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Report to Parish Councils – February 2025

This report is written for Parish Councils meeting in February. It is slightly delayed as I wanted to report on the government decision on Devolution, but this is now delayed.

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

Headline details of the government settlement are now known. Cabinet approved a budget in late January, and this is expected to be approved at Full Council on 11th February. This was conditional on the final government settlement which was announced on 3rd February. This is still being analysed but it seems to have no surprises so the budget will probably be unchanged.

The key headline points from the budget are:

- ESCC Council tax to be raised by 2.99% plus 2% extra on Adult Social Care, so 4.99% in all
- Net revenue budget (excluding schools) is shown as £579.6M
- The government has allocated some funds to areas with 'deprivation'. East Sussex was not included in this despite having significant deprivation in some parts of Hastings, Bexhill and Lewes.
- Allocations for road maintenance funding: ESCC was allocated new funding of £5.6M bringing total; funding to £21.0M which is £1.9M higher than previous planning assumption but assumes government approval for the £1.9M based on 'performance'. Sadly nothing like what we need.
- Budget is balanced but only by using £11.4M of reserves which is clearly not sustainable on an ongoing basis.
- The government settlement is only for one year with a funding review due later this year. The Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) shows additional financial pressures from 26/26 which are not sustainable.

- Our spending is dominated by adult social care and children's services directed at some of the neediest in the county. We have a higher proportion of over 85s who require more care than other age groups, but this is not recognised in government funding.

Fire and Rescue Service

I am a member of the Fire Authority which has a meeting on 5th February to approve budgets and precept. As with the County Council funding is very tight indeed and can only be balanced by using some reserves.

The increase in precept for ESFRS will either be 2.99% or a flat £5 for Band D properties. In the latter case the £5 is reduced proportionately for lower bands and increased for higher bands – it is not a flat £5 for everyone. It seems likely that £5 will be approved.

Unitary Authority and Mayors

The decision on this was due to be announced by the end of January but has now been delayed – we think to 5th February at the earliest. I have separately sent a briefing paper to set out the background and key stages in this essentially government-imposed process.

One additional point: at the moment council tax is made up of:

- A. Parish/town precepts
- B. District or borough precepts
- C. County council precepts
- D. Police precept
- E. Fire and Rescue precept

If we go unitary B and C would effectively merge into a unitary authority precept. There might be an extra precept for the mayoral authority, though hopefully given central government funding and some movements in responsibilities, no overall increase.

However different districts and boroughs do levy different levels of council tax across the county, so this process does imply some equalisation. The implications of this have not been set out by the government.

Grants for Parishes

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. I put Peasmarsh parish council in contact with them and they have already received two bags for the community gardens.

- 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.