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29th September 2024

Report to Parish Councils – October 2024

This report is written is for Parish Councils meeting in October.

Some of the items here are from information circulated by ESCC but which may not have been drawn to the attention of parish councillors and others.

Budget Challenges

As with most councils, we face major challenges at ESCC for a multitude of reasons including:

- The costs of our core services, particularly Adult and Social Care and Children's Services, have been climbing rapidly due to factors such as shortage of staff and the need to employ agency staff
- Central government announces the general grant to local authorities (the 'settlement') once a year. Ideally, they do this for the next 3 years, but for many years have only made a one-year settlement which does help medium term planning.
- Central government also limits the increase in council tax each year – most recently 1.99% for general increase and an extra amount for Adult and Social Care. This does not keep up with the increase in costs.

Our current budget forecasts for next year (from April 2025) are currently showing an unsustainable deficit of £55M. This can be seen in the cabinet papers for the 26th September meeting (agenda item 6) at:

<https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cld=133&MId=5887&Ver=4>

The council is required by law to set a balanced budget. As part of this we need to review aspects of our operations which are not statutory. Some of these require public consultation which takes some time, so are given in the cabinet papers. I've already been reviewing these as part of committee work. A significant concern is that curtailing these might lead to increased costs for other councils as well as a worse experience for residents.

We continue to lobby government for a realistic settlement. I have seen some discussion that the government might raise the cap on the increase in council tax. Although this might alleviate the deficit, at the same time it would be a very unwelcome increase in the cost of living for all residents and perhaps disproportionately hit those such as elderly residents with larger houses but relatively little income.

Newenden Bridge Repairs/Closure

I've reported on this verbally at parish councils. In summary this bridge, which straddles the Kent/East Sussex border, but which is maintained by Kent County Council, needs urgent repairs which will result in the closure of the A28 for 3 to possibly 5 months. Originally this was going to occur this Autumn, but I now understand that it has been delayed to the Spring when water levels and weather might allow more efficient work.

Needless to say, this has major impacts for residents in Newenden, Northiam, Beckley and other villages, not only those who use the A28 regularly but in surrounding areas such as Staplecross and Bodiam which might see increased traffic as a result of diversions. The official diversions are always specified to be HGV suitable though satnavs can lead HGV drivers down unsuitable shortcuts. I would push for signs such as 'Not suitable for HGVs' to be used for these, as they are elsewhere.

I have established that East Sussex Highways (under Balfour Beatty) have worked closely with Kent in the planning of this, with frequent meetings which also included National Highways.

I know some residents have mentioned the possibility of temporary bridges (Bailey bridges) but I understand that these are not feasible and in any case would require major expenditure for which Kent, like East Sussex, does not have budget.

I am in regular contact with the Kent County Councillor for the area and will update residents regularly.

Highways

As always potholes and general road conditions are the hot topic when I meet residents. I always repeat the fact that we do not have anything like enough funds to get all our roads up to the 'Green' standard. However, Balfour Beatty do seem to be doing a better job. I remind residents to please report any issues on the Highways web site and to copy me on the case number and details, so that I can 'take an interest' which can help.

I meet every few weeks with the highways steward and often get down to very detailed discussions of individual potholes!



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Budgets (again)

As announced in the press, as part of the process in moving towards a balanced budget for 25/26 ESCC needs to make significant savings – about £55M a year. Part of this might include curtailing or stopping services which are not statutory (i.e. not required by law). Some of these are for Adult and Social services and require consultation as I mentioned last month. The list of those currently out for consultation includes:

- The East Sussex Floating Support Service (ESFSS) is available to East Sussex residents aged 16+, living in, or moving to, independent or supported accommodation in all housing tenures who require housing-related support
- Supported accommodation for vulnerable adults – This service supports adults aged 18 and over whose primary need is a risk of harm due to being homeless. It comprises 28 units across two schemes located in Hastings and Eastbourne which support clients 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Supported accommodation for adults with mental health needs – This service supports adults aged 18 and over who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, whose primary

need is risk of harm due to a recognised mental health need. It comprises 45 units across three schemes located in Hastings, Eastbourne and Rother which support clients 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- Phoenix Centre – The Phoenix Centre provides day services to older people with a range of complex physical and mental health needs living in the community. The service is based in Lewes and offers care and support to up to 25 people per day, Monday to Friday.
- Milton Grange day service and mental health community outreach – Milton Grange day service delivers a range of support and activities to older people living in the community who have complex mental health and physical needs
- Linden Court – Linden Court, located in Eastbourne, is a day service for people with learning disabilities. The service is used by 42 clients accessing the day service, mostly within the building
- Steps to Work – Steps to Work provides training to prepare clients with a learning disability or autistic people, with an assessed Care Act eligible need, for work, and support to find and retain employment
- Hookstead and St Nicholas Centre day services. These are day services for people with a learning disability.
- Community support services for people with a learning disability - East Sussex Community Support Service has two elements - Supported Living and a Community Support Service.
- Drug and alcohol recovery services – These services are commissioned to support those in recovery from drug and alcohol misuse to sustain their recovery via support networks and dedicated support for the street community, and to provide specialist support for carers of those affected by drug and alcohol misuse

Although these are perhaps surprisingly not statutory (i.e. ESCC is not mandated by law to provide them) I, like I believe all county councillors, took on my role because I want to help all residents. The above list would affect some of the neediest in our community. Although generally speaking alternatives would be found, it would probably not be as good. In some cases it could result in increased costs for districts and boroughs.

This is needed because we do not have sufficient funding from central government. For years we lobbied the previous government for more reasonable funding and continue to lobby this one. It does depend on the budget tomorrow (30th October) but more particularly on the 'settlement' which is announced by the government just before Christmas. Ideally such a settlement is for 3 years but for some years it has only covered the year beginning in April, which does not help with planning.

I will continue to report on this each month as the budget becomes clearer.

Booking System for Waste Recycling Sites

As part of the ESCC review of budgets, views are being sought on proposals to introduce a booking system at household waste recycling sites across the county

The move could reduce queuing at sites, help save ESCC as much £50,000 a year and help ensure only residents' waste is being disposed.

A consultation opened on Monday, October 28 and will run for eight weeks, closing on Sunday, December 22.

Although initially I thought this would not be sensible, apparently it has been in use for some time in Kent and is generally welcomed by residents.

You can give feedback at <https://consultation.eastsussex.gov.uk>.

Grants for Parishes

Most parishes have defibrillators, but these sometimes need replacing or installed at separate sites. I have had an email from a charity called London Hearts which is dedicated to the procurement and distribution of life-saving defibrillators across the UK for both public and private sectors. They have been given £500k of funding by the Department of Health and Social Care which can be used to provide about 50% of funding for local defibrillators. For more information see www.londonhearts.org.

I am aware of various other sources of funding or support for local communities including:

- Dungeness Power Stations. I sit on the Site Stakeholder Group which liaises between the massive project to decommission these and the local community. They often provide grants for local activities including some in East Sussex even though the power stations are in Kent. For example, this Christmas Rye food bank is their designated charity.
- Veolia Green and Food Waste Composting Facility. As a member of Place Scrutiny I recently visited this site near Lewes. Their 'output' is compost and they deliver 'one tonne bags' at no cost to local community gardens and similar.
- Southeast Water do make grants to local communities, for example to support playgrounds

If you have a project which might benefit, please let me know and I will put you in contact and try to help get it approved.

I am going to make this list of potential fund sources a regular in my report. Please let me know of you come across any and I will add them to the list.