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29th September 2024

Report to Parish Councils – October 2024

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

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 Challenges

As with most councils, we face major challenges at ESCC for a multitude of reasons including:

- The costs of our core services, particularly Adult and Social Care and Children's Services, have been climbing rapidly due to factors such as shortage of staff and the need to employ agency staff
- Central government announces the general grant to local authorities (the 'settlement') once a year. Ideally, they do this for the next 3 years, but for many years have only made a one-year settlement which does help medium term planning.
- Central government also limits the increase in council tax each year – most recently 1.99% for general increase and an extra amount for Adult and Social Care. This does not keep up with the increase in costs.

Our current budget forecasts for next year (from April 2025) are currently showing an unsustainable deficit of £55M. This can be seen in the cabinet papers for the 26th September meeting (agenda item 6) at:

<https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=133&MIId=5887&Ver=4>

The council is required by law to set a balanced budget. As part of this we need to review aspects of our operations which are not statutory. Some of these require public consultation which takes some time, so are given in the cabinet papers. I've already been reviewing these as part of committee work. A significant concern is that curtailing these might lead to increased costs for other councils as well as a worse experience for residents.

We continue to lobby government for a realistic settlement. I have seen some discussion that the government might raise the cap on the increase in council tax. Although this might alleviate the deficit, at the same time it would be a very unwelcome increase in the cost of living for all residents and perhaps disproportionately hit those such as elderly residents with larger houses but relatively little income.

Newenden Bridge Repairs/Closure

I've reported on this verbally at parish councils. In summary this bridge, which straddles the Kent/East Sussex border, but which is maintained by Kent County Council, needs urgent repairs which will result in the closure of the A28 for 3 to possibly 5 months. Originally this was going to occur this Autumn, but I now understand that it has been delayed to the Spring when water levels and weather might allow more efficient work.

Needless to say, this has major impacts for residents in Newenden, Northiam, Beckley and other villages, not only those who use the A28 regularly but in surrounding areas such as Staplecross and Bodiam which might see increased traffic as a result of diversions. The official diversions are always specified to be HGV suitable though satnavs can lead HGV drivers down unsuitable shortcuts. I would push for signs such as 'Not suitable for HGVs' to be used for these, as they are elsewhere.

I have established that East Sussex Highways (under Balfour Beatty) have worked closely with Kent in the planning of this, with frequent meetings which also included National Highways.

I know some residents have mentioned the possibility of temporary bridges (Bailey bridges) but I understand that these are not feasible and in any case would require major expenditure for which Kent, like East Sussex, does not have budget.

I am in regular contact with the Kent County Councillor for the area and will update residents regularly.

Highways

As always potholes and general road conditions are the hot topic when I meet residents. I always repeat the fact that we do not have anything like enough funds to get all our roads up the 'Green' standard. However, Balfour Beatty do seem to be doing a better job. I remind residents to please report any issues on the Highways web site and to copy me on the case number and details, so that I can 'take an interest' which can help.

I meet every few weeks with the highways steward and often get down to very detailed discussions of individual potholes!