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## Report to Parish Councils – December 2024

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

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.

### **ESCC Budgets (update)**

As I have mentioned verbally, I will report on this each month until budgets and precepts are agreed. This will follow from the announcement of the government 'settlement' (which lets us know how much financial support we will get this year and the rules for increasing council tax) expected on December 19<sup>th</sup>.

Currently the headline deficit next year is £57M out of a budget of just over £1 billion. We have identified various cuts to some non-statutory services, subject to consultation (though these will still affect some of the most needy in our community) and economies but have still not closed the gap. We are consulting on redundancies, potentially of 160 county staff.

### **Unitary Authority and Mayors**

The government has initiated a consultation on creating single levels of government at local level, called unitary authorities. This would mean merging District and Borough Councils (e.g. Rother, Hastings, Eastbourne, Wealden) and county into one overall council. The rationale is that this improves efficiency though as the Ds and Bs have clearly different responsibilities to ESCC this does not seem likely to give major savings. There are some other key questions about this:

- What areas are included? For example would there be an East Sussex area including or excluding Brighton (which as a city is effectively unitary). Including Brighton would make East Sussex even more dominated by the 'coastal urban strip' to the disadvantage of rural areas such as Northern Rother
- The government are keen on having an authority under the control of a mayor. In the consultation the Ds and Bs and county together expressed opposition to this

If this does go ahead it is thought possible it would come into effect at the May 2027 election for district councillors. Watch this space!

### **Newenden Bridge Closure (A28)**

This is on the border of Kent and East Sussex but the bridge itself is in Kent so comes under Kent County Council. The bridge needs some serious maintenance and Kent Highways plan to close it for 3 to 5 months. This will cause significant disruption for many residents and businesses in Northern Rother who rely on the A28, particularly those in Northiam, Peasmarsch and Rye Foreign but also in wider areas such as Bodiam and Ewhurst which might be used as diversion routes.

East Sussex Highways liaise closely with Kent Highways on this to try to minimise disruption. The main diversion routes have to be HGV suitable but we know that locals and those with sat navs will often take routes over smaller roads. I am pushing for 'not suitable for HGV' signs to be put up, ideally with some enforcement but this is difficult.

The use of Bailey bridges was also considered by KCC but these need major engineering work, particularly on the banks, aside from the huge cost. Sadly it does not look to be feasible.

I am in regular communication and meetings with the Kent County Councillor. There is also a meeting with Newenden and Northiam parish councils on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December which I am attending.

Sadly there seem to be no magical solutions to this. Minimising the time the bridge is closed is perhaps the best we can do.

### **Grants for Parishes**

As I mentioned last month, this section will occur each month and is a list of possible sources of funding for parish level projects

- Dungeness Power Stations. I sit on the Site Stakeholder Group which liaises between the massive project to decommission these and the local community. They often provide grants for local activities including some in East Sussex even though the power stations are in Kent. For example, this Christmas Rye food bank is their designated charity.
- Veolia Green and Food Waste Composting Facility. As a member of Place Scrutiny I recently visited this site near Lewes. Their 'output' is compost and they deliver 'one tonne bags' at no cost to local community gardens and similar.
- Southeast Water do make grants to local communities, for example to support playgrounds
- Gatwick Airport are keen on funding local projects, at least partly driven by their desire to open a second runway which would have some impact on East Sussex, though less in the Eastern part

If you have a project which might benefit, please let me know and I will put you in contact and try to help get it approved.

Please let me know if you come across any new sources of funding and I will add them to the list.