**East Sussex County Council Collaborative Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector in East Sussex; Joint Statement of Intent**

Meetings involving East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Chief Executive and Director of Adult Social Care together with Chief Executives from some of the County’s Voluntary Organisations have taken place. These have explored the current context which will inform relations between the Council and the Voluntary Sector and considered areas for collaboration and also “reset” the relationship between ESCC and the local voluntary sector. The aim is for East Sussex to become a place which can exhibit “best practice” when it comes to cross sector working.

These discussions grew organically, were informal and took place outside of existing formal structures. However, they have been productive and have reached a point where it is possible to issue this joint statement to outline our thinking and broaden the debate to other colleagues, in both the public and voluntary sectors, in a transparent and accountable way.

**The Current Context**
We agreed that the current reduction in public sector finances. together with an increased demand and vulnerability faced by the voluntary sector. was creating an unprecedented position. This will require real partnership if we are to serve East Sussex residents and create the potential to offer the widest possible network of services to meet their needs. We recognise that these circumstances demand that both the public sector and the voluntary sector need to change and develop the way in which we work together. Our ambition is to become an exemplar area which others look to as a place where collaboration between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Local Authority is meaningful, creative, and making a real difference.

**Moving Forward**
Both parties acknowledge the independence of the VCS and current public sector service decisions. The ESCC Core Offer provides one contextual factor in the rethinking. The potential of the local voluntary sector in supporting communities is another contextual factor.

It is not merely “tinkering” around the edges, but a fundamental re-think about how we can make best use of the resources we have collectively to ensure services and support for local people through partnership working. This will include creating equitable environments in which planning can take place, and through which we can engage strategically to address challenges and create opportunity without either compromising VCS independence & strategy or ESCC strategic decision-making. To move this ahead we have identified 5 areas of activity where there is a need to examine our approach:-

* **Inward investment:** There is a shared aspiration across sectors, we want East Sussex to secure inward investment, develop robust processes, and respond effectively to funding calls where these involve cross sector working, multiple partners, or the deployment of match funding. In light of this we want to examine how best we can support this, and ensure this is led, as appropriate, across the sectors.
* **Procurement and Commissioning**: The development of a revised commissioning and procurement framework for ESCC to use when commissioning services. This will ensure the support of local East Sussex organisations, rather than inadvertently excluding them. We need to discuss the flexibilities available within procurement process; how these can enable genuine collaboration and enhance long term sustainability, as well as achieve Value for Money and service quality. We recognise the distinction between commissioning specific services, development work and infrastructure support. The review will include drawing on best practice elsewhere and discussing the potential merits of a “long term and strategic” approach, rather than short term service contracts. We recognise the need to ensure the contracting framework minimises structural risks to the viability of the sector. We also seek to explore how the voluntary and community sector can proactively develop potential for ‘alliance’ or partnership proposals between East Sussex rooted organisations. We recognise this may require re-envisaging the social value approach.
* **Cross Sector Understanding and effective information systems:** Understanding of the VCS is variable within the public sector and within East Sussex. We do not have a fully developed work-force offer to build understanding between sectors. This is an area which could improve knowledge and increase positive pathways for referrals into voluntary sector services. We believe that a jointly developed approach could have the effect of increasing cross-sector knowledge. We also want to embrace opportunities for secondments and other arrangements through which practitioners can develop experience and knowledge.
* **Meeting needs:** As nationally, austerity is replaced by “continued financial discipline” and local demand for public services continues to rise, the capacity of the public sector will remain under great pressure. The approach of the VCS, ESCC and the wider public sector to meeting needs must evolve. The importance of the public and voluntary sectors working together to maximise, and make very best use of, all the resources available at county and local level will be key and in this context, we want to discuss respective roles and activities.
* **Strategic Cross-Sector Engagement**: In an environment where many structures which bring the voluntary and public sectors together, but an absence of a consistent strategic dialogue capable of tackling the “big picture” issues, a review of approaches is timely. This would aim to enable leaders from both sectors to share thinking at a strategic level and re-define the nature of the relationship between the sectors in a way which produces an approach which is more, equal, collaborative, holistic and reflective of the entire ESCC agenda rather than one aspect of it.

**Conclusion**We issue this joint statement to bring to a close this stage of the debate and to broaden the discussion so that other colleagues can offer views. We hope that by doing this we will promote a debate which can offer a genuine chance of real reform and that the relationship between the County Council and the Voluntary Sector can be the best it can be. This must be a dialogue which is inclusive but also undertaken at pace with a focus on the things that will make the biggest difference to making the best use of time, energy and resources for the residents of East Sussex.

**Becky Shaw Chief Executive East Sussex County Council
Keith Hinkley Director Adult Social Care and Health East Sussex County Council
Penny Shimmin CEO – Sussex Community Development Association
Steve Hare CEO – AgeUK East Sussex
John Routledge CEO East Sussex Community Voice/Healthwatch
Steve Manwaring CEO Hastings Voluntary Action**