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Report to Parish Councils – January 2025

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

I hope everyone has had a good Christmas break and wish you a Happy New Year (as this is written two days before it).

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 Funding Update

The government published their funding update (called the local authority settlement) shortly before Christmas. The full implications are being worked through and I will have more information in January. However, some aspects are already clear:

- Council tax can be increased by 5% total made up of 3% on council tax and an additional 2% for adult social care
- There is no significant increase in funding beyond what was expected and indeed some reductions
- Some funding such as the 'Recovery Grant' will be moved to areas seen as having higher levels of deprivation. Although we have such areas in places such as Hastings this is believed to be seen as not significant! The likely impact is that we will lose such funding to other areas, mostly in the North.
- There is some extra funding to compensate for the increases in national insurance and minimum wage, but this is probably not enough to fully compensate the council
- There was an announcement about extra funding for potholes and highways maintenance. This mapped to about £21M for ESCC of which £1.9M is withheld depending on some sort of measure of performance. We'd already assumed £19M in our budgets based on previous years, so there is no significant improvement and certainly not seen in the context of more than £300M needed in ESCC to get our roads to Green standard

Unitary Authority and Mayors

I first reported on this last month. This is a fast-moving situation so by the time you read this it may be out of date, but I will give verbal updates at Parish Councils.

The government has invited counties such as East Sussex to submit proposals by 10th January for proposals to become unitary. A likely format is:

- East Sussex would become a unitary authority, taking over responsibility for aspects currently run by the Districts and Boroughs such as bin collection and planning. The Ds and Bs would cease to exist
- East Sussex would also be part of a combined authority with two other unitaries, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex. A directly elected mayor would run this with responsibilities to include police, fire and rescue and some strategic aspects. The mayor would preside over a board made up of a small number of councillor leaders from each of the three unitaries

Discussions with the leaders of Brighton and West Sussex are taking place.

If we do not submit proposals, it is likely that it would be imposed on us. The government will decide whether to go ahead later in January or early February. If this does go ahead it is thought possible it would come into effect at the May 2027 election, and the May 2025 and May 2026 elections delayed until then. All of this would be decided by central government. Watch this space!

Highways

As always, we do not have enough funding though Balfour Beatty do seem to be on top of most pothole repairs which 'meet the intervention criteria'. The intervention criteria are not as inclusive as we would like but this is limited by funding. I am in constant communication with our highways steward and Highways Management.

Current hotspots in my view are:

- Junction Road (Sedlescombe to Merriments Lane). This really needs to have some serious structural work. The Lead Asset Manager has been asked to come up with a plan for this.
- Curlew to Hurst Green
- Merriments Lane

There are others of course but these are top of my list unless people tell me differently

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. 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.