

Introduction

Leader of the Council – Councillor Peter Jones



I am pleased to present East Sussex County Council's (ESCC's) Plan for 2004/05. It should enable you to judge our overall performance, our success in delivering improved services to the people of East Sussex and our plans for improving them still further. It sets out how well we performed against our targets in 2003/04, our overall strategic objectives and our priorities for improvement in the coming year. It is primarily a tool to help Councillors, management and staff better co-ordinate and manage the work of the Council within the resources available to us. It will also be of interest to the public and to groups, individuals and organisations with an interest in, or who work in partnership with, the County Council.

2003/04 has been a very successful year for the County Council. Our overall aim continues to be to deliver high quality core services as cost effectively as possible. Over the last three years we have put the Council's finances back on a sound footing, established clear policy priorities and driven up performance. As a result this year we were one of only two councils in the Country to improve our overall score under the national Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) by two categories. This made us the most improved County Council in the Country. We have now been confirmed as a "Good" Council overall. We are not satisfied with that, however, and aim to be recognised as "Excellent" within the next two to three years, not only by external Inspectorates but, more importantly, by the people of East Sussex.

Our overall improvement this year can be seen in many areas. We were the most improved authority in the Country in relation to Social Services. Our performance in relation to Adult Social Services, particularly care of the elderly, improved significantly and we received the top three stars rating for our Children's Social Services. In most areas our improvement in relation to education examination results increased at a faster rate than national trends. We also maintained our high performance in relation to Waste Management and the management of financial resources and people. Our economic regeneration work, which is at the core of our future vision for the County, has also been recognised by the Audit Commission. This is particularly true of our work, with a range of partners, in Hastings which is leading to massive new investment there, and our efforts to introduce new technology, such as Broadband, across the whole County, including the rural hinterland. We are not, however, satisfied with the progress we have made and, as will be seen from this Plan, we have strong ambitions to do even better.

As always this means using the scarce resources available to us very wisely. Our budget situation has been more challenging than most. In an independent report the Audit Commission confirmed that the redistribution of central Government funding for local authorities from the South-East to the Midlands and the north last year led to higher Council Tax rises in the South East. In spite of receiving the lowest grant settlement of any County Council this year, we have sought to return to our original Council Tax strategy and, by cutting unnecessary bureaucracy and waste, have succeeded in not only maintaining core services but also in bringing in a relatively modest Council Tax increase. Again we wish to do even better in the future and we will play an active role in the coming year in encouraging the Government to introduce a fairer and more understandable Council Tax system.

As a public body we are committed to the principles of good corporate governance. Openness, inclusivity, integrity and accountability are at the very heart of the way Members and officers operate at East Sussex and are fundamental to our role in providing vision and leadership for the wider community which we serve. This commitment is underpinned by our Corporate Governance Policy and local framework which sets out how we direct and control our functions and relate to the community.

Our Priorities

ESCC's priorities for the whole Council for the coming year are to:

- ❖ continue to improve services to older people;
- ❖ minimise council tax rises, as far as possible, by focusing on core services;
- ❖ raise the economic performance of East Sussex;
- ❖ further reduce crime and the fear of crime;
- ❖ provide safer and better maintained roads and repair street lights;
- ❖ support teachers in continuing to raise standards in our schools; and
- ❖ promote active citizenship.

This will be achieved by:

- ❖ being clear about priorities and long term direction;
- ❖ focusing on customers, particularly our residents' needs and preferences;
- ❖ providing equality of opportunity for all through our service delivery and as an employer;
- ❖ Departments working more closely with each other and with our partners;
- ❖ using a variety of ways to deliver services;
- ❖ managing our resources and our assets well;
- ❖ harnessing the potential of our staff; and
- ❖ improving further the County Council's reputation.

We have many exciting plans for the coming year to help drive these priorities forward. Our aim is to roll out regeneration in Hastings along the whole East Sussex coast and into the heartland of the County. Key to this will be keeping up pressure on Government for new transport infrastructure initiatives in the centre of the County. We also aim to maximise the potential of many of our natural assets such as our Wetlands and introduce, with our partners, more initiatives to protect the most vulnerable in our society such as older people, those with disabilities and looked after children. We could not do this without the continuing strong political leadership of my fellow Cabinet Members and other Councillors, the excellent managerial leadership from our Chief Executive and Chief Officer team, our hardworking and innovative managers and staff, nor without the help and support of our partners and local communities. My thanks go to all of you.

Councillor Peter Jones
Leader of the Council