

Equality Impact Report: Council Plan and Budget 2024/25

Implementation date 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

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1 Background and context

- 1.1 The County Council's most significant strategic decisions are the Council Plan and the budget which is designed to deliver its commitments. In setting the budget the County Council must be aware of and consider a range of statutory and other legal responsibilities. These must inform the decision to set the budget and the Council must explain how it undertakes that process of consideration. The public sector equality duty is an important element of this process for delivering a rational and lawful budget.
- 1.2 The public sector equality duty is the duty to have regard to the impact of proposals on persons and groups with protected characteristics and the responsibilities owed to them. The Council discharges the public sector equality duty through several measures. This includes applying detailed consideration of such impacts arising from the planning and implementation of service changes, especially where those changes reduce current service levels or reduce the funds available to deliver them. The public sector equality duty impact is best understood and assessed using detailed service and customer information held or secured by those leading, planning and implementing service change. The information is used to help design service changes and to support the decisions which generate service plans. The County Council takes the budget decision on the basis that this arrangement for discharging the public sector equality duty is in place and applied effectively.
- 1.3 Consultation and engagement events were carried out during November and December 2024, including an online public consultation, an all member briefing, review by all Scrutiny Committees during November and a stakeholder event with partners, voluntary sector and business representatives. The consultation and engagement was designed to be equality duty compliant, to pick up any relevant information to the discharge of the duty and to collate data to help support the understanding of the distribution of persons with protected characteristics within our community and users.
- 1.4 Different levels of assessment or different forms of data gathering are used dependent upon the needs of the particular service plan under consideration. Where statutory or some other customer or public consultation is required to help the impact assessment work for any service change or significant proposal, this will be included as part of planning and implementation. Where specific service user data is required to better understand the potential impact on those with protected characteristics, this is secured.
- 1.5 The background to the budget for 2024/25 is continued demand pressure for essential services on which many of our more vulnerable residents rely and that these demand increases will outstrip any Government funding changes. As such, a programme of well-considered and planned budget measures and planned use of reserves is essential to ensure the Council achieves its legal duty to approve a realistic and balanced budget.

- 1.6 The savings planned for 2024/25 are £15.7m and need to be viewed in the context of a draft overall net revenue budget of around £761.4m. The measures included in the budget report to balance the budget contain further information on how the equality impact work will be addressed as part of each proposed service change or saving (Annex 1, Appendix 3).
- 1.7 The emphasis in budget planning continues to be on maintaining efficiency with a view to protecting core services in line with the Council Plan priorities. The Council's over-arching aim has been to avoid unnecessary changes or budget reductions which do not reflect the Council's priorities. Instead, the Council has focused on specific measures to both understand impacts and address any adverse impacts for services or support. Where a separate decision is needed for any proposal feeding into the budget the service prepares an impact assessment, where so advised, to inform the eventual decision based on the Council's approach to its public sector equality duty so that the decision maker has full regard to such assessment.

2 Proposals for the approach to the Equality Duty

- 2.1 Efforts have been made when compiling budget proposals to minimise the impact on residents generally and work is carried out to ensure a full equality impact assessment to identify any possible impact on those with a protected characteristic.
- 2.2 The total £15.7m savings planned for 2024/25 are a continuation of savings from last year, business as usual or operational decisions and these were subject to the consultations and engagement events held during November and December.
- 2.3 The Council has made efforts to continue to provide residents with services to meet needs and identified priorities. Work will be done, where advised, on equality impacts and how to mitigate any potentially adverse impact within any separate decisions to be taken and their implementation.
- 2.4 A balanced budget has been developed on the basis of a primary aim of meeting all statutory duties to provide services supporting the priority needs and interests of West Sussex residents and which should result in a positive impact for residents including those with protected characteristics. Available information on potential impact has informed the process of prioritisation.
- 2.5 As well as the revenue budget, the County Council will be asked to approve an updated capital programme for 2024/25 to 2028/29. The capital programme sets out how the County Council proposes to invest in assets to deliver the Council's vision for and its commitment to West Sussex as set out in the Capital Strategy in Annex 2 (a). It too will be implemented through decision-making arrangements which address the need to address the public sector equality duty.
- 2.6 In preparing the proposals outlined, it is believed that no individual group whether it be by age, sex, race, disability, gender reassignment (including transgender), sexual orientation, religion or belief or any other identifiable group will suffer from discrimination, harassment or victimisation as a direct consequence. Confirmation of this and the focus on opportunities to eliminate discrimination will be addressed in service plans and implementation.

- 2.7 The proposals identified by services will be expected to show how they will maintain equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. This is part of the work that will take place ahead of any individual equality impact work on individual proposals in any service plan area.
- 2.8 Changes to proposals will be addressed in the evaluation of any further consultation and representations where relevant and recorded in specific decision reports or identified for clarification in service plan implementation.
- 2.9 Monitoring will be through equality impact work at individual service level and also business planning and performance framework planning processes. Each Directorate will be responsible for monitoring the impact on their own services.
- 2.10 In the preparation of the detailed proposals for the Council's budget for 2024/25 an exercise has been completed to confirm those proposals which will require or which have already applied an equality impact assessment and the officer who will be responsible for ensuring the duty has been discharged in each case. This is summarised in Annex 1, Appendix 3.

Director of Finance and Support Services