

Salehurst and Robertsbridge Parish Assembly

April 2026

Report from District Councillor Susan Prochak (MBE)

Council Tax: In February Rother Council unanimously agreed the budget for 2026/27. The proposal was for a 2.99% increase making the baseline charge on a Band D property £216.95 before the Parish, Police, Fire and Rescue and East Sussex County Council add their elements making a total of for Band D £2,737.33. Our Parish Precept is £377.64.

	2026/27 £	Increase %
Rother District Council	216.95	2.99%
East Sussex County Council	1,960.29	4.99%
East Sussex Fire & Rescue	117.49	4.44%
Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner	281.91	5.62%
Sub total	2,576.64	4.87%
Parish & Town average across Rother	124.31	19.32%
Total	2,700.95	5.45%

Unlike recent years, the budget does not include drawing down reserves to bridge any shortfall. This has been the result of identifying saving over the year with officers and members closely involved in the process. The reserves which ideally should be £5 million are at £2.5 million, but it is expected the savings should deliver £443,000 into the reserves at the end of the financial year.

Local Government Reorganisation: This is the biggest change to local government for over 50 years with the disappearance of all districts and boroughs across East Sussex. Sussex councils have been told that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has not made a decision on their proposals for local government reorganisation but wants to make its own modifications to them, causing most to protest vehemently. A technical consultation looms. The ministry's news was communicated when Parliament was about to go into recess and local councils into pre-election purdah.

Six months after councils submitted their proposals for new unitary authorities, the Secretary of State, Steve Reed has told them that: he has "significant concerns about keeping Brighton and Hove on its current footprint". This was the proposal of East Sussex County Council, Hastings, Eastbourne, Lewes and Rother.

On Brighton & Hove City Council's proposal for five unitaries across Sussex, Reed wrote in an update on 25 March that he was concerned about the cost it would involve and the "disaggregation risks" it would entail – though he offered no explanation of what these might be.

Instead he offered his own suggestions including expansion of the Brighton & Hove unitary to include parts of Lewes – East Saltdean & Telscombe Cliffs, Peavehaven West, East and North and Falmer Parish – on which he plans to hold a six-week technical consultation with policy officials and other experts after the local elections in May. In two public consultations.

A map accompanying his letter was reissued on 27 March. Sussex would have four unitary authorities, under this proposal as follows:

Unitary A: Eastbourne, Hastings, Rother, Wealden and remaining parts of Lewes (population around 537,000)

Unitary B: Arun, Adur, Worthing (around 349,000)

Unitary C: Brighton, East Saltdean & Telscombe Cliffs, Peacehaven West, East and North, Falmer Parish (around 308,000)

Unitary D: Crawley, Chichester, Horsham, Mid Sussex (around 566,000).

Despite the delay, the ministry was still committed to holding elections to the new unitaries in May 2027 and implementing the reorganisation in April 2028.

Transfer of assets: Meanwhile, work is ongoing with Rother preparing to transfer 71 of their 171 assets to parish or town councils. The principle is that assets such as toilets and recreation spaces would be protected under the local parish and town councils once the new Unitary Authority is in place.

The Government have instructed Councils about to be abolished they are not to transfer fund raising assets, such as car parks.

Our Parish have for many years run the Station Road car park and toilets under a long-term lease from Rother. That is now transferring to freehold as well as the piece of land in Heathfield Gardens and Bishops Meadow.

Relationship between the new Unitary Authority and Parish and Town Councils: One of the known factors is that with Districts and Boroughs disappearing there will be a loss of local knowledge and potential for communication failure with such an enormous single authority. In fact this was the main concern when the proposals were out for consultation.

Rother Association of Local Councils under their new Chair and Vice Chair have taken on this challenge and have set up a working party to gather information from existing unitaries and to agree a proposal which, acting as a template across the new authority will then be passed on for them to implement if agreed. Our CE, Lorna Ford already chairs the Leaders Group of the existing councils, so is in a good position to support the implementation of this work.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF): Consultation on the revised NPPF recently closed on 23 February and the Government intend to bring in the new measures

on 1 May. There are some changes which are improvements to make the planning process less unwieldy. However, the main thrust of the changes is to centralise the power within the system, to tip the balance in favour of major developers and landowners and to reduce local democratic influence.

The over-riding principal is that all planning should be decided by officers with only exceptional developments to be decided by committee. An example of such changes is that members will no longer be able to call in an application for consideration by the planning committee. Members of the public and the local town and parish councils would no longer be allowed to speak at planning meetings. We were proud to introduce this change. Other measures are that officers will be required to decide on all household developments, minor commercial development and minor residential development. The definition of minor is 9 homes. Clearly this wouldn't be considered minor in a small hamlet or village. Any development having a decision in principle in a pre-application, would be dealt with by officers.

The Government have not understood that it is not the planning process which holds up development, but the build out of land with permission and that is outside the control of local authorities. Only half the homes with planning permission since 2012/13 have been built. 1.4 million have planning consent!

Rother's Draft Local Plan

The latest list of potential housing development sites in the draft Local Plan did not throw up any great shocks for Robertsbridge, following on from the work to create the Salehurst and Robertsbridge Neighbourhood Plan (SRNP) approved in 2018.

However, the proposals as far as Robertsbridge are concerned need to be set in the context of first the Government's requirements for the Rother Local Plan and second the reasons why Rother finds it difficult to meet any nationally imposed targets.

First is the failure in the recent past of Rother's meeting Government targets for house building. The Government has set housebuilding targets for many years now, and Rother has never achieved them. In 2014, Rother had a target of 335 homes a year to be built in Rother. On average, since that time, 215 homes have been built. The Government's latest target for Rother is 912 homes per year to be built. Achieving that target is clearly impossible based on past performance.

Second, the major reason why Rother has not been able to meet the target set by the Government is simply because Rother is a district blessed by having in Sussex at least, the greatest proportion of protected landscape, nearly 90%, by virtue of the High Weald National Landscape, several Special Areas of Conservation and a Ramsar site. That has the obvious effect of reducing the area on which most development can take place.

That is also why the majority of new housing proposed in the new draft Local Plan is in Bexhill.

The sites indicated as possible development opportunities for Robertsbridge were as follows:

RB1 Inclusion of and extension southwards of the site known as **Heathfield Gardens EAST and West** in the SRNP. This would increase the number of possible dwellings from 40 to **65**, with an increase in public open space and woodland preservation.

RB2 **Grove Farm Phase 1** was already identified in the SRNP and now has planning permission for **32** dwellings including the restoration of a listed barn.

RB3 **Grove Farm Phase 2** was considered in the SRNP and garnered consistently the least public support of any site proposed. **70** dwellings are now suggested which with the 32 for Phase 1 looks like over-development on a very difficult undulating topography, increasing the possibility of flooding off site.

RB4 **Vicarage site** was identified in the SRNP for **6 to 10** dwellings and a planning application is currently with Rother. Because of its sensitive context amongst listed buildings, the character of the development needs to be of exceptional quality.

RB5 **Adjacent Culverwells** site for **21** dwellings was already identified before the SRNP so was not included except in the final questionnaire to the whole village. A permission was approved in 2024 and is hoped to start with the new Health Centre and housing later this year.

There have been years of delay as the NHS could not agree on the rental value of the medical centre. Our MP was lobbied and as a result he asked questions in Parliament which unlocked the problem. The medical centre will have six consulting rooms, five community health rooms and 20 car parking spaces.

Rother have set aside £1.2 million towards this project.

RB6a **Mill Site** was identified in the SRNP and a now expired permission was granted in 2017 for **96** dwellings and some commercial space as well as the restoration of the Mill building and a listed oast building. Now the site has been purchased by Homes England, a Government development agency, preliminary planning discussions are continuing with an outline planning application expected this spring.

RB6b **Adjoining Mill Site** was considered in the SRNP and could according to officers take up to **50** new dwellings, More sensitive than the Mill Site because of its height relative to neighbouring development in Northbridge Street, its addition would make the provision of affordable housing more possible.

In conclusion, there were no real surprises in the sites suggested by officers after the call for sites, as the sites were either already allocated in the SRNP, now permitted or

extensions to SRNP sites. The total of houses for Robertsbridge parish proposed in the draft Plan, if agreed, would now be 344, an addition of 147 to the 180 suggested in the SRNP.

The table below shows how sites were regarded at surveys of public opinion, taken during the SRNP information gathering process, one in 2015 where the sample at an exhibition was 185, and the other from a questionnaire delivered to all households in 2017, where 67% of households in the parish replied (a total number of 963 questionnaires returned – an astonishingly high response).

The figures for Bishops Lane site (41 homes) recently gone to appeal are also included.

Site name	July 2015 Exhibition		September 2015 Questionnaire	
	Percent approval	Position on list out of 12	Percent approval	Position on list out of 13
RB1	70	3	55	7
RB2	54	6	37	11
RB3	42	12	30	13
RB4	45	9	55	8
RB5	Not included		75	4
RB6a	97	1	92	1
RB6b	67	4	81	2
Bishops Lane	44	10	34	12

NB The site which came 2nd or 3rd on these surveys, known as Countrycrafts on George Hill has already been built. Other sites in the surveys which were smaller sites, were not taken any further then and now.

Planning Enforcement: This area of Rother’s work has always attracted criticism as it is a cumbersome process and takes far too long. Our new Head of Planning Mike Hughes has managed to get agreed funding and to recruit another enforcement officer. When he took over, the backlog of cases was at 140. It is now down to 95 and the aim is to reduce this to 50 withing a month.

Relying on residents to report breaches, I was pleased with the immediate action taken on the sites on Beech House Lane which has a long history of requiring enforcement.

Waste management and street cleansing: Rother, Hastings and Wealden Councils have a joint waste contract with Biffa who continue to provide a very good service with few complaints. This service represents significant budget pressure for the Council.

Contract costs amounted to c.£5.9m in 2024/25, rising to c. £6.5m in 2025/26 and forecast to reach £7.58m in 2026/27. Additionally, the introduction of the new food waste service in Rother has increased costs by c.£1m for 2026/27.

All councils have been required to offer weekly food collections and around 25% of councils haven't managed to do this by April. Food waste makes up an average of 30% of household bin and can easily be recycled.

Temporary accommodation: The council has a duty to provide emergency/temporary accommodation (TA) for homeless households whilst assessing their case and/or ahead of securing more permanent accommodation. This pressure has been increasing over recent years across the country but particularly in the south east where increasing demand is putting significant pressure on budgets. Whilst some of the costs of this accommodation are covered by housing benefit there remains a significant cost borne by the Council directly. We have reduced the costs considerably by providing our own accommodation. At present we have 54 properties used as temporary accommodation.

In January this year, we have 249 people in temporary accommodation. 159 of those are with children. We have 1,450 on our housing register.

Community Grants: Rother have transferred the administration of their community grant scheme to Sussex Community Foundation. Nearly £100,000 of funding has been given to 15 grass roots projects across Rother. Community Groups, town and parish councils are eligible to apply. Eligible groups can apply for up to £10,000 for general projects and £20,000 for buildings.

The scheme is funded in part by Rother Community Lottery which has contributed nearly £50,000 between 2021 and 2025. A number of Robertsbridge community groups benefit from regular subscribers to the lottery.

Another available funding pot is for community orchards. Our village hall has benefitted from their successful application. The Village Hall took advantage of the first round of funding and with volunteers and local businesses have planted 11 fruit and nut trees in their community orchard.

Climate Emergency: Last year Rother was listed as the most improved district council for its efforts to tackle climate change. Climate Emergency UK assesses all councils on the actions they have taken. We were rated ninth out of 51 district councils. Rother councillors agreed an ambitious target to become a carbon neutral organisation by 2030 – 20 years ahead of the national target. Officers and members have worked across the council to introduce measures which have contributed to supporting our ambitious target, such as ring fencing some grants and a proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy for projects that address climate change or environmental issues.

Every committee decision considers carbon emissions and environmental impacts. There is a Green Team of officers in all Departments to take forward initiatives.

Outside Agencies: With Parish Councillors, I have been working with various outside bodies. **Rother Voluntary Action** has appointed a rural worker, Lesley Lambeth whose brief is to work in the communities of Etchingham, Battle and Robertsbridge to identify their strengths and whether there are any gaps. Lesley has really applied herself to getting to know Robertsbridge and its various communities.

Another group is the **1066 Community Rail Partnership** which is very proactive in projects linking stations on our line, providing funding for projects all to encourage rail travel. Our brilliant Station Master, Ross is very much involved in supporting the many ideas and projects.

Our Parish Council have kindly agreed to donate £300 towards a group from Friary Gardens to come on the train to Robertsbridge to plant up the station planters with plants grown themselves.

A third group is **Sussex Outreach Support (SOS)** which is a Community Interest Company working in rural Wealden and Rother. This is spearheaded by the indomitable Sarah Jaques who is a GP and Catsfield Parish Councillor. As a GP she noticed how many people didn't access services they needed either because they didn't know about them or didn't know how to access them. Through satellite hubs and a mobile outreach unit, the plan is to bring together statutory, voluntary and community partners. SOS have had funding to purchase and convert a mobile unit suitable for many purposes.

Based on a successful trial at Etchingham Station, Sarah organised a youth event of free pizza and activities for young people using the youth centre. It was an enormous success, absolutely buzzing, a roaring success and a demand for more. Youth work is definitely a gap in Robertsbridge since the County withdrew its funding.