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County Councillor Report for Salehurst and Robertsbridge

This report is written for all residents of Salehurst and Robertsbridge for the Annual Parish Meeting.

As a reminder, I write a report each month for parish councils mostly covering items under the control or influence of the county council. I have not duplicated this here but have tried to pick out common themes for the year.

Potholes and Road Maintenance (General)

As last year and probably every year the condition of the roads is a hot topic. In the appendix I include an extract from my March report to parish councils which summarises the steps we are taking to try to improve roads, but it is tough. Some key points:

- We don't have enough money to bring the Red and Amber roads to Green Standard. This is estimated as costing about £300M to £400M out of an annual budget of about £25M. So we are very limited as to what we can do. Where new monies become available, for example as a result of government grants to any area of the council's activities or savings elsewhere, we try to use it to allow freed funds to add to the road maintenance budget.
- We had a new contractor (Balfour Beatty) take over as our new contractor in May 2023. The new contractor is much better than the previous one but there are some concerns about their performance in a few areas which we are addressing.

Potholes and Road Maintenance (Salehurst and Robertsbridge)

- In the last year I met on site with Highways and the Assistant Director responsible for Highways on Station Road. As a result of this some proper jetting repairs were done,

pending resurfacing. We now have more information on this:

- The repairs to Station Road and the part of Brightling Road from the level crossing to the junction with Bishops Lane are in the early stages of planning though they will certainly be done this financial year 24/25, currently planned for the school summer holidays in July/August to avoid disruption to school traffic. Some investigations have indicated that there will be sections along this road which will need to be fully reconstructed, with varying depths of treatment depending on the condition of the road, some receiving one layer and other sections receiving two layers of surface. It is likely to need a full road closure.
- The roadworks to the A21 have caused significant disruption for residents. The A21 is run by National Highways not ESCC but I communicated with National Highways over multiple issues such as lighting at the roundabout and pedestrian crossing which have resulted in rapid action.
- There are a number of other areas where I have had specific meetings or calls with Highways including Ludpit Lane and the Bishop's Lane bridge. As a reminder I suggest any problems are reported on the East Sussex Highways website, but the case number and some details emailed to me.

East Sussex County Council Budgets and Management

Like all councils we are challenged on our budgets. With the exception of schools, which are ringfenced, our budget for 2024/25 is £538M which is dominated by adult social care and children's services. The costs for both of these have risen considerably more than inflation, particularly due to shortage of staff. Our budget for this year includes no cuts at all.

We have raised council tax by the maximum allowed (unless we have a referendum) which is 3% plus 2% for adult social care. We have also lobbied government for more funding and continue to do so. We are also very active in applying for project-specific grant funding.

In June 2023 ESCC had an independent peer review of our operations, called a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) with the aim of further improving the council's work. We received a strong vote of confidence following this. The review, which is offered to all local authorities by the Local Government Association (LGA), took place in June 2023 and included a three-day site visit.

The independent CPC report found East Sussex County Council (ESCC) to be well-run and well-managed, open and approachable as well as a trusted and respected partner. The council was also found to be financially prudent with a good record of financial stability and on the delivery of savings.

I have had comments from some residents and councillors concerned about the financial sustainability of ESCC given the well-publicised financial challenges in some other councils including local district and borough ones. Hopefully this will reassure everyone.

Thank You

I would like to acknowledge and thank the parish councillors and clerks for their work in supporting residents this year. Councillors donate their time to make life better for the residents and it is easy to forget how much work they do.

Appendix. Extract from Cllr Redstone March 2024 Report to Parish Councils

After my report last month, the assistant director responsible for highways issued an email to all councillors giving an update on the work being done to address our roads. I sent this round to all clerks but reproduce it here:

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Our contractor, Balfour Beatty, has repaired over 19,000 potholes since the start of their contract last May, with some 2,300 in January. They have increased the number of pothole repair gangs steadily since Christmas and currently have 26 gangs working across the county compared to their usual 10, and will increase to 29 gangs next week to address a small backlog. Balfour Beatty are confident this level of resource is sufficient to clear the backlog by the end of the month, but we are monitoring this closely.

A number of you spoke at Full Council or have talked to me directly about the quality of repairs and I have addressed this with Balfour Beatty senior management. I am assured that they only carry out temporary repairs where it is absolutely necessary, i.e. where it is not safe to carry out a permanent repair, or where they know a larger scale patch repair is to follow. We have instructed Balfour Beatty that all genuine temporary repairs are spray-marked with a "T" so it will be obvious to all those genuine temporary repairs. If you continue to see substandard repairs or have concerns about quality of workmanship please let me know, and ideally with a photograph. Please note there is a new requirement in the Council's contract with Balfour Beatty that requires the gangs to cut out the tarmac surrounding a pothole by an additional 25cm to form a proper seal against solid tarmac.

If you come across potholes that aren't marked for repair please report them to us either via your Stakeholder Liaison Officer (SLO), the East Sussex Highways website, or Fix my Street App.

As part of the Highway Stewards' routine inspections they can call for "advisory" patches and make "observations" about highway condition. "Advisory" patches can be used when a Steward marks up for repair a pothole that meets the Council's intervention criteria, but notes adjacent potholes or poor carriageway condition that don't meet the criteria. In these situations the Stewards can call for a patch repair up to five square metres in size to address those bits that don't meet pothole intervention levels. These requests are handled by the Council team who review these requests quickly and instruct Balfour Beatty to carry out the necessary repair.

Stewards can also make "Observations" about the condition of a road or stretch of road when going about their inspections, and recommend larger scale patches that can be up to 100 - 200 square metres in size. These Steward recommendations are reviewed by the Council's Asset Management Team who consider these requests alongside other planned patching, surface dressing and resurfacing schemes. Both advisory patches and Steward observations, along with our own engineers' planned patch repairs, are funded from an annual patching budget of circa £1.5m plus the additional one-off funding of £2.5m that Cabinet and Full Council agreed last summer.

Whilst most pothole repairs can be carried out without a road closure using simple traffic management, patch repairs including many advisories usually require a road closure and therefore a necessary temporary traffic regulation order. Unless the work is an emergency, a road closure requires 12 weeks' notice and hence there is a delay between a pothole being

repaired (within 28 days) and the patch repair requiring a 12 week notice.

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There is understandably deep frustration from all 50 county councillors at the state of our highways, though most other counties have the same issues. I have raised many specific issues with Highways and will keep pushing for this.

We had an update briefing from Highways on 21st February with the following key points, some of which repeat information in the italic email quoted above:

- In response to the current number of potholes there are now 30 repair gangs plus 10 traffic management gangs
- Pothole intervention levels start at an area of 30cm by 30cm and at least 40mm deep. Potholes which do not meet this can only be fixed by request from the highways steward (or requests via them). Ones in intervention are included in our fixed price BB contract. Other ones come out of ESCC budgets.
- Stewards can also raise Advisories and Observations, for example to repair a broader group of potholes, some of which may not meet intervention criteria.
- The contract with Balfour Beatty requires that permanent repairs to potholes extend 30cm in each direction beyond the pothole. At the moment we think that a significant number of repairs are not being done in this way. This is being urgently addressed.
- BB are required to take before and after photos. A sample are also inspected by ESCC staff both on the desktop (i.e. from the photos) and in person. At the moment the failure rate of this is 30% which is way too high. This is being addressed. Re-repairs have to be done by BB at no extra cost.
- BB have three Velocity patching machines which use jetting to fix potholes (similar to the JCB ones about which there has been a lot of publicity). These are normally only used through the summer though one is now being brought into use sooner.

I met with our steward (for all areas except Robertsbridge) on 22nd February and we went through all areas needed significant work. We checked on his electronic system and all ones of which I am aware were there. The top one is clearly Junction Road which is acknowledged to be in a dreadful state where there is major work needed all the way from the Curlew to near Sedlescombe. I am assured this will happen in the very near future. This includes pothole repairs but there are also investigations needed involving drilling test boreholes, particularly North of the Rother bridges.

[Note – since this report I have had multiple conversations with the Highways Steward responsible for Robertsbridge]