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Report to Parish Councils – March 2024

This report is written is for Parish Councils meeting in March.

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

Budget Update

The meeting of full council on 6th February confirmed the budget for the coming financial year. As I mentioned last month, this shows that to achieve a balanced budget, a legal requirement, we have to use more than £14M of reserves. The medium-term financial plan (summarised in last month's report) shows the situation worsening in future years which is not sustainable.

Since the draft budget was set the government announced £600M of extra funding, in response to pressure from us and a cross-party network of leaders of county councils, which equates to just over £5M for ESCC. At the council meeting it was agreed to consider using this to allow fewer reserves to be used which would free up more money for road repairs, subject to the outcome for this year being as forecast.

I rarely comment on political issues in this report, but it is notable that this year the opposition made a point that they would not propose an alternative budget, recognising that the situation we are in is due to lack of sufficient funding from central government. In previous years the combined opposition at County Hall has proposed alternative budgets though never in my experience significant, for example for 2023/24 a budget revising of £1M was proposed.

I should add that East Sussex is actually in a much better financial state than many other county

councils around us, particularly because of our RPPR process (Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources) which sets clear budgets and targets for each area of operation then evaluates how well we have performed against them. This process was explicitly praised in the independent peer review carried out late last year.

Potholes and Highway Maintenance

After my report last month, the assistant director responsible for highways issued an email to all councillors giving an update on the work being done to address our roads. I sent this round to all clerks but reproduce it here:

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Our contractor, Balfour Beatty, has repaired over 19,000 potholes since the start of their contract last May, with some 2,300 in January. They have increased the number of pothole repair gangs steadily since Christmas and currently have 26 gangs working across the county compared to their usual 10, and will increase to 29 gangs next week to address a small backlog. Balfour Beatty are confident this level of resource is sufficient to clear the backlog by the end of the month, but we are monitoring this closely.

A number of you spoke at Full Council or have talked to me directly about the quality of repairs and I have addressed this with Balfour Beatty senior management. I am assured that they only carry our temporary repairs where it is absolutely necessary, i.e. where it is not safe to carry out a permanent repair, or where they know a larger scale patch repair is to follow. We have instructed Balfour Beatty that all genuine temporary repairs are spray-marked with a "T" so it will be obvious to all those genuine temporary repairs. If you continue to see substandard repairs or have concerns about quality of workmanship please let me know, and ideally with a photograph. Please note there is a new requirement in the Council's contract with Balfour Beatty that requires the gangs to cut out the tarmac surrounding a pothole by an additional 25cm to form a proper seal against solid tarmac.

If you come across potholes that aren't marked for repair please report them to us either via your Stakeholder Liaison Officer (SLO), the East Sussex Highways website, or Fix my Street App.

As part of the Highway Stewards' routine inspections they can call for "advisory" patches and make "observations" about highway condition. "Advisory" patches can be used when a Steward marks up for repair a pothole that meets the Council's intervention criteria, but notes adjacent potholes or poor carriageway condition that don't meet the criteria. In these situations the Stewards can call for a patch repair up to five square metres in size to address those bits that don't meet pothole intervention levels. These requests are handled by the Council team who review these requests quickly and instruct Balfour Beatty to carry out the necessary repair.

Stewards can also make "Observations" about the condition of a road or stretch of road when going about their inspections, and recommend larger scale patches that can be up to 100 -200 square metres in size. These Steward recommendations are reviewed by the Council's Asset Management Team who consider these requests alongside other planned patching, surface dressing and resurfacing schemes. Both advisory patches and Steward observations, along with our own engineers' planned patch repairs, are funded from an annual patching budget of circa £1.5m plus the additional one-off funding of £2.5m that Cabinet and Full Council agreed last summer.

Whilst most pothole repairs can be carried out without a road closure using simple traffic management, patch repairs including many advisories usually require a road closure and therefore a necessary temporary traffic regulation order. Unless the work is an emergency, a road closure requires 12 weeks' notice and hence there is a delay between a pothole being repaired (within 28 days) and the patch repair requiring a 12 week notice.

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There is understandably deep frustration from all 50 county councillors at the state of our highways, though most other counties have the same issues. I have raised many specific issues with Highways and will keep pushing for this.

We had an update briefing from Highways on 21st February with the following key points, some of which repeat information in the italic email quoted above:

- In response to the current number of potholes there are now 30 repair gangs plus 10 traffic management gangs
- Pothole intervention levels start at an area of 30cm by 30cm and at least 40cm deep. Potholes which do not meet this can only be fixed by request from the highways steward (or requests via them). Ones in intervention are included in our fixed price BB contract. Other ones come out of ESCC budgets.
- Stewards can also raise Advisories and Observations, for example to repair a broader group of potholes, some of which may not meet intervention criteria.
- The contract with Balfour Beatty requires that permanent repairs to potholes extend 30cm in each direction beyond the pothole. At the moment we think that a significant number of repairs are not being done in this way. This is being urgently addressed.
- BB are required to take before and after photos. A sample are also inspected by ESCC staff both on the desktop (i.e. from the photos) and in person. At the moment the failure rate of this is 30% which is way too high. This is being addressed. Re-repairs have to be done by BB at no extra cost.
- BB have three Velocity patching machines which use jetting to fix potholes (similar to the JCB ones about which there has been a lot of publicity). These are normally only used through the summer though one is now being brought into use sooner.

I met with our steward (for all areas except Robertsbridge) on 22nd February and we went through all areas needed significant work. We checked on his electronic system and all ones of which I am aware were there. The top one is clearly Junction Road which is acknowledged to be in a dreadful state where there is major work needed all the way from the Curlew to near Sedlescombe. I am assured this will happen in the very near future. This includes pothole repairs but there are also investigations needed involving drilling test boreholes, particularly North of the Rother bridges.

Help for Children in Care

Last month I made a plea for Foster Parents. This month I am highlighted a request to support children in care.

As corporate parents at ESCC we need to do what other parents do for their own children as

they get older namely, help prepare them for adulthood and the world of work by providing help, support, guidance and advice in their life, and particularly, career, choices.

Work experience is an important part of this preparation, and as far as our Children in Care are concerned the County Council is, by default, the 'Family Business' and we do offer this service including work experience and career opportunities, but there is only so much ESCC can offer in house.

Among our 50 members, we know we have a wealth of experience in many and varied career fields, from military to trades, and from private companies to big business, or at least you may have retained connections within your areas of expertise. So we are asking, "what can you personally offer"?

The children themselves have asked the Corporate Parenting Panel for help in obtaining career advice, workplace experience, practice interviews and job opportunities, even a one day visit to an office, shop, factory would be a big help in broadening the career horizon of our care leavers.

The youngest would be in year 10, so 14-15, and many older. The council's Careers Hub team would be able to provide advice on what would need to be in place to support the experience and the children and young people themselves would be identified and fully supported by social workers and personal advisers (in the case of the older cohort).

Health & Safety work placement checks would be completed by our in-house ESCC Work Experience team and any additional support needs addressed. The right opportunities can make a big difference to young people's understanding of what might be possible and their motivation to work towards their goals. Your connections and initiative could mean a great deal to young people who need and deserve our support.

Our looked after children include some truly inspiring youngsters as those of us on the Corporate Parenting Panel found out last week when we met the current Children in Care Council. They often have insights, understanding and maturity beyond their years as a result of their challenging experiences, while still being teenagers with the right to seek counsel and encouragement, which all young people are owed from us their elders.

If you think you might be able to help in any way, could you let me know? I can then link you in with the Careers Hub team who can advise on next steps.