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| ESSP new without graphic | **Meeting Notes**  **Monday 7 February 2022**  **Virtual via Microsoft Teams** |

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| **IN ATTENDANCE** |

**ESSP Members present:**

Chris Bending Wealden District Council

Cllr Johnny Denis Lewes District Council

Lorna Ford Rother District Council

Cllr Keith Glazier East Sussex County Council

Jane Hartnell Hastings Borough Council

Mark Matthews East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

Graham Peters South East Local Enterprise Partnership

Becky Shaw East Sussex County Council

Cllr Bob Standley Wealden District Council

Keith Stevens ES Association of Local Councils

Michael Turner Environment Agency

Dawn Whittaker Chair/East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service

**Also in attendance (official observer):**

Harriet Judson East Sussex County Council

**Apologies for absence**:

Cllr Zoe Nicholson Lewes District Council

Cllr Susan Prochak Rother District Council

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| **NOTES** |

1. **Welcome, introductions and Apologies**

Dawn Whittaker welcomed ESSP members and delegates to the meeting and apologies were given.

1. **Urgent items of business**

There were no urgent items of business.

**3) Minutes of the meeting on 5 July 2021 and matters arising not on the agenda**

The minutes of the meeting on 5 July 2021 were agreed as an accurate record.

Lorna Ford notified Dawn that the link to the Focus on East Sussex report included in the minutes is no longer working.

Attendees were notified that Gordon Ackroyd, who attended the 5 July meeting, is no longer CEO of Action in Rural Sussex. The interim CEO is Steven Haasz - [Steven.Haasz@ruralsussex.org.uk](mailto:Steven.Haasz@ruralsussex.org.uk)

**ACTIONS:**

**i) Harriet to circulate an updated link to the Focus on East Sussex report:** [**https://new.eastsussex.gov.uk/your-council/about/key-documents/state-of-county**](https://new.eastsussex.gov.uk/your-council/about/key-documents/state-of-county)

**4) Assembly Review – Dawn Whittaker**

Dawn spoke about the 2021 East Sussex Assembly, which focused on the theme ‘Skills for young people and the working population’. The virtual Assembly was well-attended by members and delegates, who heard from a range of speakers and participated in workshops to discuss how East Sussex can address long-term skills shortages in the local area. They also looked at how organisations can empower workforces to meet business needs and ensure people have the best chance to succeed.

Attendees offered positive feedback on the virtual event & speakers and appreciated the opportunity to forge networks with local partners.

Dawn invited attendees to share suggestions for the 2022 Assembly date and location. Attendees agreed to explore the possibility of hosting the Assembly in September, possibly in Eastbourne. Attendees also agreed the Assembly should provide hybrid attendance options for those unable to join in person but ensure issues around low attendance for hybrid meetings are considered.

Attendees were invited to suggest ideas for the Assembly theme:

* Cost of living and impacts in East Sussex, particularly in regards of maintaining our approach to net zero
* Encouraging stimulation in the post-COVID economy
* East Sussex efforts on net zero: how to quantify our input and engage our communities
* Transport in the county (could invite colleagues from Transport for the South East?)
* Shaping the community offer post-COVID
* Partnership working.

**ACTIONS:**

**i) Dawn and Harriet to investigate possible dates and locations for September Assembly**

**ii) Harriet to send information about previous Assemblies to Lorna Ford.**

**iii) Harriet to prepare a short summary about each proposed theme and circulate to Members in advance of the April steering group meeting. Members to discuss themes and select their preferred option.**

**5) Budget Updates**

Dawn invited attendees to provide an update on their organisations’ 2022/23 budget, any financial challenges they are facing, and the adjustments required to overcome these challenges.

S31 grants are expected, therefore organisations have had to make some assumptions in the forthcoming budgets in advance of grants.

Cllr Glazier provided an update for ESCC: Cabinet have put forward recommendations to Council and are meeting on 8 February to set the budget. ESCC are not seeking to make major savings this year. £900k of savings will be released for Children’s Services Early Help. ESCC are investing £31m in highways over the next ten years. There is expected to be a lot of pressure on Adult Social Care (ASC), although the specifics are currently unknown. One grant will be put into reserves to counter this unknown pressure when it arrives. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) could be as wide as a £10m deficit over the next three years. ESCC will raise council tax to 1.99% (maximum allowed) with 1% specifically raised for ASC. Residents will pay an additional £1.33 p/w, £69 p/a. The alternative to raising council tax would be to make £12m of savings. With so much uncertainty ahead, this option is not viable as the council need to be prepared and deliver good services.

Cllr Standley provided an update for WDC: The proposed budget has gone through Cabinet and will be put forward to full council by the end of February. The recommendation is for a £5 council tax increase to Band D properties in small surplus in 2022/23. The challenge of inflation is affecting the cost of running services; for example, the WDC Waste Service contract is increasing by an estimated 5%. All additional Council Tax income will be used to cover this increase. One approaching challenge is the change to business rates, which will cost over £1m if they go ahead. Another concern is the extra burden on the Waste Service (e.g., food and garden waste). Wealden have a strong commercial programme which will provide income in future years. The Knights Farm Employment Park, currently in development, will provide good employment and income opportunities and enable WDC to keep council tax low.

Mark Matthews provided an update for the ESFRS: The budget is balanced at just over £41.5m. Council tax will be raised to 1.99%. Core spending power is an average 4.7%. The ESFRS received a one-year settlement, which is frustrating. A funding review is scheduled for 2023/24; colleagues are concerned about how the Levelling Up agenda will impact on services. The service will need to make £800k of savings, with reserves moving from £16.2m to £15m and borrowing moving from £10m to £20m.

Lorna Ford provided an update for RDC: The financial situation in Rother is similar to WDC. Cabinet is meeting tonight (7 Feb) to consider the budget. Officers are working hard on financial stability and investing in property to generate income. £3m of reserves are being drawn on, which is unsustainable. Band D council tax will be raised by £4.67.

Michael Turner provided an update for the Environment Agency: The agency has an ambitious programme to protect properties from flooding. The current Pevensey scheme finishes in 2025 and there are plans to replace it. There are reductions to the service offer, officers are no longer able to attend minor pollution incidents but are instead focusing on serious/significant incidents and environmental permits. The agency is unable to provide feedback to reports but is instead reassuring people that information submitted will be held. Where partners request attendance, the agency will continue to consider requests.

Jane Hartnell provided an update for HBC: There are huge demands on services, particularly in terms of homelessness and temporary accommodation requirements. These issues now take up one third of the council’s budget. HBC will be dipping below minimum levels of reserves this year and will have a significant expenditure programme. Officers are working with partners where reductions will impact on other areas.

Cllr Denis provided an update for LDC: Budget has been through Cabinet but is yet to go to full council. There will be a maximum council tax increase of 9p p/w. LDC is aiming to have 100% council tax relief, up from 80%, to protect the most vulnerable residents. Money has been set aside for another programme to support vulnerable residents, taking funding from various capital pots to offer extra relief on fuel bills and other expenses. Investments in biodiversity projects and public toilets are being made.

**6) COVID updates**

Dawn invited attendees to discuss the ongoing impact of the pandemic on their organisations.

Dawn explained that the county has seen higher infection rates with the Omicron variant, but fewer deaths. Young people are being encouraged to get vaccinated. There appears to be some lethargy about restrictions amongst public and some staff. People want to get back to ‘normal’, but decisions to relax restrictions may result in higher infection rates.

Becky advised that a lot of people are keen to get back to ‘normal’, but others are genuinely scared. The council is entering a transition stage, which is uneven as a lot of people are choosing to work virtually but others have returned to the office. ESCC are still working through what changes mean in practice and are still making the most of carbon gains by allowing people to work virtually for a few days a week. Difficulties in partnership working are easing.

Michael explained that the Environment Agency have taken a cautious approach to returning to the office, but construction workers have been continuing to work on sites throughout the pandemic. Where possible, meetings have been held outdoors. Internal office work can mostly be done remotely, and all teams have created charters about how to work inclusively, taking into account different considerations. There will be changes to working arrangements, charters will be implemented in April following a dry-run last Autumn. The agency is aiming to meet net zero by 2030, including tractor and commuting carbon. Useful guidance about meeting with partners and MPs has been received. The agency shares their building with the Civil Service, who are opening offices without distancing restrictions – however, the agency remains cautious.

Lorna advised that RDC officers have been reviewing working policies and return to work guidance to ensure the tone is correct and suggested it would be helpful to review other organisations’ communications on the subject.

Dawn explained that the ESFRS have revised their policy and recently announced a requirement for corporate staff to work a proportion of contracted time in the office. Office working will be on a rotational basis to minimise the number of people in at any one time, and to tackle isolation issues.

Chris advised that WDC staff are still settling into the ‘new normal’ and keeping working arrangements flexible. No assumptions are being made about what staff want to do in terms of remote working. Instead, senior management are listening to staff and reacting accordingly.

Jane informed Lorna about a working group sharing best practice around working arrangements. Sue Evans, Director of HR in West Sussex County Council, chairs the meetings.

Becky suggested new ways of working could be an interesting subject for the next Assembly. There was a great deal of interest in the speakers from Team East Sussex, who spoke about new ways of working at the 2021 Assembly. Attendees could explore how organisations have adapted to the changes to working arrangements.

Graham Peters will continue to remind Team East Sussex colleagues from the University of Sussex to produce the report mentioned at the Assembly.

Mark told attendees about the tactical coordination group who meet and discuss COVID-related issues, e.g., absenteeism in key roles such as control room officers. Mark thanked all volunteers who assisted with the vaccine booster programme. Mark suggested the Assembly could explore how COVID shapes services in the virtual world.

Keith Stevens echoed Mark’s suggestion and advised the Assembly could cover both issues and positive results arising from the impact of COVID.

**ACTIONS:**

**i) Jane Hartnell to send further information about the COVID working group to Lorna Ford.**

**9) Any other business**

No items discussed.

**9) Dates of future meetings**

Business Meeting 2: Monday 4 July, 10am to 12pm (location TBC)

East Sussex Assembly: Currently scheduled for Friday 25 November. The event may be brought forward to September to encourage in-person attendance.

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| **SUMMARY OF AGREED ACTIONS –** | |
| **Item** | **Action** |
| **3** | **i) Harriet to circulate an updated link to the Focus on East Sussex report** |
| **4** | **i) Dawn and Harriet to investigate possible dates and locations for September Assembly**  **ii) Harriet to send information about previous Assemblies to Lorna Ford.**  **iii) Harriet to prepare a short summary about each proposed Assembly theme and circulate to Members in advance of the April steering group meeting. Members to discuss themes and select their preferred option.** |
| **6** | **i) Jane Hartnell to send further information about the COVID working group to Lorna Ford.** |