

Cllr Paul Redstone
Email: Cllr.Paul.Redstone@eastsussex.gov.uk
Phone: 07510 074267

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Report to Parish Councils – October 2026

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.

My Activities

In September I did the following (excluding parish councils and individual meetings with residents).

- Had a Fire Authority meeting looking at budgets but also the progress towards the Fire and Rescue service being run from the Sussex and Brighton Strategic Authority. This will happen at the end of March 2027, and the Fire Authority will cease to exist
- I attend a meeting of the Planning Committee. Our main topic was the setting of charges for a zone for parking in Bexhill which was approved
- I attended remotely a meeting of the Pension Board which has representatives from employers and employees who are members of the East Sussex Pension Fund which covers about 130 employers across East Sussex. This is good preparation for the Pension Committee of which I am a member and meets on 1st October.
- I attended remotely a Fire Authority seminar, looking in particular at devolution
- As member of the Pension Committee I attended the annual meeting or the Borders to Coast (B2C) in Leeds. The East Sussex Pension Fund has approximately £5 billion in investments which is used to fund the pensions and future pensions of about 82,000 employees across 130 organisations and about 82,000 members. This was previously invested through ACCESS, a pool made up of 11 local pension funds. The governments 'Fit for the Future' changes to pension led to changes in this, requiring that we change pools. We, along with 6 other members of the ACCESS pool, selected B2C which is (was) made up of 11 other pension funds, mostly in the North of England but now with 18 members covers much of the country. This migration is complex and crucial to the function of the pension fund.
- I attended cabinet meeting where there were a number of important papers and topics:

- The first stages of budget setting for 2027/28. See below.
- A proposed change in the approach to addressing climate change. See below

Local Government Reorganisation and Devolution Update

In last month's report I gave an update on the current position on this. After I sent my report the government announced a 'pause and review' into LGR which I reported verbally and in an additional report I circulated.

There have now been additional communications and meetings with the MHCLG which are giving inconsistent information. In the additional report I said that the review of LGR is expected to be done by the end of October after the parliamentary recess which occurs during the party conference season. It is now understood that the timetable for the review will probably be given by the end of the recess, though this is not definite. It is almost certain that the unitary elections planned for May 2027 will be delayed, which also means that the district and borough elections will go ahead then.

Previous to the pause, the government had decided to move a one area covering Peacehaven and Telscombe from East Sussex to Brighton and Hove as part of LGR, against the wishes of the residents. It is hoped that the government will now reverse this decision and the leaders of district, borough and county councils have written a letter to the government asking for this.

County Council Budget for 2027/28

At this time of year, we start to look at the budget for the year starting in April 2027. At ESCC we use a process called RPPR (Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources) which has been independently recognised on multiple occasions to be good practice.

As has been the case for many years we face two types of pressure:

- Government grants have decreased in real terms
- Demand for our services has increased, particularly due to increased deprivation, the increasingly complex support needs for some of our children and adults and the age profile of our elderly population. All of these are well understood.

For this reason the budget for 2026/27 was the first time we, along with many other local authorities, needed EFS (Exceptional Financial Support) where the government lends us money to balance the 'revenue' budget (the amount we spend rather than invest). In the current financial year we forecast a deficit of £55M and have EFS authorised of up to £70M.

As expected the situation has not changed and for 2027/28 we expect to also require EFS. As part of EFS the government asks CIPFA, an independent group of accounts expert in local authority finance, to carry out a review. We've had two of these, one in August 2025 and one in Spring this year. Both made some relatively minor recommendations which will not have a dramatic impact on the deficit, but the headline comments were:

- The council has 'sound and well-established financial management arrangements'
- The council services are 'lean and efficient'

The budget for the coming year is the first under Reform UK administration. They have announced a list of areas where they are looking for savings, but they do not expect these to be dramatic and will probably not help significantly next year.

The underlying issue is the lack of funding from central government which does not recognise the profile of our aging population or areas of deprivation. All parties at ESCC work together, with our MPs, to highlight this and press for more realistic central funding.

Climate Change

Some years ago ESCC declared a climate emergency and a policy to get to council operations to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. It would have cost more than £200M to get just scope 1 and 2 to this, money we do not have. (Scope 1 is our own emissions from things like heating, scope 2 is the emissions of generating electricity we use and scope 3 emissions from things we buy or subcontract). Scope 3 emissions account for by far the most emissions.

Climate change is a major risk to the world and to the residents of East Sussex. Locally it will increase the risk of flooding, wildfires, high temperatures as well issues such as food shortages or increases in price. As a county council we have a responsibility to protect our residents.

Reform have sensibly announced that climate change policy will be reviewed, initially by scrutiny committees, then cabinet and finally full council.

I gave my support to this. There are two separate issues but these are often confused by some:

- **Reducing carbon emissions** as a whole is sensible, but carbon is **global**. Emissions from, say, China have the same effect as emissions from East Sussex. In round terms East Sussex county council emissions are about 0.001% of global ones and only about 10% of emissions in East Sussex, which are dominated by those from residents and businesses
- Making ourselves **resilient** to the effect of climate change is crucial and is **local**, whether this be through better ways of preventing flooding, reducing the risk of wildfires and how we handle them etc.

Some people mistakenly think that reducing carbon emissions in the county somehow protects our residents. The science says otherwise.

I should add that I have some expertise in this area and work hard to reduce my own carbon footprint.

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 a meeting with SEW, probably in Staplecross 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 in late October.

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.