recent years, so that there is a contemporary assessment of the health and resilience of the VCSE sector to inform future planning and policy.

#### Migration

6.9. A new [Restoring Control Over the Immigration System White Paper](#) was published in May 2025 setting out reforms to legal migration.

6.10. The White Paper has five key principles:

- Reduce net migration;
- Link the immigration system to skills and training requirements in the UK, so that no industry is allowed to rely solely on immigration to fill its skills shortages;
- The system must be fair and effective;
- Rules must be respected and enforced; and
- The system must support integration and community cohesion.

6.11. Updated measures in the White Paper include increasing the threshold for skilled worker visas to reduce lower skilled migration; workforce strategies to increase training and participation rates in the UK; closing the social care visa route to overseas recruitment;

restricting dependants; increasing English language requirements; and increasing the length of time people need to be in the UK to achieve settled status.

6.12. The White Paper puts forward changes the Government intends to make, and we await further details and implementation timescales to help us to fully understand the impact. However, we anticipate that these measures could have a significant impact on the care workforce and we will work with our providers to understand this as proposed measures progress.

#### *Humanitarian protection schemes*

6.13. Separate from this White Paper, new measures specifically to respond to 'irregular migration', including small boat crossings, are included in the [Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill](#). This repeals some provisions within the previous Government's legislation. However, plans remain in place to deliver dispersal accommodation across the UK, with all areas expected to participate in accommodating people seeking asylum. The Home Office holds procurement plans and targets for dispersal accommodation for all areas, including the South East. Indications are that the current Government will seek to take a more 'place based approach' that considers asylum dispersal in the wider context of other types of asylum accommodation and refugee resettlement, and this may require greater engagement and accountability at a local level. At the recent Spending Review Government allocated additional funding to reduce the asylum backlog and committed to ending the use of hotel accommodation by the end of the parliament.

#### *Homes for Ukraine and the Ukraine Permission Extension Scheme*

6.14. The Ukraine Permission Extension (UPE) scheme opened for applications in February 2025 to allow Ukrainian nationals, or family members of Ukrainians living in the UK with existing permission on one of the Ukraine schemes, to live in the UK for a further 18 months. The Council continues to support Ukrainians in East Sussex through the Homes for Ukraine programme, which will support to people on UPE where this is needed and appropriate. The Homes for Ukraine scheme also remains open to new applications.

#### *Afghan Resettlement Programme*

6.15. The Government is consolidating resettlement schemes under a single Afghan Resettlement Programme (ARP) to streamline support and funding. The revised programme will update arrangements for funding, transitional accommodation, and resettlement, and will require local authorities to put forward proposals for support. In East Sussex, the ARP is led by district and borough councils.

#### *Safe and legal migration routes*

6.16. A consultation on capping other safe and legal migration routes was halted due to the general election. Further updates on safe and legal routes and any associated caps will be determined following future consultation, in which the Council and partners will participate, once details of this become available.

#### *Support for Separated Migrant Children*

6.17. The Council remains committed to the [National Transfer Scheme](#) for Separated Migrant Children (previously known as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children). Children are well supported by a specialist team of practitioners who are experienced and skilled in understanding their needs, and the impact of their earlier life experiences. Whilst the National Transfer Scheme ensures funding for under 18s, there are significant budget

pressures associated with those who become care leavers who often, due to complexities relating to their immigration status, require support until they reach the age of 25.

6.18. Under a new Government policy, young people seeking asylum status are now processed more quickly and, as a result, can spend longer in appeal. Supporting a young person who is in appeal is not as well funded and could result in financial pressures for the Council. We are working through the implications of this change.

## Community Safety

### *Preventing violent extremism*

6.19. The terrorism threat to the UK remains 'substantial', meaning an attack is likely. To prevent future incidents, several national developments are taking place in 2025 including the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 (or Martyn's Law); a rapid review into counter extremism policy; a national review of Police Led Partnerships; and a national evaluation of the Channel programme.

6.20. Locally, we expect to see an increase in the number and complexity of Channel cases (those relating to people susceptible to radicalisation). The counter extremism review will see the introduction of new powers to tackle the rapid increase in youth radicalisation and measures to strengthen the Prevent programme. The Safer East Sussex Team will continue to work with system partners, including Sussex Police, to respond to national updates and co-ordinate efforts to prevent violent extremism in East Sussex.

### *Serious violence and adult exploitation*

6.21. The Government's Safer Streets mission to halve knife crime within a decade will influence how Violence Reduction Partnership funding is allocated and will introduce a new power to seize knives in public places, including schools. Youth Futures prevention partnerships and panels will be introduced to manage suspects in crimes, young people at risk of offending, and anti-social behaviour. The Serious Violence Duty national guidance (2025) has also been refreshed.

6.22. The remit of the East Sussex Violence Reduction Partnership will be expanded to include criminal and sexual exploitation of adults due to recent increases in serious violent crimes, and links between serious crime and exploitation. The Council's Children's Services panels (Immediate Justice, Turnaround and REBOOT) will influence how Violence Reduction Partnership funding will be allocated.

6.23. Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) are regular multi-agency meetings to discuss victims of domestic abuse who are at the highest risk of serious harm or death. In East Sussex, the number of cases discussed are 29% above recommended levels and that of the national average, with volumes reaching 35 – 40 cases a week. In order to address this, a pan-Sussex MARAC review will be led by Sussex Police, drawing on national best practice examples. East Sussex is leading the way with proposed changes to referral criteria and the introduction of a separate High Risk Domestic Abuse Panel. The proposal is for the majority of multi-agency liaison and action planning on high risk victims to take place online rather than at in person meetings which will be used only for cases that would most benefit from a multi-agency discussion.

### *Domestic and Sexual violence and abuse and violence against women and girls*

6.24. We are working with partners to tackle domestic and sexual violence and abuse, and violence against women and girls through a locally produced action plan. The plan is

informed by the pan-Sussex needs assessment and strategy in fulfilment of Domestic Abuse Act 2021 duties, including those related to domestic abuse-related death reviews.

6.25. The Council's application to reinstate White Ribbon accreditation has been accepted and the action plan to February 2027 demonstrates a commitment to ending violence against women and girls. However, as we have not seen an increase in funding to match rising costs in delivery, it will be challenging for the Council to sustain its offer with current resources.

#### *Substance misuse*

6.26. In response to a relative funding reduction in 2025/26 of the Drug and Alcohol Treatment, Recovery and Improvement Grant (DATRIG), the Safer Communities Team is working with the commissioned treatment provider to ensure continuity of service provision.

6.27. The DATRIG is for one year, which means that the recommissioning of drug and alcohol treatment services can only be specified against the core budget available which has reduced due to the financial pressures on the Council. Services such as 'Carer Provision' and 'Outreach and Navigators' will have reduced capacity and direct funding will cease for a women-specific service, recovery activities, and some elements of the psychosocial interventions previously provided. However, some specific support services will be integrated into the commissioned treatment provider, such as prison in-reach services, and our specialist partners and providers, to minimise impact on the people accessing these services and the wider community.

6.28. The 'Harm to Hope' Board will oversee developments in recommissioning of substance misuse services in East Sussex and its strategic work will continue, focusing on improving joint working protocols, access to primary care, continuity of care in the justice system, services for underrepresented groups and respiratory and liver conditions.

#### Trading Standards – priorities and future focus

6.29. Legislation previously agreed, or currently progressing through Parliament, will result in several new powers available to Trading Standards to underpin and develop work to protect consumers and businesses in East Sussex and ensure fair trading in the county. The service will integrate the new legislative provisions outlined below into business as usual as they come into effect.

6.30. In April 2025, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 came into force. The Act gives Trading Standards new powers to deal with issues such as drip pricing (where consumers are initially shown a low price for a product or service, but additional fees are added later in the buying process) and fake reviews, but also encourages more collaborative work with the Competitions and Markets Authority to deal with large scale consumer issues in partnership.

6.31. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill (see 3.74 above) will provide new powers to Trading Standards to issue fixed penalty notices for contraventions of the legislation when it comes into force. In addition, from 1 June 2025, Trading Standards powers to enforce regulations banning the sale of disposable vapes came into force.

6.32. The Product Safety and Metrology Bill is likely to receive royal assent in the coming year. The Bill aims to update product safety and metrology law since EU transition and adapt the legal framework to accommodate technological advancements like artificial intelligence (AI) while ensuring an equitable landscape, particularly regarding online marketplaces and product safety.

### Local resilience arrangements

6.33. Martyn's Law, officially the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025, has now received royal assent. The Act mandates that certain premises and public events in the UK take steps to enhance preparedness for and protection from terrorist attacks. It applies to publicly accessible locations and events, dividing them into two tiers based on capacity, each with specific requirements, with the goal to improve public safety by making premises and events better prepared to respond to attacks and reduce harm. The Government intends for there to be an implementation period of at least 24 months before the legislation is commenced, which will provide those responsible for premises and events to have sufficient time to understand the new obligations, and to plan and prepare accordingly. An assessment of the ESCC estate has concluded that all ESCC premises fall into the standard tier and therefore premises will be expected to have procedures in place for evacuation, invacuation, locking down the premises, and communicating with individuals on the premises. Government will release guidance on the implementation of this legislation in the coming months, which will be required to fully assess the impact of the Act.

6.34. One of the recommendations arising from the Covid-19 Inquiry was to hold regular UK-wide pandemic response exercises. The Government accepted this recommendation and work has commenced on preparation of a national pandemic preparedness exercise (exercise Pegasus), to be held in autumn 2025. The exercise is designed to test the nation's preparedness, capabilities, and response arrangements in the context of a novel infectious disease pandemic. The exercise will test the Council's response plans, ensuring ESCC is resilient in the event of another pandemic.

### National planning reforms

6.35. In March 2025, the Government introduced the [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), which is expected to receive royal assent later this year. The overarching aim of the Bill is to reform the planning system to increase housing and infrastructure delivery, modernise planning authorities, and to speed up decision making and the Local Plan making process.

6.36. Aspects of the Bill are unlikely to have a substantial impact upon ESCC, in terms of our existing role as the County Planning Authority. Measures proposed include a national scheme of delegation (i.e. prescribing which planning applications need to be considered by a Planning Committee), mandatory training for Planning Committee members and specifying the composition of Planning Committees. Although close attention will need to be paid to these measures, they are unlikely to result in the need for substantial changes to be made in the way the County Planning Authority, including the Planning Committee, is run and managed.

6.37. Of greater significance to the County Council is the element of the Bill that sets out the return of statutory strategic planning, with the requirement for Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) to be prepared by Strategic Planning Authorities (SPA). An SDS will set out policies that broadly distribute development (i.e. how many houses will be built in particular areas), as well as the infrastructure to support that development. The geography of an SDS is expected to be consistent with combined authorities.

6.38. The Bill sets out that SPAs which will be required to produce a SDS include combined county authorities, and upper-tier county councils and unitary authorities which do not form part of a combined authority. As the Sussex Mayoral Combined County Authority is proposed to be in place by May 2026, it is expected that it will take responsibility for the production of the SDS, subject to Government approval. The Council will have a significant role in its production, contributing towards and influencing the evidence base to inform the

SDS, as well as its content. There will be clear resourcing and budgetary implications of this for ESCC, although further detail is required from Government to accurately assess these.

6.39. Other reforms in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill relating to the Nature Restoration Fund and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects will have implications for relevant development proposals that the Council is either promoting, determining the applications for, or acting as a consultee.

6.40. The Government has also recognised the important role played by statutory consultees in the planning system and is proposing a number of changes, reforms and reviews as to how they operate. This is an important matter to ESCC given that we perform a statutory consultee role as Highways Authority, Lead Local Flood Authority and County Planning Authority. The Government wants statutory consultees to make more timely responses on applications, for local planning authorities to limit the occasions when consultations take place and to introduce a new performance framework for consultees. The Government has recognised that statutory consultees need to be resourced adequately and on a sustainable basis and is expected to announce further details on this in the coming weeks. Until such details are forthcoming, along with further information on the already announced measures, the implications of these changes to ESCC cannot yet be fully established.

## **7. Highways and Transport**

7.1. This section sets out a range of national and local developments impacting on transport planning and infrastructure in the county, encompassing highways maintenance, road safety, bus and rail reforms, the update to the Local Transport Plan and associated strategies, and planned improvements to local public transport.

### **New Local Transport Plan 2024-2050**

7.2. The East Sussex [Local Transport Plan 4](#) (LTP4) sets out our strategy and policies for how we plan to invest in improving transport and maintaining the roads in the county to meet transport needs. Following extensive public and stakeholder consultation, the LTP4 and associated documents were adopted by the Council in October 2024. This included an Investment Plan of short, medium and long-term interventions and initiatives which support the delivery of the Plan's vision and objectives. Both LTP4 and its Investment Plan now provide the strategic platform to help prioritise and determine investment in transport infrastructure in the county in the short term. The main implications are in managing public and partner expectations on what can be delivered within the limited budgets available as opportunities to successfully secure external funding, usually via competitive bidding rounds, may impact on our ability to deliver on the strategy going forward.

7.3. LTP4 will also provide a strong evidence base for the proposed Mayoral County Combined Authority (MCCA) for Sussex, as the new Mayor would have powers to develop a joint transport plan for the MCCA geography.

### **Integrated National Transport Strategy**

7.4. The Government is developing an Integrated National Transport Strategy which will set the high-level direction for how transport should be designed, built and operated in England over the next 10 years. It will set out a single national vision which intends to put people who use transport and their needs at its heart, and empower local leaders to deliver integrated transport solutions that meet the needs of their local communities.



7.5. Last year, the Government issued a 'call for ideas' consultation. In our response we advocated for a vision led, 'people and places' approach, which the Council applied in the development of LTP4. Our response also advocated that funding (both capital and revenue) should be available to reflect the multi-modal approach of transport over a longer time period. In addition, where infrastructure is linked to development and supporting growth, we suggested that an 'infrastructure first approach' is key, with the appropriate funding needing to be in place to enable delivery in advance or alongside development. It is expected the Integrated National Transport Strategy will be published later in 2025.

#### Rail reforms and services

7.6. One of the five strategic priorities for the Department for Transport (DfT) is improving performance on the railways and driving forward rail reform. The Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024 received royal assent in November 2024, and means nearly all passenger rail services will be re-nationalised when existing contracts expire. Government will be bringing forward further legislation to establish Great British Railways (GBR), the organisation which will absorb Network Rail and the train operating companies. Government consulted on its proposals for GBR in its 'A railway fit for Britain's future' consultation undertaken in spring 2025.

7.7. Together these changes will have a significant impact on rail passengers and businesses in the county. It is important that we continue to be involved in future processes associated with the delivery of the Plan for Rail and engage with GBR to ensure these changes benefit our residents, those visiting East Sussex, and businesses operating in and out of the county.

7.8. Following the Kent and East Sussex Rail Connectivity Study, in May 2021 a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) which set out the strategic case for four options (two in East Sussex) to potentially improve rail connectivity to the Kent and East Sussex coast was submitted to Government. A formal response has yet to be received, however the scheme has been included in the Kent, Medway and East Sussex package of interventions in the Transport for the South East (TfSE) Strategic Investment Plan and the LTP4 Implementation Plan. In the meantime, KentSussex Connect, involving business and other interested parties, and the local authorities in East Sussex and Kent continue to work collaboratively to explore opportunities to lever in private sector finance or investment to fund the delivery of the rail schemes identified in the study.

#### Highways maintenance

7.9. In December 2024, Government announced £21m maintenance funding allocation for ESCC in 2025/26, which supports our planned capital programme. £5.5m of this funding is contingent on the Council demonstrating to Government that it is complying with certain criteria aimed at driving best practice and continual improvement in highways maintenance and publishing information on our website regarding asset plans, asset condition and spending.

7.10. Additionally, ESCC needs to provide more detailed information on how we are meeting best practice by 31 October 2025. This will include not only highway maintenance, but how we are managing our street works to minimise disruption (including the introduction of the lane rental scheme), what we are doing to understand any risks to the network arising from climate change, how we are decarbonising our operations and how we apply a risk-based whole life cycle asset management approach to all highways assets, including bridges, footways, cycleways, street lighting, drainage, and soft estate. The East Sussex Highways team is in a good position to provide the required data and documentation and

evidence our compliance with best practice, although this will take additional officer time and cost to commission some data we do not currently hold.

### Bus Services Bill

7.11. The [Bus Services Bill](#) aims to make it easier, faster, and more flexible for local authorities across England to take greater control over their bus services through franchising, ultimately aiming to improve services for passengers. The Bill will empower all Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) to franchise bus services without needing prior consent from the Secretary of State, and it will accelerate the process of doing so. At this stage we have indicated to the DfT that our current position on franchising is that we are open to exploring whether franchising could deliver benefits in East Sussex and opportunities for franchising in the future.

7.12. Other provisions include the direct awarding of initial contracts, allowing LTAs to directly award the first franchise contracts to incumbent operators for a maximum of five years, greater flexibility in service descriptions, streamlined data sharing and enhanced enforcement powers. The Bill will also grant the Secretary of State for Transport powers to issue guidance on making bus stops and stations more accessible and safer for people with disabilities, as well as to set an end date (no earlier than 1 January 2030) for the sale of new non-zero emission buses for local services outside of franchised areas.

### Bus Service Improvement Plan

7.13. ESCC received £41.4m in BSIP funding (£22m capital and £19m revenue) in 2022. The majority of the capital funding (£20m) was allocated to deliver bus priority measures by the end of the financial year 2024/25, which was subsequently extended to 2025/26. £13m of the revenue funding was allocated to bus service improvements, including the Flexibus Digital Demand Responsive Transport services, and these improvements are funded to April 2026. £5m of the revenue funding was allocated to providing reduced fares in East Sussex and will do so until April 2026. Delivery of the East Sussex BSIP has played a key role in East Sussex's bus passenger numbers being one of the highest in England in 2023/24, compared to pre-Covid levels. We are sixth nationally and the top rural and shire authority.

7.14. Following public consultation in both 2023/24 and 2024/25 across bus priority proposals, schemes in Eastbourne and Newhaven are progressing with continued engagement with stakeholders which will support the final designs. The cost of delivering these schemes will come from external funding so will not impact on our budgets but there will be an ongoing maintenance cost to some of these schemes.

7.15. East Sussex County Council published the [East Sussex Bus Service Improvement Plan 2](#) (BSIP) in May 2025. The BSIP 2 outlines a range of deliverables aimed at enhancing bus services in East Sussex:

- Conventional Bus Services: Maintain the existing bus network where possible and the BSIP enhanced services that have been in place from July 2023.
- Rural Service Improvements: The continuation of the Flexibus service which provides rural residents with access to key services and to the wider public transport network.
- Traffic Light Priority: bus priority at 30 traffic signal-controlled junctions in areas including Eastbourne, Hastings, Peacehaven and Newhaven.
- Fares and Ticketing: including fare reductions for young people, a new multi-operator day ticket, and discounted single trip fares.
- Passenger Experience: Improvements to real-time information at bus stops, QR codes for accessing live information, interchange enhancements, and bus stop upgrades



across the county. Construction of key interchange facilities, with Uckfield completed in October 2024 and Hailsham expected in summer 2025.

- Fleet Improvements: Working with bus operators to increase the number of low and zero-emission buses in East Sussex.
- Ongoing Support: funding for BSIP delivery through the bus team, marketing and communications initiatives.
- Infrastructure Integration: Integrating bus improvements with wider transport infrastructure programs in the county.

7.16. The BSIP also sets out longer-term ambitions beyond 2026, focusing on further improvements to the bus network, bus priority measures, fares, passenger experience, and fleet.

### Rail and Freight Strategies

7.17. Following the adoption of the East Sussex LTP4, the supporting Rail and Freight Strategies have been updated to reflect its vision led approach, revised objectives and policies. For the Rail Strategy, this has included assessing the opportunities in relation to Operations and Infrastructure, Planning, Policy and Data and Urban Delivery. For the Freight Strategy, this has included assessing the opportunities in relation to infrastructure, service enhancement, customer experience and connectivity to the station. Both strategies are currently subject to stakeholder and public consultation, before being presented to the Lead Member for Transport and Environment for approval and adoption.

### Active Travel developments

7.18. Our [Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan](#) (LCWIP), adopted in September 2020, sets out proposed local cycling and walking networks and measures for the key coastal towns and the market towns within the county. It provides a basis for seeking funding for active travel infrastructure projects and is being used to inform the review of borough and district councils' Local Plans. The LCWIP will be refreshed in 2025 as a supporting document to LTP4.

7.19. The Council's local authority self-assessed active travel grade was re-affirmed in September 2024 by Active Travel England (ATE) as Level 1, securing active travel funding to deliver the development of pipeline schemes for future capital funding bids in 2025. These pipeline schemes include school streets schemes and an area-based cycle scheme which have involved collaborative and co-design activities with communities and learning opportunities for both officers and Members regarding active travel. In addition, we have received consolidated revenue and capital funding for the development and delivery of active travel schemes during 2025/26.

7.20. The Council continues to aim towards achieving beyond the current ATE level 1 assessment so that we can unlock further external funding from ATE to support the delivery of the vision and objectives set out within our LTP4. However, without significant external funding for these programmes, we will not be able to deliver our ambitious plans for active travel infrastructure in the county.

### E-vehicle charging

7.21. Transport is now the greatest contributor to carbon emissions in East Sussex. Supporting this area will be a major part of carbon reduction within the county, and the Council has made a commitment to develop a strategy to support the growing demand and needs of Electric Vehicles (EV) users within East Sussex. Reflecting the national strategy at

a local level, a draft EV Charging Strategy has been developed as a supporting document to our LTP4.

7.22. The ability to charge at or close to home is a major concern to many EV users. In November 2023, £4.441m was secured under tranche 1 of the Government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) Fund. The funding will help the Council to scale up the delivery of local on street chargepoints, enabling more residents, especially those without off-street parking, to switch to EVs. The funding will also be used to provide chargepoints on the County Hall campus.

7.23. Separate grant funding has been made available to local residents with no off-street parking to introduce EV chargepoints on their properties. This has implications for the Council in relation to licencing the installation of cable gully channels in the footway in line with Government best practice guidance, as well as the liability and ongoing maintenance of these channels, alongside how this affects the commercial viability of potential on-street chargepoints delivered using the LEVI funding.

7.24. Procurement of a chargepoint operator will be undertaken during 2025 with an expectation that the initial roll out of on-street chargepoints will commence from autumn 2025 onwards. Following the initial investment and installation of chargepoints across the county the effectiveness of the take up by the public will determine the future implications of this work as there is the potential for a proportion of the income generated to be used to support Council services.

#### Transport for the South East (TfSE)

7.25. We have provided evidence for the refresh of TfSE's Transport Strategy and a response to its consultation on the draft strategy which will inform the final draft to be presented to the TfSE Board in summer 2025 before submission to Government in October. We will also work with TfSE to support their review and update of the Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) first approved by TfSE's Board in November 2022. The SIP identifies key transport priorities across the region and has helped to access funding for eight key schemes last year.

7.26. Launched last summer, we have provided case study evidence to the TfSE Centre of Excellence which now has over 200 recognised users and has been recognised as an exemplar by the Department for Transport. This also means we can collaborate and learn with national organisations, universities, and professional institutions to share best practices and strengthen our capability.

#### Road safety developments

7.27. The statutory duty placed on us, and the expectation of our residents, in terms of road safety is significant. To manage this, we have a range of measures and programmes designed to fulfil the wide-ranging pressures we face, including an annual assessment of crashes occurring on our road network to inform prioritisation of road safety schemes. Nationally, the Government has confirmed the first Road Safety Strategy for over a decade is in development and expected to be published later in 2025.

7.28. A review of speed limits on all A and B-class roads across the county was recently undertaken which identified 13 roads where a lower speed limit would be more appropriate and three roads where measures to improve compliance with an existing speed limit would be beneficial. £500,000 has been allocated to take forward schemes at these sites, and consultations are underway for four of the lower speed limits, with a further two planned to commence during 2025/26. The measures to encourage compliance with existing speed

limits are due to be completed in summer 2025. The remaining speed limit changes will take place in 2026/27.

7.29. We are continuing to implement innovative behaviour change focused projects which aim to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured (KSI) on the county's road network. A new behaviour change trial, in partnership with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA), launched in February 2024, is continuing into 2025/26. The trial targets young drivers and uses existing DVSA communication channels to engage with them in the six months after they pass their test. Communications are designed to address a range of behaviours which influence driving, reinforce the legitimacy of speed limits and the costs of driving unsafely. The trial is intended to reduce the overall rate of speeding offences, which evidence indicates is a suitable proxy for reducing the future risk of being involved in a KSI collision. The impact of the trial will be assessed during 2025.

#### Exceat Bridge replacement

7.30. Following the reallocation of some Bus Scheme Improvement Programme (BSIP) funding to the bridge replacement project, the preferred option of a two-lane, offline bridge is progressing. In view of the objections received by the Department for Transport against the Compulsory Purchase Orders necessary to secure the land needed for the new bridge, a Public Inquiry was held in May 2025 and we await the decision from the Secretary of State in the autumn. Construction of the new bridge is expected to commence in early 2026.

#### National Highways Programmes

##### *Strategic Road Network (SRN) - A27/A21*

7.31. The Government's second [Roads Investment Strategy](#) (RIS2), covering 2020-2025, identified further work would be undertaken to develop proposals for the A27 between Lewes and Polegate as a potential pipeline scheme for construction between 2025 and 2030. A study outlining potential options for the A27 was submitted by National Highways (NH) to DfT in January 2023 for consideration alongside the other RIS3 pipeline scheme studies.

7.32. The RIS3 was expected to be published by March 2025. However, Government announced in February 2025 that RIS3 will cover the five-year period from April 2026 to March 2031 with an interim settlement for NH being put in place covering 2025-26. It is expected that the draft strategy will be published in summer 2025 and the final strategy in place at the end of 2025.

7.33. NH's Strategic Road Network Initial Report and South Coast Central Initial Report, published in May 2023, indicated that the A27 Lewes to Polegate will slip to become a pipeline project in RIS4. Alongside our partners, it is important we continue to engage with NH and DfT to make the case for investment in a more comprehensive solution for the A27 between Lewes and Polegate, as well as improvements to the A21 at Kippings Cross to Lamberhurst, Flimwell and Hurst Green through future RISs. The schemes for the A27 and A21 corridors, included within the TfSE SIP and the LTP4 Implementation Plan, will improve the economic connectivity of the county.

##### *Major Road Network (MRN)*

7.34. The MRN sits between the Strategic Road Network and the local road network and includes the busiest and most economically important local authority A roads. In East Sussex there are a number of roads included as part of the MRN, including the A259 between Rottingdean and Pevensey Bay and A22 Eastbourne to Forest Row (including Golden Jubilee Way).

7.35. The Outline Business Case for the A22 Corridor Package, focused on the Hailsham, Polegate and Stone Cross section of the corridor, was approved in May 2024 with the full business case planned for submission to Government in March 2026. A decision is still pending from Government on the Strategic Outline Business Case submitted for the A259 South Coast Corridor Package. Further business cases are being developed should further rounds of MRN funding become available. The development and delivery of these packages of MRN funded schemes are required to meet infrastructure needs that will come forward through the Local Plan processes as well as support the objectives of our adopted LTP and its supporting documents, our Prosperity Strategy, alongside TfSE's Transport Strategy and Strategic Investment Plan and national policies.

## **8. Economy**

8.1. The following sections outline recent developments in Government policy and investment programmes that will affect the support we provide, with partners, to drive sustainable local economic growth in future, including through the East Sussex Prosperity Strategy, skills and employability programmes.

### Government plans for economic growth

8.2. The Government has indicated that delivering economic growth is its number one priority, with an aim for the UK to achieve the highest sustained growth in the G7. To support this, in November 2024 the Government published [Invest 2035: The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy Green Paper](#), a 10-year plan to provide certainty and stability to businesses to encourage investment in the high growth sectors. The growth sectors identified in the Green Paper were: advanced manufacturing; clean energy industries; creative industries; defence; digital and technologies; financial services; life sciences; and professional and business services. The Council responded to the consultation on the Green Paper, noting the importance of flexibility in the Industrial Strategy so it can align with local high growth sectors including health and social care, agri/viticulture and the visitor economy. The Government's final Industrial Strategy, to be published in June 2025, will set out how it plans to accelerate growth in the eight growth-driving sectors and strengthen economic resilience.

8.3. A second key pillar of the Government's growth plans is its ambition to build 1.5m new houses by the end of the parliament, including a new generation of new towns to be built across England. The Council will need to work to ensure that any new significant developments in East Sussex have the necessary infrastructure and services in place to support communities. The Government also intends to speed up the development of critical major infrastructure, and to this end has indicated that it is minded to approve the use of a second runway at Gatwick Airport, with a final decision expected later in 2025. A 10 year national Infrastructure Strategy is also expected imminently.

### Local economic strategy

8.4. Under the Government's devolution plans, the proposed Sussex Mayoral Combined County Authority will have powers that cover economic development and regeneration, including a statutory duty to produce a Sussex-wide Local Growth Plan. Devolution and plans for local government reorganisation will create both opportunities and complexity for local economic development teams to respond to, alongside delivery of existing functions and schemes.

8.5. We will continue work to develop a strategic investment plan to support the delivery of the missions in the [East Sussex Prosperity Strategy 2024-2050](#), which we envisage will feed into any proposed Sussex-wide Growth Plan. The missions encompass Business,

People and Place with associated interventions aimed at increasing prosperity across the county. We will also continue to support Team East Sussex (TES) which is the county's business-led public/private advisory growth board and will also continue to support a range of sectoral special interest boards to further work on economic prosperity.

8.6. We are awaiting the publication of the Government's new Industrial Strategy and Small Business Strategy in 2025, alongside the launch of a new national Business Growth Service to work alongside the Growth Hub network to support business growth. The Economic Development Team continues to deliver the East Sussex Growth Hub, alongside a raft of business support programmes.

#### *Levelling Up Partnerships*

8.7. Rother and Hastings are Levelling Up Partnership areas, each receiving a funding package of £20m to invest in areas such as housing, health and wellbeing, skills, and economic development. As part of the programmes, ESCC has been awarded funds including to deliver: a Youth Hub in Hastings; a £1m skills fund; and monies to assist with the completion of the Queensway Gateway Road.

#### *Plan for Neighbourhoods*

8.8. Under the previous Government, Bexhill, Eastbourne and Hastings were identified as recipients of Long Term Plan for Towns investment of up to £20m endowment fund each over 10 years. The current Government has since agreed to 'retain and reform' the programme rebranding it as a 'Plan for Neighbourhoods'. Accompanying guidance has been designed to offer support and tools for Neighbourhood Boards and accountable bodies (the relevant district and borough councils) to deliver the plans. We will seek to maximise investments to support our priorities and those of our partners.

#### Skills and employability

##### *Skills England*

8.9. Skills England has been established as a new arms-length body to identify and address skills needs nationally. It will prioritise key growth-driving sectors to shape and direct technical education to respond to skills shortages and it is due to announce reforms to the Growth and Skills Levy, to replace the existing Apprenticeship Levy. Changes to the Levy include more flexible and shorter/accelerated provision, as well as the development of foundation apprenticeships aimed at supporting younger workers into the system.

8.10. It is expected that Skills England will work closely with Combined Authorities and upper-tier local authorities to create a unified and coherent skills landscape. This collaboration aims to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the necessary skills to drive economic growth and meet local and national priorities. The local response to any national policy and reforms will be considered and overseen by the Skills East Sussex (SES) Board.

##### *Bootcamps*

8.11. Skills Bootcamps will be rolled out in 2025/26 across East Sussex to upskill adults aged 19+ via intensive 16-week Level 2-5 provision with a wide variety of courses on offer to those who are unemployed and those who wish to upskill and progress in work. Training for up to 450 people in East Sussex will be available in areas such as construction, green skills, viticulture, early years learning and a range of digital skills. We will focus on maximising take up of courses in order to achieve the outcomes envisaged from the programme.

## *Connect to Work*

8.12. The Department for Work and Pensions funded Connect to Work Programme is anticipated to start in 2025/26 as part of the Government's Get Britain Working plan (see paragraph 10.7 below). It will provide support to economically inactive people in East Sussex, supporting people from specific cohorts into work, including care leavers, homeless adults, people with disabilities or mental health needs, those at risk of unemployment, refugees, people aged over 50 and ex-offenders. The programme is planned to run for up to five years, supporting over 2,500 people into work. ESCC will oversee the programme implementation, working with local providers to ensure that there is good take-up of the offer in line with objectives, that a high quality of employment support is given to participants, and we will draw on our links with local employers to support access to jobs in the local economy for project participants.

## *Skills provision*

8.13. The Council's Employability and Skills Team run several programmes, many of which are time bound and subject to funding. There will be a need to respond to substantial changes in national policy and funding reforms in relation to skills and employability in partnership with Council services and external partners. A number of projects will continue until or beyond March 2026, including the 'Steps to Success' Effective Transitions pilot for disadvantaged young people, the Moving on Up employability programme, Support in to Work for Ukrainians and refugee groups, and Homelessness Prevention Employment Service.

8.14. ESCC will continue to deliver the Transform service to support East Sussex small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) with advice on apprenticeships and skills training and help them to access Government incentives and unspent Levy funds to pay for apprenticeship training. ESCC is able to allocate up to 50% of its unspent Apprenticeship Levy (up to £600,000) to local SMEs if not used by the Council for its internal apprenticeship training. The Skills England reforms to the Growth and Skills Levy to be announced in 2025/26 may impact the amount of Levy that Transform is able to transfer to SMEs going forward.

8.15. The Adult Skills Fund (ASF), which is a vehicle for supporting adults towards employment, has been reduced by 6% for 2025/26 and will decrease by a further 11% over the next two years. The ASF is a funding area that would be transferred to a Sussex Mayoral Combined County Authority, meaning in future there would be opportunity to determine the application of the funding to support local needs.

## Culture and tourism

8.16. VisitEngland has rolled out Local Visitor Economy Partnerships (LVEPs) which segment England into strategic tourism areas, each with its own LVEP board. The East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex LVEP was accredited in February 2024. An open recruitment has now secured a business led LVEP board for the region and a Visitor Economy Growth Plan has been endorsed, which sets out a strategy to grow the Sussex visitor economy from its current value of £5bn a year to £7.5bn a year. To support the delivery of this ambition ESCC and West Sussex County Council have launched Experience Sussex, a Destination Management Organisation which targets international and high spending markets whilst supporting visitor economy sector development.

8.17. Both the culture and tourism sectors are operating in an uncertain economic environment, creating challenges for businesses. Although overseas visits to the UK and visitor confidence have now returned to pre-Covid levels, the impact of inflation and cost

pressures on businesses and customers, and geopolitical instability continue to affect these businesses. Those parts of the cultural sector that rely on grant funding are reporting a significant decrease in funds available, resulting in fewer projects, shorter opening hours and less work for creative freelancers. The creative industries are identified in the Government's Industrial Strategy Green Paper as one of eight priority sectors. As a consequence South East Creatives, a business programme to support high growth potential creative businesses, has received a funding extension from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

## **9. Environment and Climate Change**

9.1. The following paragraphs detail recent national commitments, strategies and legislation that impact the Council's work to deliver climate change mitigation and adaptation, protection and enhancement of the local natural environment and waste management. It is important to note that net zero is increasingly integrated into wider policy, for instance housing, transport and public procurement.

### **Climate change – national policy context**

9.2. One of the Government's five missions is to 'make Britain a clean energy superpower through delivering clean power by 2030 and accelerating to net zero'. The [Great British Energy Act 2025](#) has established Great British Energy Ltd, which will be responsible for investing £8.3bn over the current Parliament in clean energy projects. This represents an opportunity to draw significant investment into East Sussex in support of delivering Council objectives set out in the Economic Prosperity Strategy, the Local Transport Plan 4 and other strategies.

9.3. The Energy Act 2023 established the National Energy System Operator (NESO), which is responsible for planning the transition to net zero in an integrated way across the electricity and gas networks. NESO has established regional teams to prepare Regional Energy Systems Plans during 2025, which will look to identify what investment in the energy system is required where and when. Local authorities are expected to play an important role in developing the plans, for instance in identifying where new housing and other development is required and when it is likely to come forward.

9.4. The proposed Sussex Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) would take on responsibility for some aspects of responding to climate change. This includes co-ordinating heat network zoning, energy infrastructure planning and work on green jobs and skills, as well as working strategically with Great British Energy. Most of these roles are not currently being carried out by any organisation in Sussex, so this provides a further opportunity to draw new investment into East Sussex. There is also the need to define what role the current and future local authorities in Sussex need to play in addressing climate change, to work most effectively alongside the new structures that are emerging, including GB Energy, NESO and the MCCA.

### **Environment Act 2021**

9.5. The Environment Act 2021 placed a number of duties and responsibilities on ESCC with implications as outlined below.

#### ***Local Nature Recovery Strategy***

9.6. The Act placed a requirement on ESCC to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for East Sussex and Brighton & Hove. LNRSs are a means to identify and agree the local priorities and direct future action and funding needed to deliver bigger, better and more connected habitats, as well as wider environmental benefits such as



carbon storage and sequestration and flood management.

9.7. ESCC is continuing to work closely with West Sussex County Council (WSCC) to share expertise and resources and carry out joint engagement. Extensive stakeholder engagement has been undertaken, as well as regular updates with our Supporting Authorities (Local Planning Authorities and Natural England). We are currently planning to go out to public consultation in summer 2025, with publication of the final strategy likely to be in Quarter 4 of 2025/26.

9.8. Delivery of the LNRS, once published, remains unclear, with many actions falling to individuals and organisations other than the Council. However, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has indicated that it sees Responsible Authorities such as ESCC playing a role in delivery, for example providing local leadership and oversight, coordinating delivery and creating a project pipeline. Additional burdens funding for such a role is currently under consideration by Defra. In parallel, the English Devolution White Paper has indicated that, over time, Government envisages that Strategic Authorities, such as the proposed Sussex MCCA, will be appointed to be the LNRS Responsible Authority.

#### *Biodiversity Net Gain*

9.9. The Environment Act 2021 requires the majority of developments considered through the local planning system to deliver a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain (BNG). This system has now been mandatory for a year and the Government has provided local authorities with additional burden monies to support implementation. ESCC has provided training to relevant staff at district and borough councils on BNG requirements and is continuing to support them on assessing BNG, through our service level agreements.

9.10. To support the need to deliver BNG, habitat banks (areas of land where biodiversity enhancements are being implemented to generate biodiversity units which can be sold on to developers) are being developed, with at least two live and registered in East Sussex, and several more in development.

9.11. One of the main challenges with BNG is securing the means to meet the requirement to maintain, monitor and report on the ecological schemes that are being implemented for at least 30 years following development. This is usually done through planning conditions and/or Section 106 Agreements. ESCC is working to develop best practice, including learning from other authorities across the country, to help ensure that BNG is being delivered as promised.

#### *Waste provisions*

9.12. The Environment Act introduces several changes to how waste services operate. Extended producer responsibility for packaging (EPRP) began in 2024 and the Council will receive its first payment towards the management of this material in winter 2025. Weekly food waste collections and the inclusion of cartons in the recycling bin will begin in April 2026, with plastic film collected from April 2027. A deposit return scheme for plastic drinks bottles and metal beverage cans will be introduced in October 2027. These changes will impact the Council's waste contracts, will require changes to facilities and will alter the amount and composition of waste and recycling that we manage.

#### UK Emissions Trading Scheme



9.13. In summer 2024, the Government conducted a consultation on the expansion of the UK Emissions Trading Scheme to include energy from waste from 2028, the results of which are expected in summer 2025. Inclusion of Newhaven Energy Recovery Facility in the UK Emissions Trading Scheme would have significant financial and operational impacts. Should this go ahead, starting in January 2026, the plant will need to monitor, report, and verify its emissions. From January 2028, it will also be required to purchase carbon allowances. The Council has engaged technical support to investigate potential ways to decarbonise the facility and reduce the financial liability of joining the scheme.

## **10. Supporting Services**

10.1. The below section provides updates on key local and national developments for ESCC's supporting services. This includes local priorities relating to the transition to Oracle, responding to workforce and pay challenges, asset management, supporting productivity and reforms to data & digital/AI and public procurement.

10.2. ESCC support services such as IT & Digital, Human Resources (HR), Property, Internal Audit, Finance and Procurement will be comprehensively and fundamentally affected by local government reorganisation. There will be further complexity related to the delivery of some support functions (IT & Digital, Procurement and Internal Audit) through a shared service model across ESCC, Brighton & Hove City Council and Surrey County Council, as part of the Orbis public sector partnership. The scope and scale of the change will be significant, alongside business as usual activity, and will include areas such as property assets and their use, team structures, IT systems and data infrastructure, cyber security, and existing contractual commitments across all authorities concerned.

### Oracle transition

10.3. The Oracle implementation programme was established to replace the Council's core finance and human resources (HR) systems. The current system, SAP, will no longer be supported by the supplier beyond 2027, making the implementation of a replacement unavoidable in order to sustain critical business functions, such as running a payroll. Replacing a system originally implemented over 15 years ago provides opportunities to take advantage of new technology which is better able to support an agile and flexible workforce. In addition, a more modern system is more intuitive for users, has a single sign-on, and brings with it improvements to the Council's internal control environment.

10.4. Oracle Fusion was selected as the new software platform with Infosys as the implementation partner, and the system is being implemented in a three phased 'Adopt not Adapt' approach. The 'Adopt not Adapt' approach involves using as much off-the-shelf Oracle functionality as possible, meaning that some changes in organisational ways of working are instead required. These changes are therefore supported by considerable staff, and wider stakeholder, engagement and assistance.

10.5. Most modules of Phase 1 (Enterprise Performance Management) and all of Phase 2 (Finance with dependent HR processes, Procurement, Recruitment and Helpdesk modules) are now live. Phase 3 (Payroll and all remaining HR processes) will be delivered during 2025 and 2026.

### National workforce reforms

10.6. The Government's Plan to [Make Work Pay](#) is a core part of its mission to grow the economy, raise living standards across the country and create opportunities. The Plan seeks to help more people to stay in work, improve job security and boost living standards, of which the [Employment Rights Bill](#) is a key element. Containing a number of reforms, once

implemented, the Bill will support family friendly rights by improving flexibility and security, prioritise fairness, equality and wellbeing of workers and strengthen individual and collective employment rights, placing new obligations on employers.

10.7. As a good employer, the Council already has in place an extensive suite of employment related policies and procedures which set out our approach to staffing matters. We have well established consultation and engagement arrangements with the recognised trade unions and these have served us well in handling a complex range of workforce issues in recent years. We will ensure we follow the progress of the Bill and other wider workforce related reforms, such as those coming out of the [Get Britain Working White Paper](#) and the Keep Britain Working Review, and will update our policies and procedures as necessary to ensure compliance.

### Workforce challenges

#### *Pay*

10.8. The introduction of the National Living Wage (NLW) created pressures as a result of its close proximity to the bottom end of the local government pay scales. Given the national employers' principle that local government should not be a minimum wage employer, maintaining headroom between the lowest rate of pay and the NLW has been a key objective of the recent national pay awards. The current top-end forecast of the NLW will have a significant impact on the lower end of the local East Sussex Single Status pay scales, in particular the first two grades. These grades currently cover a range of posts, the majority of which are in schools.

10.9. To address the NLW pressures, recent national pay awards have removed pay points and front loaded the pay award to provide a higher increase at the bottom end of the pay structure. Whilst this has addressed the immediate NLW pressures, a continuation of this approach in future pay awards will likely result in the need for the local Single Status pay scales to be remodelled.

#### *Recruitment and retention*

10.10. The Council continues to face recruitment and retention challenges as a result of the current national labour market conditions and cost of living pressures. Locally, there are particular challenges in front line social care roles (qualified and unqualified) and some of our technical and professional roles such as legal services, IT/digital, property, and engineering. The position is exacerbated in our more rural locations with recruitment in these areas being especially difficult. There is evidence to show that this tight labour market is putting pressure on pay levels.

10.11. In order to respond to these pressures and attract staff to work for the Council, a number of initiatives have been put in place which position ESCC as an 'employer of choice'. These include building on our 'We Choose East Sussex' recruitment brand to create additional engaging and informative content on the jobs pages of our website, as well as attending local careers fairs to showcase the range of job opportunities at the Council. As well as seeking to attract experienced individuals, we are also utilising approaches such as apprenticeships (making use of the Apprenticeship Levy), traineeships and intern arrangements as a way of bringing new talent into the Council. We are developing a 'work experience' package, the intention being to provide opportunities to support individuals to become work ready as well as encouraging individuals to consider the Council as the place to start their career, supported by wider work to attract candidates from a younger demographic to the Council.

10.12. Retention of our workforce is also a key aim. We are committed to supporting our staff with continuous professional development and creating an environment where staff are encouraged to learn and grow. In line with this, the People Strategy, covering the three-year period 2024 to 2027, has been updated to reflect the areas of workforce challenge. We are reviewing our leadership development offer following the second cohort of our innovative 'Ladder to Leadership' programme to build on the programme's successes and ensure it remains relevant to the needs of the Council and our future workforce. We continue to develop our extensive wellbeing offer to support our staff to remain healthy and well, both in and out of work.

10.13. Subject to the detail to be announced by Government, we will look to utilise increased flexibility in the new 'Growth and Skills' Levy to pursue wider training options to directly address our workforce needs and skills gaps.

#### ESCC Property Asset Management

10.14. The [Strategic Asset Plan 2020-2025](#), which is being reviewed and updated this year, includes actions to support efficient use of the Council's property assets. There is an ongoing focus on ensuring our assets are optimally utilised to reduce the physical footprint, which reduces property running costs and carbon emissions from the whole estate.

10.15. Following the review of County Hall in 2024/25 and the rationalisation of the Council's use of the space, we are pursuing opportunities to secure external tenants alongside Council operational teams to further reduce our property running costs. There will be a further review of all operational assets aligned to service changes reflecting the financial and budget pressures the Council faces.

#### *Asset disposals*

10.16. The Council will continue its ambitious disposal of assets programme to secure capital receipts which support the capital programme. This is particularly important at a time of significant financial constraints. We are working with district and borough councils to ensure relevant groups are aware of the Assets of Community Value lists under the Localism Act 2011. This gives town and parish councils and defined community or voluntary groups a right to nominate buildings or land for listing by the local authority as Assets of Community Value, with the aim of preserving buildings or land that are of importance to their community's social well-being.

#### Supporting productivity – data management and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

10.17. The [Data \(Use & Access\) Bill](#), currently in its final stages in Parliament, proposes comprehensive regulations on the use and access of data within local government, aiming to enhance transparency and accountability in digital governance. The Bill mandates stricter guidelines for the implementation and usage of AI in local government operations, requiring AI systems to be thoroughly vetted for biases and ensuring they operate within ethical standards. Additionally, it promotes the adoption of AI to improve service delivery while safeguarding residents' privacy and data security.

10.18. One of the critical impacts of the Bill is on resident-facing systems, such as online portals and customer service platforms. The Bill advocates for these systems to be more responsive and accessible, providing residents with real-time updates and personalised services. We will monitor closely the progression of this Bill to legislation and adoption, and revisions to existing approaches relating to the testing and adoption of new technologies will be made as required.

10.19. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has set out a vision and set of initiatives for AI within governmental operations which focus on improving efficiency and enhancing service delivery by automating routine tasks. This includes the deployment of AI-powered chatbots in customer service, predictive analytics for resource management, and machine learning algorithms to enhance decision-making processes. This drive from Government will complement the work underway within local government to explore how and where AI-powered systems can enhance the efficiency of resident-facing platforms, such as online portals and customer service interfaces as well as central functions. The Council is conducting trials with Microsoft Copilot to assess productivity gains, quality improvements, and to develop ethical and security guidelines.

#### Procurement Act 2023

10.20. The Procurement Act 2023 came into force in February 2025 and is the most significant change in public procurement legislation for 30 years. It has required a number of changes to our systems, process and procedures, as well as corporate governance arrangements, and engagement with service stakeholders on the impacts of this legislative change. The Council's Procurement and Contract Standing Orders have been rewritten to comply with national legislation and were approved by Full Council in March 2025. As well as procedural changes and new opportunities to procure differently, the Council has a number of new transparency and contract management obligations. All procurement staff have been trained to understand these, and support and information has been provided to officers more widely affected by the new regulations.

10.21. The Council must also have regard to a revised [National Procurement Policy Statement](#), which also came into effect in February 2025. It includes four priorities: social and economic benefit; supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and voluntary, community and social enterprises (VCSEs); sustainability and Net Zero; and procurement/commercial capability. Associated Procurement Policy Notices require social value in contracts to be obtained through the use of the Government's Social Value Model (though this is not binding on local authorities). We will keep the new regulations and changes made under review in the short term to ensure these are embedded effectively in Council operations.