

Report from Councillor Teresa Killeen (MBE) to Salehurst and Robertsbridge parish council:

Rother District Council - highlights and key issues – 2023/24

January 2023

The Council started the new year by urging residents and businesses to take part in a budget consultation, as the authority continued to face increasing demands on its finances.

A new requirement for voters to show photo ID when they vote was highlighted. Residents were warned the new rule would apply for the first time in the May 2023 local elections.

January ended with some fantastic news, as the authority was told it had been awarded over £19 million for community, creativity, and skills in Bexhill. The investment, from the Government's Levelling Up Fund would be used to support two major projects at the De La Warr Pavilion and in Sidley.

February

This month the authority highlighted its work to keep the district tidy with the removal of unsightly graffiti at several sites, and by encouraging smokers to dispose of cigarette butts in the right way. The Council also promoted its green credentials with the launch of a new energy improvement project for village and community halls across the district.

Cabinet met at the end of the month to agree items including community grants of more than £40,000 for groups in Battle, Burwash, Icklesham and Staplecross, the extension of a contract for Citizens Advice with £85,000 of additional funding, and progress being made on the Council's Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy.

March

In March, the Council launched a special £10,000 grant for community groups looking to celebrate the Kings Coronation in May. Further good news was confirmation the district had been chosen as one of 20 new Levelling Up Partnership areas and would benefit from a share of the £400m UK fund.

This month also saw the authority addressing some difficult issues. The Council continued its negotiations on the devolvement of public conveniences to town and parish councils and issued a joint statement with East Sussex County Council on the Government's proposed plan to use the Northeys site as a centre for people seeking asylum.

April

The forthcoming May elections took centre stage with another step in the process ahead of residents going to the polls. The authority published its 'Statement of Persons Nominated for the District & Parish Elections' online allowing people to check those standing in each ward.

It was another example of the work of the authority promoting the elections which has included the election timetable, including deadlines for registering to vote and voting by post, plus Photo ID needed in polling stations, and the LGA debate note hate campaign.

The Council also kicked off its annual work to promote safety, protection of the environment, and respect for local communities at Camber and along the rest of the district's coast.

May

The District Council and Parish Council elections took place on Thursday 4 May and results were announced at the election count held at the De La Warr Pavilion on Friday 5 May. On the day of the count, the Council published results as they came in on its website and on social media.

Later on in May, the Council highlighted its work to promote equality and diversity with the raising of the Progressive Pride Flag at the Town Hall in Bexhill. The Flag marks International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia.

June

In June, the issue of public open spaces was on the agenda. The Council launched a consultation on proposed changes to dog controls in public spaces, and highlighted the need for budget savings with proposals to change grounds maintenance.

The issue of Northeye again came up this month, with Council Leader Doug Oliver releasing a statement to confirm that the Government had changed its plans and would not be opening the proposed centre in September 2023 but the plans remain on the table.

The Council's Cabinet met and approved items including continuing with the enforcement of certain environmental offences - such as dog-fouling and littering. Cabinet also confirmed the Council's Net Zero pledge and its membership of UK100 – a network of UK local authorities who have pledged to reach Net Zero by 2030.

July

The Council helped to celebrate the completion of 15 new affordable homes for local people in Icklesham. The Council joined Hastoe Housing Association, the Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust, Icklesham Parish Council, Sussex Community Housing Hub and other partners to mark the project.

Other highlights included promoting democracy to school pupils when a group from All Saints School visited the town hall, praising improved bus timetables that will boost the economy, and highlighting Egerton Park in Bexhill - recognised as one of the country's best parks for the eleventh consecutive year.

August

This month the authority announced it had appointed Lorna Ford as its new Chief Executive and welcomed its first cohort of energy champions – volunteers who will train others to reduce their energy bills and save money. August also saw the Council continuing its work to maintain the electoral register by asking residents across the district to check their details and ensure they do not miss out when it comes to voting in local elections.

September

There was good news for people in the Rye area this month with the announcement that Rye Pool was set to reopen in October. The Council and its partners had worked tirelessly to make the facility available again for local people after soaring energy costs forced its closure in 2022.

Community groups and projects in Battle, Bexhill and Winchelsea were among the beneficiaries of the latest round District Council community grants with close to £20,000 being handed out. And a local eyesore in Bexhill got a welcome makeover as National Highways confirmed it had completed the Ravenside roundabout improvements.

October

In October, due to budget savings, the Council introduced a trial closure of public toilets over the winter months in Battle, Bexhill, Pett Level, Sedlescombe and Rye. The Council took the decision as it faced a £3.8 million shortfall in its budget.

At its Cabinet meeting, the authority discussed various issues including the Council Tax Support Fund, cash payments in car parks, dog controls, and CCTV cameras.

The month also saw the authority highlight its work to get people of all ages active and healthy. The Council promoted a national rugby play programme called Rugby tots for pre-school and primary school aged children to take part in rugby-themed activities.

And looking ahead to Bonfire Season, the Council reminded Rother bonfire societies of their responsibility of clearing up litter after their official events.

November

The Council launched a wide-ranging consultation on its budget situation. Using all its communication channels, the authority urged residents and businesses to have their say on how the Council manages its finances, as Government budget cuts, soaring costs and extra demand for services create a £3.8m funding gap.

Towards the end of the month, the Council started its annual 'Love Local' campaign, urging people to shop and eat locally in the run up to Christmas. The campaign, which includes input from businesses themselves was boosted with the announcement that once again free parking would be available on set days in council-run car parks during the festive period.

December

The last month of the year saw continued activity on Rother's budget consultation and Love Local campaigns, and at a Cabinet meeting councillors discussed the Council's Climate Strategy and how its aims would be implemented over the coming months and years. At the same meeting, cabinet members were told that the authority had received £76,000 from DEFRA's Coronation Living Heritage Fund, for tree planting, community orchards and biodiversity work across the district.

January 2024

January saw the announcement of a new £300,000 rural business grant for Rother - offering match-funded grants of up to £50,000 to help create jobs, increase productivity and adopt new technology. The month also saw the opening of five revamped tennis courts at Egerton Park in Bexhill, and the Council hosting a housing event at Manor Barn in Bexhill with 80 delegates from councils, developers, consultants and housing providers.

The Council also formerly launched its Climate Action Strategy and received confirmation that it was a member of UK100 – a network of local authorities who have committed to taking ambitious climate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This month the council completed its budget consultation and announced it had received over 700 responses from residents, groups and businesses.

A very busy start to 2024 was completed with the Council welcoming the official start of work on a new NHS mental health hospital at Mount View Street in Bexhill.

February

The month started with an announcement that the Council had added more services to its My Rother online offer – allowing residents and businesses to save time by accessing council tax and housing benefit information online. February also saw the announcement that the Peasmarsh Neighbourhood Development Plan referendum would be held on the 29th of that month.

February saw the Council set its budget with £15m planned to be spent on services in 2024/25. Despite years of funding cuts, soaring costs, and greater demand for services, the Council announced that it would be able to balance its books by using some of its limited reserves, identifying efficiency savings and maximising income from investments, fees and charges. The authority said residents will also be asked to pay an additional 2.99 per cent on their council tax – the equivalent to an extra £5.94 a year for a Band D property.

March

In March the Council gave its backing to Empty Homes Week – a national initiative aimed at bringing empty properties back into use for housing, agreed to hold two consultations on the local Plan and an Anti-Social Behaviour Order for its beaches, and highlighted the latest round of its community grants programme which provided over £66,000 to six local projects at Little Gate Farm, Bexhill Family Collective, Bexhill Heritage, Crowhurst Parish Council, Icklesham Parish Council, and Three Oakes Village Hall.

March also saw some fantastic news with Government confirmation that Rother would be one of only two areas in the south east to be given Levelling Up Partnership status and that it would receive close to £19m in funding for regeneration and community projects across the district, and the Council also announced a new Coronation Community Orchard grant scheme, providing grants ranging from £500 to £5000 to help create green spaces and connect communities with nature.

April

So far this month, the Council has taken part in English Tourism Week, helping to promote the tourism industry with leading Cllrs touring some of the most popular attractions across Rother – celebrating 1066 Country as a quality visitor destination.

The authority has also started to celebrate its 50th anniversary, taking the opportunity to highlight its service to residents and businesses since it was formed in 1974.

And at its Cabinet meeting this month, the Council discussed the Long-Term Plan for Towns initiative for Bexhill that will see £19.5m over ten years from the Government - backed up by a further £14.9m from the Council's capital programme – spent on community and improvement projects.