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Report to Parish Councils – August 2022

This report is written in late July and is for Parish Councils meeting in August, though only some PCs hold such meetings. It is for all 7 parishes in Northern Rother.

Some of the items here are from information circulated by ESCC but which may not have drawn the attention of parish councillors and others.

Ukrainian Guests

More than 600 families across East Sussex have welcomed those fleeing the war in Ukraine and 1000 Ukrainians have settled in the county. This has required coordinated work by various ESCC agencies, volunteers and others. You can see details of this at

<https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/community/supporting-refugees/ukraine>

Holiday Activities

The Holiday Food and Fun programme has been expanded. There are now more than 80 providers, almost all local to East Sussex in 140 locations giving up to 27,000 places for children who receive benefits-related free school meals.

More details are available at <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/children-families/childcare/welcome-to-holiday-food-and-fun>

Activities available include arts and crafts, circus skills, musical theatre, sport and fitness, dance, cooking, puppet workshops, a coding workshop, and many more.

Bus Service and Reducing Bus Fares

ESCC has been recently successful in winning about £42M from central government for the 'bus back better' programme, more formally known as the Bus Service Improvement Plan. This money comes with restrictions, and it is not clear yet exactly where it will be deployed. I have been championing the need for some of this to be used to enhance the bus services in the villages of Northern Rother, particularly at evenings and weekends, which could potentially encourage much more use of buses. There are also plans for reduced bus fares, particularly for younger people.

Aside from this, I have been elected chair of the ESCC Long Term Transport Plan 4 reference group which is charged with guiding the work by our officials to produce an integrated transport plan including cars, buses, trains, cycling and walking.

You may also have seen an announcement by Transport for the South East (TfSE) of a 30-year plan for transport across 6 major counties from Hampshire to Kent with a budget of more than £40 billion. Good transport can give real benefits in terms to the economy and jobs, as well as reducing our carbon footprint and working toward net zero. The chairman of TfSE is Keith Glazier, leader of ESCC.

Disruption by Protesters of ESCC Meetings

As you may have seen in the media, a group of climate change protesters have disrupted various ESCC meetings, including Full Council on 12th July and Cabinet on 19th July. In the latter they disrupted proceedings in the Chamber which had to be suspended, then forced the cabinet to take refuge in another room. The protesters are reported to have shouted at, jostled, and intimidated cabinet members and officials. The police and security staff were eventually able to restore order, but only after over 90 minutes.

The ostensible reason for these protests is to get the East Sussex pension fund to divest from fossil fuels. This fund provides pensions for about 82,000 members who work for or previously worked for about 130 employers across the county. I am a member of the pension committee and, like all committee members, strongly believe in addressing climate change. I and my family take many actions to reduce my personal carbon footprint and also donate a lot of my time and money to a climate change charity, though I should disclose that the charity was founded and is run by one of my daughters. I believe that we all need to take action to counter climate change but this needs to be sensible, by persuasion and should not impact the residents of East Sussex more than of other countries.

Those calling for divestment seem not to understand the fiduciary limitations which are rightly placed on local authority pension funds or the fact that emissions in East Sussex are a very small proportion of the global emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gases. They also presume a cause-and-effect relationship between divestment of ownership and promotion of the energy transition for which little evidence is offered. This is not a reason for doing nothing, but some campaigners seem to suggest that climate change is caused by the pension fund! In fact, the pension fund was recently awarded LAPF local government pension fund of the year 2021 and highly commended for its investment approach to climate, a fact which the demonstrators seem conveniently to ignore.

I passionately support the principles of freedom of speech and peaceful protest, but a small

minority of protesters seem to not to believe in the 'peaceful' part of protest. It is a reminder that we need to be ever vigilant to maintain democratic freedoms and stand up to mob rule

Cases

Each month I will give summaries/updates for a sample of current cases across Northern Rother. I currently have about 20 which are being progressed. For ones which have been on this list for some time, this month's updates are shown in italics.

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. (Footnote – not checked but I believe these may no longer be needed as the blocked ditch has apparently been cleared). 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, with no evidence of flooding.

National Highways have completed the surveys though are waiting the detailed report, though the drains do appear to be clear. However, they have found a number of other issues including infilled ditches and pipework which they are addressing. We should have another update shortly.

Update from June. A survey has been carried out. Full results are not yet in but two more possible factors have been identified:

- A ditch from an adjacent parcel of land which connects into the watercourse, and which is heavily silted. Discussions continue with the landowner
- A catch pit just off Northbridge Street which is silted up. Fixing this may also help. Apparently this is up to the 'local authority'. I am establishing if this is ESCC or Rother DC.

Homewood School Bus Service

A number of children from Northiam, Beckley and Peasmarsch apparently attend Homewood school in Tenterden and travel on the 294 service provided by Hams Travel. Hams have said that this will be discontinued at the end of June. I understand that it is a discretionary service and it is also complicated because the school is, of course, in Kent.

I spoke last week to the East Sussex Lead Member for Education who is looking into it, but I think I may need to contact Kent County Council. I have to say I am not hopeful of a satisfactory outcome but this will cause significant expenditure and inconvenience to parents who then have to drive to Tenterden and back twice a day.

I have had discussions with the Principal Transport Officer at ESCC who has been

speaking to the bus company and others. I also understand that Kent County Council have been looking at this and that the bus service will no longer be discontinued. I will await to see confirmation of this, but this is very promising.

Development off the Paddocks, Northiam

I have received multiple correspondence from residents and others about this development, but there are clearly several misconceptions about this, for example the need for a stopping up order. I have had multiple discussions with officials at ESCC and have passed on their comments to residents.

Some key points:

- Planning permission was granted in 2019 and mentioned stopping up orders but county have confirmed that none is required.
- Parking places are being moved not lost. In fact the number of parking places available seem to be more than guidance would require
- One part of a water drainage pipe (sometimes called a sewer though in fact it is not for foul water) is being rerouted. This was put in by a previous developer and the parish council given some funds which are held in a 'sewer account' to be used in case of problems and which I believe now total about £80k. I know of no evidence that the rerouting will cause problems. The sewer account has never been needed. *I understand that the developer has agreed with the Parish Council to fund a survey of the modified route and will await the results of this.*
- There is understandable concern amongst residents about the disruption during the construction process itself. The developer is aware of this and is building a car park for contractors within the site. They are also trying to maintain good communications with residents. ESCC officials are keeping close to this as am I. I would encourage residents to keep me informed of any issues

I understand that there was opposition to this development and sympathise with this, but planning permission was granted and it is going ahead.

Burst Water Pipes Affecting Robertsbridge, Staplecross

This was caused by burst water mains in Flimwell and has affected a number of villages including Robertsbridge, Mountfield, Staplecross and I believe Wadhurst. My understanding from South East Water (SEW) is that this was made worse by high demand for water in the recent hot weather which reduced the water available in the network and limited the ability to redirect water around the burst pipe. Apparently, the dry weather also caused conditions making burst mains more likely. I am not expert enough to comment on this.

However, the situation was exacerbated by poor communication and planning as regards where bottled water was delivered. For example, those in Robertsbridge, a sizeable village, were asked to go to Flimwell. This is unacceptable and I have been in communication with SEW about this. They have improved communication via their web site after storm Eunice but accept that the location of bottled water stations is not ideal. Our MP has been in communication with the CEO of SEW and is putting pressure on SEW to improve this.

I have suggested to SEW that each village has a designated bottled water location which

is identified and publicised in advance and included in the parish resilience plan which I know most parishes are developing. SEW have said 'we are looking at how we can use local Parish Councils in the area to help distribute water more effectively in the future' so I am hopeful that we can be better prepared.