



Councillor Paul Redstone

Email: Cllr.Paul.Redstone@eastsussex.gov.uk

Phone: 07510 074267

25th March 2025

County Councillor Report for Annual Parish Meetings

This report is written for the Annual Parish Meetings for residents of Northern Rother Division, comprising the parishes of Northiam, Beckley, Peasmarsh, Rye Foreign, Ewhurst, Bodiam and Salehurst & Robertsbridge.

I always issue a monthly report for parish council meetings. This report is more strategic covering a review of the year and some hot topics. I am happy to answer questions at Annual Parish Meetings, at parish meetings or elsewhere.

Devolution

The biggest announcement this year has been the government White Paper on devolution. There is much misunderstanding about this which in fact has two components:

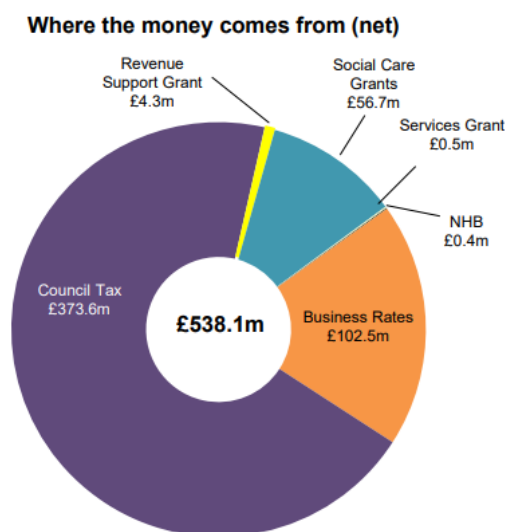
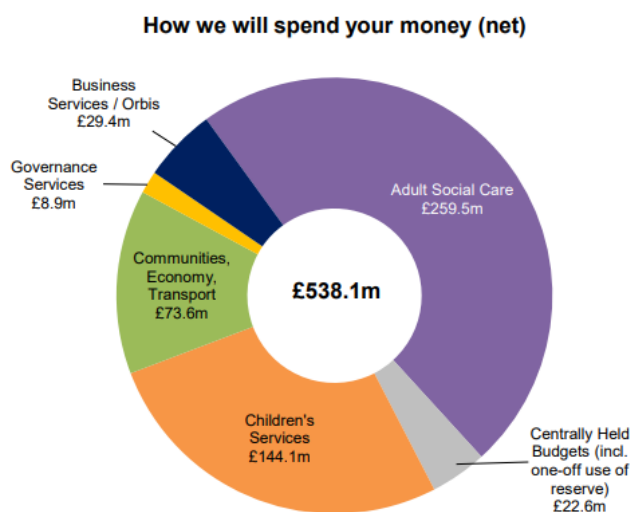
- Local Government Reorganisation, which will see the district, borough and county councils in East Sussex abolished and replaced by a single new unitary council, with similar changes in West Sussex.
- The addition of a directly elected mayor covering three unitary councils in Sussex (East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove)

There is so much interest in this that I have written a separate appendix to this report.

East Sussex County Budget

Most of your council tax is the county council precept, but it also includes the district council precept, a parish council precept and separate precepts for the Fire and Rescue Service and the Police. We also receive rates from local businesses and some grants from central government. In the year 2024/25 our total ESCC expenditure is forecast to be £538M, excluding ringfenced funds for most schools' expenditure.

The pie charts below summarise for 2024/25 how we spend/spent your money and where it comes from.



As can be seen, the dominant costs are for adult and social care and children's services.

Prior to each year we are legally required to produce a balanced budget for the financial year which starts in April. For the year 2024/25 we did this but still overshot and have been required to fund a deficit of £24.8 from reserves. For 2025/26 our balanced budget includes £11M from reserves. Our reserves are therefore decreasing and are forecast to be £82M at the end of 24/25, but including only £19M of non-earmarked funds, so use of reserves is unsustainable. Like all local government at all levels, we face major challenges in funding, though we are in a better state than most.

For many years we have lobbied government to provide a fairer funding basis for local government, and for recognition of the fact that our population is significantly more elderly than elsewhere, requiring more expenditure. So far this has not resulted in extra funding.

Highways

The condition of our highways, particularly potholes and drainage, is the top priority of most residents. Sadly, we do not have anything like the funds we need to properly repair and maintain our roads. In the pie chart above the total budget for communities, economy and transport is £74M of which about £23M is on highways including road safety. It is estimated that to get our highways back to 'Green' standard would cost about £350M.

The government has recently announced grants for highway maintenance of £21.3M for East Sussex of which £1.9M is apparently going to be based on performance. This is in line with our previous years grants and expenditure and is nothing like enough to do the work which is needed.

Appendix: Update on Devolution

In December, a week before Christmas, the government published a paper on Devolution. Unusually they did not choose to publish a consultative Green Paper but a White Paper which sets out what they plan to do. It was much more specific than expected and with a tight timetable. This note sets out the facts and corrects some widespread misunderstandings about Devolution. This is a rapidly changing initiative, so this document is being regularly updated. **Please note that some of this document is likely to change as a result of government decisions!**

The White Paper covers two separate but linked areas:

- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) which means that two-tier areas such as East Sussex which currently have a County Council and separate District and Borough Councils, will reorganise to have a new single unitary authority, taking on the responsibilities of all councils
- The election of a Mayor for Sussex, taking a strategic role, covering three unitary authorities (East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton & Hove)

The timetable for these is as follows:

- Councils were invited to send expressions of interest for both LGR and the mayoral authority by 10th January. These were sent by the leaders of East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove
- On 5th February the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution notified the leaders of the councils that Sussex had been given the go ahead for the Devolution Priority Programme, one of only 6 areas.
- In response to this, on 21st March all councils in East Sussex submitted an interim plan to the government setting out developing proposals for LGR in East Sussex. Although there are some concerns, all recognised that it was the sensible way ahead, particularly given the government imperatives.
- The next stage in LGR is for a full proposal to be submitted to government by 26th September.

For the wider Sussex area, the government proposal is for a directly elected mayor with responsibilities for:

- Transport and local infrastructure
- Skills and employment support
- Housing and strategic planning
- Economic development and regeneration
- Environment and climate change
- Health, wellbeing and public service reform
- Public safety (including fire and rescue services and the police)

The Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) would include the mayor plus six 'cabinet' members (the term is not yet clear), made up of two councillors from each of the three unitary authorities, probably the leader and deputy leader from each council. Decisions would be

subject to majority voting by the cabinet. The mayor would also appoint a deputy and perhaps other associate members.

The mayoral structure is regarded as 'light touch', unlike those in cities such as Manchester. Almost all services to residents would be provided by the unitary authorities.

The timetable for LGR and MSA are currently expected to be:

- Decision by government by January to April 2026
- Elections for Mayor in May 2026
- Elections for shadow East Sussex unitary councillors in May 2027
- Vesting (i.e. assuming power) of the new unitary council in May 2028

Prior to vesting, the county and services provided by it would continue to be run by the district/borough and county councils/ councillors.

In common with other local government reorganisations, the White Paper suggested that county councils might wish to delay elections and could ask government to do this, which is what happened. The rationale is:

- Given the timescales set out by the government, much of the work involved in consultation and writing proposals for devolution would be at the same time as the build up to, and follow on from, the May 25 elections. This could not be done during an election period.
- Local elections invariably lead to a turnover in council membership across all parties. This would give a new set of councillors who would need significant work by officials to bring up to speed, at a time when their workload would be dominated by the reorganisation and continuing to manage services.
- The resulting county councillors would only be in office for 2 years, could only pass one meaningful budget and could not make any fundamental changes to council policy.

There is a lot of work required over the next few years to make this happen, one of the reasons that the government only gave the go ahead to some areas. There are many issues to resolve including:

- The geography of each of the unitary councils. Government guidance is that a unitary council should have population of more than 500,000 which fits East Sussex with a population of about 560,000. However, Brighton has only 280,000 residents and West Sussex about 900,000. Some discussions on the geography and organisation are ongoing but are unlikely to affect East Sussex.
- At the moment district and borough councils can set different levels of council tax to support their operations. (The county component of council tax is the same everywhere). It is expected that in due course one level of council tax would be needed throughout East Sussex.