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Report to Parish Councils – August 2026

This report is written is for Parish Councils meeting in September and covers the two months of July and August due to the fact that few parish or other meetings occur in August.

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.

My Activities

In July I did the following (excluding parish councils and individual meetings with residents). I had a comment from a councillor that this part of my report is too centric on what I personally have done, but this is part of the work we as councillors do in helping to scrutinise county work and to take decisions. Many of these meetings have tangible impact on residents. Much of what I do has direct impact on residents in Northern Rother which is my primary concern.

- As IT lead member on the Fire Authority I attended the quarterly progress meeting with the primary IT contractor. We have significant IT projects and associated budget challenges in the Fire and Rescue Service.
- I attended full council where some significant motions were debated:
    - There was a motion to ask cabinet to continue discontinuing the recycling centre booking scheme. In fact this is generally popular with the exception of those unable to use the online booking system who need to use telephone booking. I supported this on the basis that the review would hopefully improve access for those not using online booking.
    - A motion to give all veterans free bus travel. I received comments from several people in advance of this, including a veterans organisation which is against such a blanket award as most veterans would not benefit. An amended motion was proposed and agreed which asked the Executive to look at options which will hopefully come up with a more targeted and affordable approach whilst giving real benefits to those veterans most in need.
    - A motion to require the Executive to come up with a detailed plan for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), proposed by Cllr Hilton (leader of the Green group) and seconded by me (as leader of the Conservative group) and with the

full support of Cllr Field (as leader of the LibDems). The three of us had drawn up this opposition motion as we concerned that the lack of enthusiasm of Reform for LGR would mean that detailed planning would not take place and chaos could result. Reform then voted with this motion, I suspect because they would have lost. Since the motion, a first draft of this plan has been circulated to group leaders and will then go through the normal scrutiny process. LGR is being imposed by the government, so we have no choice. See below for some other updates on this in a separate section

- I attended a meeting of planning committee where I am vice chairman. The ESCC planning committee does not deal with the majority of planning applications which are local and for housing or similar, which is the responsibility of district and borough councils. However uniquely we consider local planning applications where the site straddles part of a national park (such as the South Downs) and just outside it. We had one of these to consider at this meeting.
- I attended a meeting of the Policy and Resources panel of the Fire Authority, looking particularly at expenditure to date and budgets
- I attended a meeting of Cabinet
- As a member of Governance committee, we met to approve, amongst other items, appointments to scrutiny panels of the new Sussex and Brighton Combined Authority. These are important in ensuring proper scrutiny and democratic accountability.
- As member of the Pension Committee, we held an investment strategy day. The government has decreed that we change the way we work which has required changing from the ACCESS pool to the Borders to Coast (B2C) pool, with fewer decisions being taken by the pension committees of East Sussex and many other local authorities.
- With Dr Kieran Mulland MP, I met with the new CEO of SouthEast Water. See below for a special section on this.

Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution Update

The Government has decided to move a few areas including Peacehaven and Telscombe from East Sussex to Brighton and Hove as part of LGR. Several consultations have been held and in all cases the residents were overwhelmingly against this but the government is still going ahead. Transferring services such as adult and social care and other ESCC-provided services is not trivial and we estimate will cost more than £3M. I believe this is driven by blatant political desire driven by Brighton and Hove which needs more space to build.

Apart from this the government seem to be in support of the ‘One East Sussex’ plan which was drawn up by district, borough and county councils, whereby elections will be held for unitary councillors in May 2027 with final vesting (assuming of power) in April 2028. However, the government have decided to opt for a Shadow Authority model which means that the unitary council will be a new legal entity rather than the simpler Continuing Authority model which would have meant the East Sussex County Council legal body ‘becoming’ the unitary council, which would massively reduce the legal work. Employees of district and borough councils such as Rother will still be transferred to the new Authority as now will existing East Sussex employees.

As a result of the motion on this at Full Council (see above) the officials are new producing a detailed plan for the highly complex process of LGR. I have a first draft and this will be published

and fully scrutinised over the coming months.

The summary timetable for LGR is:

1. Elections for Unitary councillors in May 2027
2. May 2027 to April 2028. Shadow Unitary Council with ESCC, Districts and Boroughs continuing to run local government services but handing over to the new Unitary Council
3. April 2028. Unitary council is vested (assumes full powers). ESCC, District and Boroughs abolished.

On Devolution, the Sussex and Brighton Strategic Authority met again with its AGM and appointed a chair. My major work recently has been in looking at the way the Fire and Rescue Services will be governed as East Sussex and West Sussex have different arrangements. In East Sussex we have a Fire Authority, of which I am a member, but in West Sussex it is run by the county council. In East Sussex the funding is via is a separate precept – in West it is part of council tax. The government have said that there will no longer be a separate precept so it will come under the SBSA precept, though we hope ringfenced. This needs care to ensure that the safety of East Sussex residents is not compromised and that we do not end up subsiding West Sussex.

SouthEast Water (SEW)

Many residents have had problems with burst mains causing low pressure or loss of water. When it happens, bottled water can be slow to be provided or be in inconvenient locations or slow to be delivered to vulnerable local residents. Over the last 5 years I have had many communications with SEW and in July had a meeting with Dr Kieran Mullan MP and John Halsall, the new CEO of SEW. He seems to be very responsive and seems to have taken on board many of the points we made. The next months will see if this gives real changes.

Together with district councillors Tony Biggs and Tony Ganly we are setting up two meetings with SEW, probably in Staplecross Village Hall and Northiam Village Hall. This be open to all residents will hopefully allow constructive discussion on how the issues can be addressed. We will publicise these as soon as we have agreed dates, possibly late September or in October.

Highways

The new(ish) Reform administration seem to have realised that there are no magical solutions to the condition of our roads given our overall budgetary situation at ESCC. In summary we need about £350M to get the 2000 miles of roads in East Sussex up to ‘green’ standard. This includes drainage (poor drainage increases degradation), as well as resurfacing or rebuilding, as well as signs, road markings and pavements. We get about £21M from the government which is earmarked for highways so cannot be used elsewhere, but this is clearly not enough. Sadly, the general pressures on budget and the fact that we are running a deficit funded by £70M of Exceptional Final Support (which is borrowing) means that the county cannot spare any more for highways.

Nevertheless, I am pushing for urgent work on some roads in Northern Rother, in particular:

- Junction Road, B2244 between Sedlescombe and Merriments Lane. Some parts of this continue to subside and a significant part needs rebuilding as well as patching and resurfacing elsewhere. The cost of resurfacing is about £750k to £1M a mile - rebuilding presumably more, so this alone could us up at least 5% of total highways budget!

- Beckley Road, B2088 between Northiam and Beckley. I've had this road inspected multiple times but the challenge is that the type of degradation does not meet highways criteria so be part of the fixed price contract with Balfour Beatty. Nevertheless I believe this is a safety issue and have asked highways to review it and cost remedial work.
- Bodiam Road (also called the Stage) from the Duck Inn (was Curlew) to Hurst Green. This has had much pothole repair work done on it over the last 9 months but is still causing much concern and would benefit from wider patching or even resurfacing

I continue to respond to issues about potholes, hedges, pavements and many other small issues which affect residents. If residents find an issue I encourage them to report it online (search for East Sussex Highways Report and Problem) and let me know the case number so I can chase it.

Newenden Bridge

I have reported on this previously and continue to push for the following:

- Kent County Council to maximise the working time so as to minimise the closure time. Work can only be done in daylight for safety reasons but given this is planned to be in the summer of 2027 this would help reduce the closure time.
- East Sussex Network management (part of highways) diversions to be well signed, with sensible routes and many prominent signs, particularly to deter HGVs from trying to use Bodiam bridge or smaller roads
- Active enforcement of the limit at Bodiam bridge, perhaps with police and/or traffic cameras
- Strategically, pushing for an additional new bridge, leaving the listed one for pedestrians. This would cost about £15M and need central government funding and I have asked that officials from Kent and East Sussex meet to draw up a business case for this, as has worked elsewhere. This came up at the meeting Kieran Mullan had in Newenden and I am hoping we can start to push for the new bridge solution, but this will take many years.

Grants for Parishes

No new sources of funding have come up recently so I am not repeating this section, but if you have a project which might benefit from extra funding please contact me and I will endeavour to help.