



Joint Response from Hastings Voluntary Action and Hastings Community Network Executive to the East Sussex County Council Budget Consultation.

1. Introduction

Hastings Voluntary Action and the Hastings Community Network are pleased to have an opportunity to respond to the proposed budget reductions advanced by East Sussex County Council and welcome the clarity of information and the convening of the partner engagement meetings.

The following points set out are detailed response to the proposals and, more importantly where we believe this leaves the cross-sector relationship with the VCSE during this extremely challenging period.

By way of background Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) is the VCSE infrastructure organisation supporting "not for profit" sector in Hastings. The Community Network Executive (facilitated by HVA) is elected body bringing together leaders from a range of VCSE organisations to capture evidence and respond to consultations and represent the sector on relevant partnerships.

2. The Context

Having reviewed and discussed the relevant reports and seen the videocast of the relevant cabinet and Full Council meetings we know that no-one advancing or supporting these proposals is in any doubt of the negative impact they will have on the lives of those in need who deserve and require support. We make this point not simply in the context of this budget cycle but across a much longer period in which the entire shape of local government and the services and support available to the public have been systematically eroded to the point where ESCC are having to fall back on a statutory core offer supplemented by relatively narrow areas where it is still able to offer some further support.

We are now 14 years into a government funding regime in which Austerity measures have become the norm and significant funding increases (which may have been anticipated by a change in government) are unlikely to materialise in the medium term. It is clear from the papers produced by ESCC that this year's Reconciling Policy and Resources process is a precursor for even greater savings which will be required for the Council to balance the budget in future years.

We recognise the fact that the elected members of East Sussex County Council have a fiduciary duty to set a budget and have no alternative but to identify and achieve savings

which enable them to achieve this. However, the long term impact of this needs to be acknowledged both on individuals but also on the model of service delivery which the Council is seeking to develop. We have dealt with this in section 5 below

3. The Background

From a VCSE perspective it is important to be clear about the issues which we see in the day-to-day work we do, the long-term trends this creates and the strategic issues we need to address. In 2022 we spent some time as a sector agreeing and presenting our thinking in a single document Facing the Future which was launched at the East Sussex Assembly and remains our collective analysis of the issues affecting the VCSE in its attempt to provide services for residents in need. We have attached a copy of this report to this submission and argue that the further contraction in public sector funding has continued and exacerbated many of these trends. It is against this backdrop that our comments need to be viewed.

Need is increasing at a time when the resources and funding to the VCSE sector have fallen and at the same time as its reserve position is becoming more fragile (as a result of cost of living increases, other costs and the recently announced changes to NI costs). We make this general point to emphasise the fact that the ability of the VCSE to respond to local need is just as fiscally compromised as the position of the public sector. In this sense the idea of the VCSE “stepping in” to fill the gap as services reduce which was intimated during the Full Council debate is problematic at best. What is needed is a strategic and realistic cross sector debate involving partners at ESCC, VCSE, NHS and District and Boroughs to scope out an assessment of current needs risks and response. We can no longer make any assumptions about the ability of any sector to step into the space which consistent reductions in funding has created.

4. Reviewing the system and not just the ESCC budget:

Seeing the Bigger Picture We make the point that in assessing the risk of the proposed changes ESCC have confined its analysis to the specific budget cuts it is proposing. This is relevant but in our view does not provide a complete picture which can accurately describe how services in a particular geographical area will be impacted. For example, the proposals in relation to drug and alcohol services refer only to the ESCC component and make no reference to the ending of Operation Adder or the ending of Lottery funding received by East Sussex Recovery Alliance to provide pre and post rehab entry for clients who are seeking to detox and remain clean. It is, we believe incumbent on commissioners to have a clear strategic picture of the local “system” and not simply confine their risk assessment to specific contracts or services funded by ESCC. This would enable a better understanding of how any change will play out in terms of service access.

Anticipating increases in demand on other services: In various reports budget reductions or plans to eliminate services altogether are justified because of the existence of alternatives within the VCSE. For example, in the report, dealing with the ending of the STEPS to Work service cite the existence of 3 VCSE providers but does not attempt any analysis about how an increase in client numbers or demands for assessment will be assimilated by those organisations.

This issue is not simply confined to the VCSE sector and we note that in the report covering the on-site support for the accommodation services for adults with mental health needs it is acknowledged that the reduction in support will have profound implications for service users including the loss of their accommodation and a significant risk that this may result in increased homelessness because of the lack of alternative accommodation. No serious attempt is made in the analysis to understand the implications of this on the Borough Council or acknowledge that it is the support – not just the availability of accommodation – which will determine if an individual with complex Mental Health issues can sustain a tenancy and avoid street homelessness.

5. Prevention -v- Acute Intervention

The depth and range of the proposed budget reductions do not just impact on services to individuals in need (important though that is) but have profound implications for an entire model of service delivery which has underpinned the approach in East Sussex for many years. The argument here is that:-

- Preventative services act to prevent or delay individual needs becoming acute and that investment in these services creates more cost effective community solutions rather than significantly more expensive acute interventions.
- The existence of such services enables people to remain at home and close to family and local support networks
- Over time, a fully preventative strategy will manage demand to such an extent that it is possible to engineer a shift of resource from the acute sector into the community to create a more sustainable health and social care model.

If authorities responsible for the provision of Adult Social Care reduce services to little more than that required to meet their statutory obligations it makes these ideas less achievable and as a consequence more sustainable system for care and support moves further out of reach. In this sense, the proposed changes create significant challenges to the implementation of the ESCC prevention strategy which we have contributed to and support.

This is acknowledged in the report where the proposed withdrawal of preventative services such as the Floating support service is being suggested without any proper understanding of whether its continuation is viable “This is such a significant budget reduction that we don’t yet know whether a future service is viable or what it could look like.” We make the point that without the existence of a preventative approach demand on acute services and the statutory homelessness service will simply increase in ways which are difficult to control and which is forcing many Authorities to the brink of s.114 status as they will become unable to sustain the pressure of securing and supporting temporary accommodation.

6. VCSE Infrastructure: We welcome the acknowledgement of the needs of the VCSE sector and the retention of some (albeit reduced) provision for essential infrastructure

services. These enable the type of cross sector approach we are advocating but also provide key services to help local organisations form, grow, develop and manage some of the challenges they face. However, we regret that it has not been possible for ESCC to secure an arrangement with other public sector partners (Health and District/Borough Authorities) to consider a model which could make appropriate provision for these essential services. In previous years this realised a greater level of investment capable of producing greater impact in a way where the funding responsibility was shared more equitably between relevant public bodies.

7. Keeping Alive to the Possibility of Community Asset Transfer

We note that the proposed budget reductions have implications for the future of buildings as well as services and we think that consideration is given to the possibility of retaining these assets to fulfil some kind of continuing community purpose. We understand that the Council have recently revised and updated its Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy and we hope that this might enable a strategic response which could meet the accommodation needs of services delivered by the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise sector. There will inevitably be a demand to dispose of any surplus assets in ways which generate Capital receipts and we invite the County Council to take a strategic position on this in light of their willingness to embrace CAT good practice principles.

8. Conclusion

We hope that these comments and observations are helpful to East Sussex County Council in coming to a final position on its budget setting process. Once this is complete we look forward to receiving detailed proposals via which the kind of cross-sector conversation which we have advocated elsewhere in this document can be developed.

Yours Sincerely



Steve Manwaring
CEO HVA



Tracey Rose
Co Chair HCN

Tracy Dighton
Co Chair HCN