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## Report to Parish Councils – December 2021

This report is written in late December and is for Parish Councils meeting in January. It is for all 7 parishes in Northern Rother

December is a slightly slower month in terms of meetings at decisions at county, but there were some which affect Northern Rother.

### Budgeting

At this time of year we are beginning the budgeting process for next fiscal year (i.e. from April 2022). A key part of this is the 'settlement' in which the 'Ministry for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC)' (as the government department responsible for local government is now called) sets out how much money from central sources will be available to local government. There was an announcement on the 16<sup>th</sup> December, even later than normal, and the impact on this for ESCC is being assessed. I will report in more detail on this over the next few months, particularly as the overall spending patterns come through, but here are some headlines:

- The increase in national insurance will be a significant burden, particularly for services such as care for the elderly and children where costs are dominated by staff costs. There are several increases in central grants such as the Services Grant and the Social Care Grant which should help. There is also a 'Market Sustainability and Fair Cost of

Care Fund' which is intended to allow councils to pay fair costs for social care staff which will help with recruitment and retention.

- Council tax referendum limits are confirmed at 2% (or £5 for district councils and fire authorities where this is more than 2%). No limits are set for town and parish councils. At a time when household budgets are under particular strain, keeping council tax increases to the minimum is a key priority.
- The settlement is for a single year only as there are to be consultations on funding reform over the next year. This makes medium term financial planning a little challenging though the underlying rationale is understandable.
- We still await details of a number of areas of special grants including for supported families, disadvantaged children, highways and SEND capital distributions and the new support for cyber security, all of which will affect our overall budget.

In summary watch this space!

### **Pavements and Weeds**

There has been a lot of debate about the best ways of dealing with weeds, with particular emphasis on the use of glyphosate. After detailed consideration of alternatives a decision was taken to safely use a glyphosate-based herbicide until a suitable alternative becomes available and we will work with neighbouring authorities to continue exploring alternative options.

Compared to towns such as Bexhill which has huge number of pavements, this has relatively little impact, but it is a factor in our villages. Weeds are a significant hazard, particularly for the elderly or infirm. I would be pleased to receive views from anyone in Northern Rother.

### **Highways and Customer Service**

There has been much discussion on this and on multiple occasions I have raised the issue of poor customer service and responsiveness from highways. We have to accept that resources are limited, even with the recent one-off £5M extra funding, but nevertheless poor communication exacerbates this. This seems to have been taken on board by highways (which is subcontracted by ESCC to the Costain CH2M consortium). We now have a new customer service manager, Deborah Dodge responsible for the East of the county, working with our highway steward. Early signs are that communication and coordination is improving.

As a reminder I always suggest that issues are raised on the highways portal at <https://www.eastsussexhighways.com/report-a-problem> This will generate a case number and you will be kept up to date. Let me know the case number as well which allows me to 'encourage' highways.

## Cases

Each month I will give summaries/updates for a sample of current cases across Northern Rother. I currently have about 12 which are being progressed.

- **Flooding in Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge.** This continues to be a top issue with Huw Merriman's office dealing with National Highways, me dealing with Highways East Sussex and Councillor Sue Prochak dealing with Rother district council. There is some small progress – for example Highways East Sussex have raised a drop kerb which was enabling relatively small amounts of rain to go into some back gardens, but the main response needs to come from National Highways. More interim measures have been taken – for example there are now sandbags down one side of the A21 to help prevent water from land coming across the carriageway, into the layby and then to Northbridge Street. Immense pressure is being put on National Highways by Huw's office. One challenge is assessing if measures are working given that flooding does not occur every year and seems to depend on a combination of factors. Recent experience has apparently been good.
- **Robertsbridge Youth Centre.** This was closed during the pandemic but is now open. One further delay was caused when Legionnaire's bacterium was discovered in the hot water, requiring disinfection and further tests. This building is in fact owned by a trust for which ESCC is the trustee. Currently the fees from usage of the building just about cover day-to-day running costs but not larger maintenance costs. This arrangement is being reviewed to help determine a viable longer-term future for the building.
- **Road marking improvements near Robertsbridge Community College.** This predates my time as councillor but an application for matched funding for new road markings and dropped kerbs has been submitted by Salehurst and Robertsbridge PC. I will be speaking in support of this when it comes up for approval. Several other potential matched funding opportunities are in earlier stages of consideration but often the budgets exceed what parish councils can afford, even at the 50% funding level.