

Item 5 – Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources: Appendix 7 – **Engagement Feedback with Young People and Trade Unions**

1. Trade Union Representatives

1.1. A meeting was held with trade union representatives on 21 January 2026 to consult them on the Council's draft Council Plan and budget proposals for 2026/27.

1.2. The Leader of the Council opened the meeting and thanked the trade union representatives and the staff they represent for their work this year. He acknowledged that this meeting would be Amanda Park's (UNISON representative) final RPPR engagement meeting and extended gratitude, on behalf of the Council, for Amanda's dedicated service in her Unison role, particularly her involvement in the budget setting process.

1.3. The Leader noted that, as the report to Cabinet sets out, the importance of the services provided by the Council had been evident once again this year, and that delivery of those services would not have been possible without the commitment and hard work of staff who continued to respond to growing service pressures and changes. The Leader noted as detailed in the Cabinet papers, this was the most challenging financial position the Council had seen.

1.4. The Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer then delivered a presentation which provided an overview of ESCC's Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) planning for 2026/27; the national policy context; recent local government funding announcements, and the anticipated financial position for 2026/27 in light of these; steps being taken to address the budget deficit, including further savings and seeking Exceptional Financial Support; updates to the Capital Programme; and ongoing lobbying efforts in light for this position.

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

Steps to address the budget deficit

1.6. Representatives acknowledged ESCC's effective resource management and service delivery, as demonstrated by positive external assessments, and commented that it was regrettable that the Council was facing the financial position it was in. They also noted staff confidence in the Council and its leadership to address these difficulties.

1.7. The Leader thanked representatives for their comments and agreed it was a difficult position to be in which did not reflect the Council's record of good management and service delivery.

Savings

1.8. Representatives sought clarification on the roles that would be impacted by the savings set out in the budget report. The Chief Executive noted that the majority of posts impacted were in Adult Social Care and Health (ASCH). The Director of ASCH explained that savings proposals would affect around 140 posts, resulting in

16 job losses, including 8 occupied roles (two posts were vacant, one an interim post, and seven would be realised through normal turnover). Most affected roles were within Planning, Performance, and Engagement and included temporary contracts. The Director reflected that last year's savings included 11 proposals and impacted over 100 staff, but compulsory redundancies were minimal, with most staff being successfully redeployed or accessing voluntary redundancy and a similar approach was anticipated this year.

1.9. Representatives expressed concerns about savings proposals in the Business Services Department (BSD) and commented that these were crucial services to support staff, including HR services which ensured compliance with our policies and statutory regulations and provided support to managers and staff. The Assistant Director, HR&OD thanked representatives for recognising the work of the HR team and agreed that there were strong policies and procedures in place to support staff, including an effective policy framework to help staff and managers manage change, and confirmed that there were no planned savings for HR for 2026/27 and that BSD savings were predominately focussed on Oracle implementation efficiencies.

1.10. The Chief Finance Officer also recognised the key role of BSD services in supporting change and reiterated that savings in BSD were focussed on ceasing the Good Shape contract, data packages for mobile phones, and reviewing the provision of Oracle systems, including the cost of licenses. It was noted however that as the Council began planning for 2027/28 and beyond, BSD services would be subject to further review.

1.11. Representatives asked if there were further savings proposals. The Chief Executive clarified that all the current savings proposals were set out in the report, although noted that the Council would continue to adapt services and seek efficiencies in light of the current budget position. However, options for savings were limited due to previous savings and the need to meet statutory duties.

BSD functions

1.12. Representatives asked about the implementation of Oracle and if this was on track to be in place by the end of the year.

1.13. The Assistant Director, HR&OD assured representatives that teams were working hard to implement Oracle Phase 3 on time and ahead of the Good Shape contract coming to an end. Oracle would replicate Good Shape tools and functions and there were mitigations in place in the event that implementation was delayed.

1.14. Representatives enquired about ASCH finance officers and their role within the wider finance team. The Director of ASCH clarified that the ASCH finance and benefits team conducts financial assessments and collects client contributions. Operating within the division that supports vulnerable individuals, they coordinate with the BSD Accounts Receivable Team to maintain clear processes. The Director commented that current system functions effectively due to strong collaboration between practitioners and finance staff.

Exceptional Financial Support

1.15. Representatives expressed concern regarding the necessity to pursue Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) and asked about the sustainability of increased borrowing and its long term implications. However, they also recognised that this action was necessary given the Council's financial position.

1.16. The Leader acknowledged that the current situation was not sustainable, emphasising that it is not possible to meet statutory obligations without adequate funding.

1.17. The Chief Executive expressed concern that the outcome of the Fair Funding 2.0 had resulted in less funding for ESCC and cited the unique position of the Council applying for EFS despite proven management. However, without opportunities to sell assets and insufficient reserves, borrowing through EFS, although not a sensible financial strategy, was the only option.

1.18. Representatives asked if a rise in Council Tax had been considered in applying for EFS. The Chief Finance Officer noted that there were two options in seeking EFS, applying to raise Council Tax above the referendum threshold, or borrowing. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) informed ESCC early on in the process that a Council Tax rise would not be supported due to higher than average Council Tax rates in East Sussex.

Lobbying

1.19. Unison representatives commented on their recent lobbying with local MPs on local government funding and to raise awareness of local issues and deprivation and committed to further work on this, including work with Council leaders and officers to communicate these messages.

1.20. The Leader thanked representatives for their lobbying work and confirmed that the Council would persist in advocating for greater awareness of the financial challenges facing local services, especially social care. He noted that whilst reforms in ASC and CSD were still awaited, current funding was insufficient to meet the needs of both adults and children, and lobbying would continue to focus on securing the necessary funds to deliver these services. The Leader welcomed ongoing cooperation with Trade Unions on this issue.

Use of digital and AI

1.21. Representatives commented on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital to improve efficiency and asked if there were plans to utilise these to mitigate job losses. The Director of ASCH responded that for ASCH, seven of the posts that have been identified as potential savings were within the operations admin team, as practitioners had become less reliant on admin staff in recent years. The department was piloting the programme Form Flow, which uses AI to complete assessments for practitioners after conversations with clients, and commented that there was

potential for greater efficiency. A similar programme, Magic Notes, was also being piloted in CSD, with both initiatives aiming to boost practitioner capacity. The Director commented that as demand continues to rise, practitioners would remain essential.

1.22. The Chief Executive commented on the wider adoption of AI within the Council, emphasising that the budget was set using evidence of AI usage and its potential impact. Although it was recognised that AI had the potential to play a significant role in managing growth and demand, decisions would continue to be made based on experience rather than assumptions. The Council was taking a cautious approach to AI, based on learning (the pilot programs in ASC and CSD had already been thoroughly tested elsewhere), however, the Council would continue to set ambitious goals.

Local elections

1.23. Representatives enquired about the likelihood of 2026 council elections taking place and if there was a contingency in place if so to meet the associated costs. The Chief Executive clarified that ESCC had requested a deferral of these elections as part of the local government reorganisation process and that this request was now being considered by Government. The cost of running elections was predominantly with district and borough councils and conversations with local councils had confirmed spending could be postponed until the end of January. The Chief Executive added that the Reform Party had initiated a judicial review regarding postponing elections, with the case scheduled for February, and confirmed that the ESCC would continue to work with district and borough councils to safeguard election arrangements.

1.24. The Chief Finance Officer clarified that the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) is building up an election budget, however, if elections did go ahead in 2026, there would be an additional pressure which the Council would need to meet as the current budget would not be sufficient to cover costs.

SEND demand

1.25. A representative from the National Association of Headteachers expressed concern at the ongoing rise in demand for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPS) and special educational needs and disability (SEND) support, commenting that there was a lot of unidentified early need that would likely result in additional pressures. She noted that schools were working in a similar climate of limited options to seek savings and efficiencies and commented that it was becoming increasingly challenging for schools to deliver statutory duties.

1.26. The Lead Member for Education, Inclusion and SEND commented on the increase in EHCP applications and expressed frustration that reforms to SEND had been delayed. He commented that unless the definition or funding were reviewed, SEND pressures would continue.

1.27. The Leader recognised that these challenges were being felt by a number of partners, including health professionals and reiterated the need for continued partnership working.

1.28. The Leader thanked representatives for the positive feedback and for their input in the session and confirmed Members and officers would continue to maintain open engagement with trade unions as doing so was important for working together effectively to deliver services.

2. Youth Voice Group Representatives

2.1. The Lead Member for Children and Families, the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability (ISEND), the Chair of the People Scrutiny Committee, the Chief Executive, and the Director of Children's Services met with the East Sussex Youth Cabinet, Children in Care Council (CICC), Care Leavers Council, and Young Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Ambassadors on 17 January 2026 to discuss the County Council's budget setting process and young people's priorities for the year ahead.

2.2. A presentation was delivered by young people on the role of youth voice in decision making, with updates on the work of the Youth Cabinet, CICC, Young SEND Ambassadors and Care Leavers Council. A presentation was then delivered by officers on the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources process, the Council's Priority Outcomes, factors that the Council considers in setting its budget each year, and the financial position and priority areas of work in the Council Plan for 2026/27.

2.3. Topic discussions were then held in small groups with Lead Members, Officers and young people. The following areas were covered:

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

2.4. One of the groups discussed the opportunities for young people of the incoming Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) for Sussex, including working on a broader footprint across Brighton & Hove and West Sussex. Young people commented that while some of them sometimes attended youth hubs outside of East Sussex, this was a matter of personal choice. They asked whether cross-Sussex offers would become more standard when the MCCA was established. They heard that services such as youth hubs would continue to be run by individual councils rather than by the MCCA. However, working on a pan-Sussex basis could provide the platform needed to make a more effective case to Government about young people's needs and priorities, as the MCCA would represent almost 2 million people.

2.5. Young people enquired about areas where devolution could make a practical difference to their lives. They heard the example that many roads in East Sussex are small, rural lanes, and the ability to strengthen our transport system would be an

opportunity for visible change. Similarly, devolution would provide the chance to redesign bus services to better fit local needs.

2.6. The group also discussed upcoming changes to local government through LGR. The importance of consulting young people throughout the process of developing and implementing LGR plans was noted. It was commented that LGR was a unique opportunity to redesign services to better meet the specific needs of local communities.

2.7. Young people heard that LGR would provide the opportunity to reset how youth engagement works, as all services would become the shared responsibility of each unitary council, removing the need for young people to navigate a complex system to advocate for themselves by providing a clearer line of accountability.

Community cohesion

2.8. One of the groups discussed issues around community cohesion as well as what gave young people a sense of belonging in their area or school.

2.9. Young people commented that the availability of accessible, creative, physical and social activities was important to their sense of belonging, both inside and outside of school. These included music events, art clubs, individual and team sports activities, and groups such as Cubs and Scouts. Such activities provided opportunities for social connection, as did political organising and spending time with family.

2.10. Young people also felt that employment would improve their sense of belonging, but shared that securing jobs had been very challenging.

2.11. In terms of supporting community cohesion, young people fed back that schools could provide opportunities for this, and suggested making free extracurricular clubs mandatory; increasing advertising of external community youth clubs and other local creative and physical activities through schools; offering more interest-led after school clubs; and allocating more time in the school day to social activities. Young people felt that it was important to have a consistent approach across schools to maximise effectiveness.

2.12. Young people noted the need for more volunteers in the county to support activities, as well as improving communication from voluntary organisations around what is available to them.

2.13. Young people also cited Peacehaven Youth Hub as a positive example of an offer which supported community cohesion, as well as churches in Seaford that ran activities for the community.

2.14. Young people cited the importance of friendships based on similar hobbies and interests as a key reason to expand activity-based groups. However, they noted that sports clubs were often less accessible, requiring money and facilities, and

noted the barriers some young people may face that could prevent them from taking part.

Youth voice in decision-making

2.15. One of the groups discussed how young people's ideas can be accounted for by decision-makers in the Council and how they can inform and support the Council's lobbying efforts.

2.16. Young people noted the importance of having strong relationships with council staff and Members, ensuring a comfortable environment for them to share their priorities. They noted that the new Youth Voice group would provide an opportunity to work closely with a wider range of people in the Council. In particular, young people felt that it would be valuable to have regular opportunities to talk directly to leaders, including Members. They suggested that the Council could help its adults to develop the skills to communicate effectively with young people and foster an environment where young people feel comfortable asking questions when they do not understand a topic.

2.17. Young people felt that they were often consulted too late in the Council's decision-making and suggested that LGR could help address this. They recommended that the Council present a few realistic options for feedback rather than a single proposal.

2.18. Young people felt that engagement by the Council should be varied and stimulating, using a range of different approaches. They commented that there should be more time allocated at events to allow for co-production with young people.

2.19. Young people also commented that there needed to be a clearer feedback loop in which they had a stronger understanding of how the Council had taken their views into account.

Open discussion

2.20. Young people, Members and officers also took part in an open discussion, with questions and discussions on several topics. Comments from young people during the discussion included support for lowering the voting age to 16, and the need for increased teaching on media literacy and critical thinking in schools to support young people to be politically engaged; the need to develop Youth Voice in the Council to ensure young people's views were considered when making decisions; opportunities in devolution to work with bus providers to improve services and public transport experiences; and the possibility of the Council developing an apprenticeship pathway specifically for care leavers.

2.21. Groups additionally considered potential areas of focus for the new Youth Voice Group and the importance of designing a system of engagement around the needs of neurodivergent people in particular.

2.22. Young people were very positive overall about the event's discussions and welcomed the opportunity to hear from Members and officers and voice their concerns and experiences.