

# SALEHURST & ROBERTSBRIDGE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

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**MINUTES of the Annual Parish Meeting (Assembly) for Salehurst & Robertsbridge, held Monday 14th APRIL 2025, 7.30pm, Robertsbridge Hall, Station Road**

**Presiding:** Cllr Nick Brown, Chairman of the Parish Council.

**Present:**      **Electors:** 73                      **Press:** None

**Parish Council** Cllr Natalie Bishop; Cllr Louise Britten; Cllr Nick Brown; Cllr Fran Dulley; Cllr Mark Hamilton; Cllr Simon Longhurst; Cllr Sean O'Hara; Cllr Paul Pitman; Cllr David Todd; Karen Ripley, Clerk; Gill Colquhoun, Asst. Clerk.

**Rother District Council:** Cllr Sue Prochak

**East Sussex County Council:** Cllr Paul Redstone

**Doors were opened to the public at 7pm** with opportunity to mingle, view local groups tables etc. The following groups and organisations had tables or displays:

*The Villager (Editorial Team); Robertsbridge W.I.; Robertsbridge Wine Club; Robertsbridge Archaeological Society; Robertsbridge Scouts; Helping Hands; Robertsbridge Arts Partnership; Parish Environment Group; Robertsbridge & Brightling Repair Café; Monday Lunch Club; Oldwood Surgery PPG; St Marys Church/Friends of St Marys Church; Rother Valley Railway, Bonfire Society*

- 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS** - the Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. He was pleased to report that the Parish Council has a Full Council of nine members and asked Councillors to stand up to introduce themselves to the audience.
- 2. A MAYOR FOR SUSSEX? DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION PLANS FOR SUSSEX**  
A TALK BY CLLR PAUL REDSTONE, ESCC FOLLOWED BY QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Cllr Redstone explained that he would speak non-politically about devolution: a mayor for Sussex undertaking a strategic role, linked to local government reorganisation with two tier County and District/ Borough Councils being reorganised into a single unitary authority (see his published report for the meeting). It is a fast-changing situation. On 16<sup>th</sup> December 2024 a Devolution white paper was published with a tight timetable. This white paper covers 2 separate but linked areas: local government reorganisation and the election of a mayor for Sussex. On 10<sup>th</sup> January Councils had been invited to put their names forward to be considered to 1.become unitary authorities, 2 to have mayors. ESCC felt it had no choice in long term and applied to become a unitary authority. On 5th February ESCC, WSCC and Brighton all given go ahead to become unitary authorities. On 21<sup>st</sup> March there was a more detailed proposal with a consultation following on mayoral proposal. There are 5 months to prepare a detailed plan for Sussex, and the Government will then make a decision. ESCC elections for May 2025 were cancelled; there will be elections for a mayor in 2026 and for unitary authority in 2027 (there are likely to be 2 Councillors for each division so we would have 2 representatives in the new unitary authority, rather than one county and one district

representative. Almost all staff to be transferred across in East Sussex. Mayoral strategic authority will be a directly elected mayor with responsibilities for specific strategic areas including planning, with a 'cabinet' of 7, and others. It is devolution because mayor and cabinet will decide where money goes.

Issues and challenges include 1.A tight timescale. 2.The geography is a challenge (not balanced numbers across the 3 unitary areas). 3.Council tax equalisation (district and borough vary). There has been a suggestion to vary number of councillors in each division.

### Questions

Q. Local briefing sessions should be made available for local electorate.

A. There was no formal promise on consultation.

Q. A change like this is driven by ideology or economics, what is the point? A means of increasing revenue from domestic properties?

A. This is a very good point, there is some element of ideology. East Sussex did not want to be part of it.

Q. Why did you think it was in the interest of East Sussex when need to balance disparate parts of Sussex – what do they have in common? Why did you vote about it?

A. Government made it clear this will be first chance – there will be no choice. Decision made at top by Chief Executive of ESCC. (Cllr Prochak highlighted that Rother DC told the vote would be meaningless for the district council).

Q. Why not elect a new Council and then that Council decide what to do?

A. We did not have the time.

Q. If most of the Councillors are not in favour why have our elected Councillors not suggested we protest?

A. It was going to be inevitable.

Q. I am interested in how planning will work out in unitary authority.

A. Good question. There will be strategic planning by the Mayor and their department. Potential for planning regions. (Cllr Prochak added that the government could remove as many decisions from local selected members and reduce the number of Councillors on any planning committee. At the moment 90 +% of planning applications are approved by officers, only large or contentious applications are decided by Rother planning committee. Rother has been told to continue with reviewing local plan with compulsory targets for the number of houses built. In her view Rother will not build number of houses needed with this reorganisation).

Q. Whilst I am opposed democratically, we will have fewer representatives, Town and Parish councils could get more power and finance if they wish in this reorganisation. Eastbourne and Hastings will be replaced.

A. We await a new white paper which could give more power to town and parish councils.

Q. Don't volunteer to be a guinea pig because it will cost more. Where was the challenge for the Leader to decide?

A. Letters submitted on 10<sup>th</sup> January.

The Chairman informed the meeting that the PC did respond to the associated public questionnaires – the PC had highlighted that it had major concerns / reservations, and there was inevitable clash between different areas. The reorganisation needed to be managed very carefully.

### **3. SALEHURST CHURCH UPDATE**

Stuart Thompson, churchwarden at Salehurst Church provided an update. The Community relies on the Church for major life events, for 800 years it has been an important community asset. Rev Annette Hawkins sadly died in November, leaving the PCC with the stark choice to carry on without a vicar or amalgamate with a number of other parishes unless the local community can generate more funds for its own vicar. The Diocese is keen to help the Parish to appoint a vicar for Salehurst but cannot consider it unless the local community substantially increases its share of costs to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the costs of the vicar (equivalent to £10 every adult in the Parish). The PCC has exciting plans to reorder(reorganise) the church which will make it more attractive. He asked everyone present to ask themselves what role they will play in this challenge. In particular they need help with IT skills in communicating this message; help with Villager editorial layout to replace John Howell and a duty church warden to replace Elspeth Howell. One of the most popular misconceptions is that the local church gets money back from Diocese which it does not. Improvements are paid by grants, the community and individuals.

Q. A resident encouraged others to make regular contributions to the Church.

### **4. ROBERTSBRIDGE 800 UPDATE**

Simon Longhurst spoke about this one-off free event, organised by the Parish Council, which is taking place on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2025 to celebrate 800 years of Robertsbridge. Its purpose is to provide fun and entertainment for all ages, to promote local businesses and local clubs and organisations, and to educate residents and visitors about local history and attract new businesses and visitors. 57 pitches have been booked with events throughout the afternoon and evening. A R800 website has been created [www.rbr800.fun](http://www.rbr800.fun) with thanks to John Shuttleworth. New posters are being produced. More helpers are needed, please contact [simon.longhurst@salehurst-pc.org.uk](mailto:simon.longhurst@salehurst-pc.org.uk)

***Break for refreshments, mingling, time to meet local groups  
and talk informally with electors / local elected Councillors.***

- 5. MINUTES OF THE PARISH MEETING 15 APRIL 2024 –THE CHAIRMAN** signed the Minutes of the last APM held on 15 April 2024 (on the website).
- 6. REPORT AND ANY NOTICES & INFORMATION FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PARISH COUNCIL NICK BROWN**  
Cllr Nick Brown gave a short review of Council projects in the past year 1. Completed transfer to new Led street lighting with reduced costs and environmental benefit, thanks to Sean O’Hara for initiating the project and to David Todd for managing the finances; he had calculated that if we had not changed the lighting we would be paying 3.5 times as much and using 45 times as much electricity 2. Upgraded the Recreation Ground car park hand in hand with refurbishing the play area. 3. Three new defibrillator cabinets with batteries and pads. 4. Station Road toilet maintenance. 5. Station Road car park continues to be non-charging, and the PC have no intention to change this. Use of the car park is self-policed. 5. The PC contributed to a project to improve safety at Knelle Road/Langham Road junction with drop kerbs and yellow lining (which is now enforceable).

The Parish Council has given money to local and broader organisations this year including Robertsbridge Scouts; REG (Christmas Capers); PCC for Christmas Tree festival; St Michaels Hospice (for Darvel winding up the Memorial Clock); Robertsbridge Community Bench (Community orchard); Defib contribution for Upper Langham; Community rail group for station planters; Kent & Sussex Air Ambulance. If you have a deserving cause, it is worth asking.

Homes England had provided an update statement on Hodson’s Mill which will be added to the Parish Council website. It remains the largest brownfield site in Rother, with application approval in 2021 now not viable and a change of ownership. Homes England purchased the site in March 2024 and provided the first stage of public consultation in November 2024. They have completed a lot of technical work and have been looking at flood risk modelling and emergency access on the north side off the A21 layby, together with an arboricultural survey. They recognise the heritage significance of the Mill building and barn. It is taking time but Homes England have been good at feeding back to the Parish Council. Homes England does not need to make a profit and can break even across all their sites i.e. an individual site does not need to break even.

- 7. REPORT FROM DISTRICT COUNCILLOR SUE PROCHAK** - Sue thanked all the volunteers who make Robertsbridge a great place to live. She expressed her gratitude to her husband, the NHS, her RDC colleagues and to the PC for their kindness and support. Rother is run by an alliance of Liberal Democrats, Labour, Independents and 2 Greens. They have worked very hard on the budget. She highlighted the following in her report (available on the Parish website) 1. RDC are very aware of the role of PCs and Town Councils, and working hard on what they want to do in the proposed local government reorganisation. There is a possibility, particularly in Bexhill, for services and contracts to be handed over to Councils. We already do a lot in Robertsbridge but there is the possibility for the PC to take on a parcel of RDC land in Heathfield Gardens and to look at the lease on Bishops Meadow. A new officer has been appointed to support PCs who wish to register any interest and a property and investment panel has been set up for transfer by Oct 26 2. New NPPF has kept the importance of the High Weald AONB (Landscape). 80% of Rother is AONB which makes

housing target impossible. Target increased to 932, but on average 250 a year. Reassured that Mill site will include affordable housing. New local plan being developed. 3. Sites for Robertsbridge are contentious in that nothing has been done. 178 houses at time of NP. Now extras in Bishops Lane, George Hill and Heathfield Gardens. The medical centre is ready to go, with 16 homes. Waiting for ecological surveys. Costs have gone up and Rother had put aside 1.1 million to help with costs but NHS have said rent will come off. If a decision is made with MPs involvement the project will start in December. 4. Biffa a good contractor for waste and recycling. 5.Grants available – Rother lottery now includes Helping Hands as a new member. Rothe Rural Trust is a special trust with small amounts given to individuals and communities. If you know someone who needs it please contact.

**REPORT FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR PAUL REDSTONE** – Cllr Redstone highlighted the following points in his report (available on the PC website) 1. Budget – required to set a balanced budget – 25/26 £538 million excluding schools, only balanced by using £11 million reserves, which is not sustainable. Well run County but had to make cuts to non statutory services. 2.Potholes – not enough money to get roads right, so apologies for condition of the roads. Station Road /Brightling Road is an exception.

**NOTICES** - The Clerk read out a few notices:

- 1.Station Road – flood exercise tomorrow 15 April 2025 from 9.30am.
2. Flood Awareness Day at Village Hall Saturday 17 May 2025 10am-1pm
3. St Marys Church Spring Fair 10<sup>th</sup> May at Village Hall
4. VE Day and VJ Day 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary flag ceremony at war memorial 11am; event at The Stage Field, Silverhill in evening
5. Opening of community orchard Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> May am
6. Robertsbridge Bonfire Society Annual 10K run Friday 20<sup>th</sup> May
7. Robertsbridge 800 Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June from 12 noon.

Nick Moor highlighted that RBL are aiming to raise the poppy appeal this year to over 5K. They will be joining in Robertsbridge 800 and have VE Day pins to sell.

**8. QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR FOR THE PARISH, DISTRICT AND COUNTY COUNCILLORS**

There were no questions. The Chairman reminded those present that the Parish office was open Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. The WI and Wine Club were thanked for the refreshments and local organisations thanked for attending.

**Meeting closed: 21:08pm.**

**Chairman.....**

**Date.....**