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Report to Parish Councils – March 2026

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

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

This section has bullet-point summaries of *some* of the meetings I have had, or actions carried out. I started writing this as sometimes residents think that we don't do much at county! Almost all meetings include briefing papers, sometimes with hundreds of pages, which need to be read in advance. I do not include in this list parish council meetings or meetings with residents, often to discuss potholes and other highways issues!

- I attended another whole council forum with briefing on the new Sussex and Brighton Combined County Authority which will become the Mayoral County Authority in two years. This takes power at end of March and will have funds of about £15M a year across Sussex rising to £38M when the mayor takes power. Setting up this authority is very complex and we have an impressive interim chief executive and team who gave the briefing.
- I attended a meeting of the Dungeness Site Stakeholder Group where I represent ESCC. Although Dungeness is in Kent it has significant implications for East Sussex and also employs East Sussex residents. They are also looking for 10 apprentices which could provide good opportunities for young people.
- I attended another meeting of a working group of the Rother Association of Local Councils to which I have been co-opted, which is tasked to look at Local Government Reorganisation and the interaction with parish and town councils.
- I attended a meeting of full council. On the agenda was a motion from Cllr Kathryn Field to require the county council to impose 20mph speed limits when adopting roads in new developments. In the days leading up to the meeting I reviewed the motion which I felt did not reflect the national guidance on speed limits or the planning process. I proposed a modified version which addressed these issues and strengthened the motion. I am pleased to say the modified one was adopted by Cllr Field. I spoke on the motion and

it was passed unanimously. This will certainly help ensure that new roads in residential developments are designed to be 20mph through natural calming.

- I attended two reference groups of Place Scrutiny, where we reviewed the way Streetworks (e.g. road closures, traffic lights, diversions) are authorised and coordinated. I initiated this reference group as there have been a number of cases where I felt that coordination had not been good. We've had representatives from various utility companies as well as Network Traffic Management from East Sussex highways. The second meeting at the end of February finalised the report with a number of recommendations which will then go to full Place Scrutiny, then to cabinet and full council. My hope is that this will reduce delays and in particular adverse interactions such as the one where the gas main in Battle Hill was going to cause a road closure at the same time as the A21 was closed for Queensway Gateway.
- I attended a meeting of the Fire Authority where we approved the budget for the coming year and also the draft CRMP (Community Risk Management Plan) which, following extensive consultations, sets out how we will protect the residents, visitors and businesses of East Sussex from fires, road traffic collisions and other hazards over the next 3 to 5 years.
- I am a member of the joint scrutiny reference group looking at Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation. We met to get an update on the extensive work going on. See below.
- I chaired a cross-party committee of transport leads from each party to review the capital plan for highways which covers highways improvements (roads and pavements) and cycle paths. All such expenditures have to be financed from ringfenced central government funds or in some cases CIL or Section 106 money from developers, as we now have no budget for discretionary expenditure (see budgets below).
- I attended a meeting of the pension committee which is responsible for about £5 billion of investments to fund local government pensions for about 86,000 staff, ex staff and retired staff from about 130 employers across East Sussex including the county council, Brighton and Hove council, other districts and boroughs and numerous other smaller ones. Our major topic was the extensive work needed to effect the government-imposed changes in 'pooling'.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Last month my report said "The government confirmed that county elections in East Sussex are cancelled". About a week later the government did a U-turn and said elections for county council will now be held this May. I fully understand and respect the reasons for this, but councillors elected in May will only have a year in power as unitary elections are planned to be held in May 2027. During the election period decisions typically cannot be made. After the elections officials need to spend a lot of time bringing new councillors up to speed. All of this will hamper all the work needed to prepare for a unitary council – which is why the government suggested postponing elections in the original white paper!

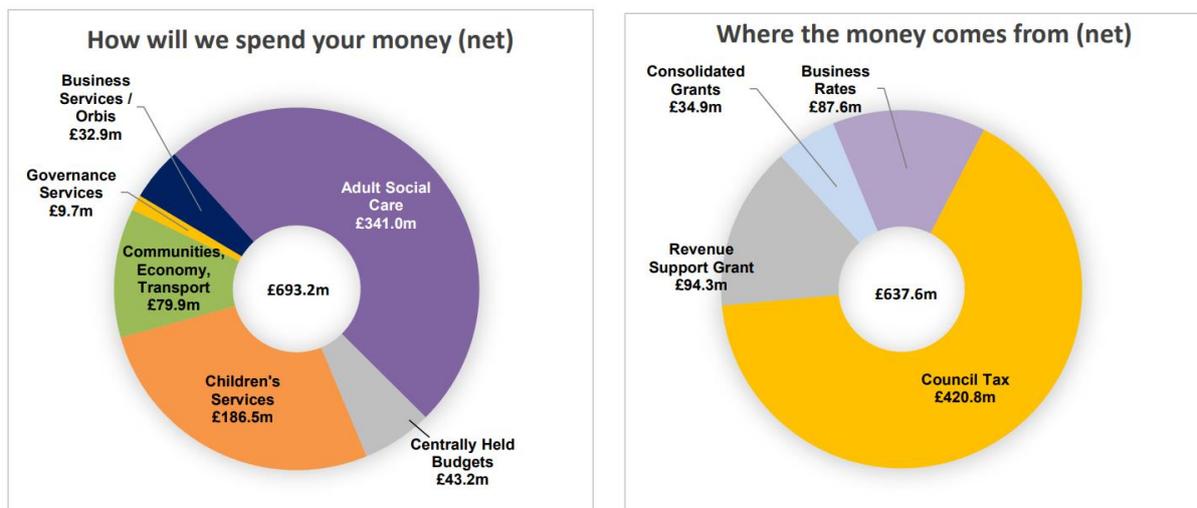
The configuration of unitary councils will be decided by government and announced in March. ESCC. Most district/borough councils in East Sussex believe that the 'One East Sussex' model is best, where there is one unitary council in East Sussex with the same footprint as the current county council. An alternative which would see East Sussex split into two unitaries and some

other changes has been proposed by Brighton. In our view this would cause immense disruption as services such as adult and social care and children’s services would need to be split.

Watch this space!

East Sussex Budgeting

Apart from some fairly minor amounts where we await news from central government, the budget for the coming year (April 26 onwards) was approved at full council. The graphics below show our total budget (excluding schools which is almost all separately financed) and our sources of funds:



Some key points from this:

- Adult Social Care and Children’s Services make up 76% of total expenditure. Almost all of this is on statutory services that by law we have to provide. Central government funding does not take account of the fact that our population is significantly more elderly, particularly the numbers over 85, who tend to need more support. East Sussex used to get some extra funds due to have areas of deprivation, for example in Hastings, but this has now been withdrawn which we feel is unfair.
- Costs in these services have also risen disproportionately due to increases in minimum wage and national insurance as well as the numbers of residents needing such support.
- Communities, Economy and Transport includes a wide range of services including waste disposal, libraries, fostering economic development and, of course, highways. Given budget constraints our highways spend can only be what the government gives us in ringfenced grants – currently about £21M. We estimate that getting all 2000 miles of highways in East Sussex to ‘Green’ standard would cost about £350M.
- The above figures show a deficit of £55M and we do not have reserves to cover this. Along with many other councils we have therefore asked government for Exceptional Financial Support of £70M (to include some contingency). This was granted a week ago. Sadly, EFS is not a grant but allows us to borrow funds for ‘revenue’ expenditure so this will need to be repaid at some time.

Highways

With the frosts followed by record levels of rain, the conditions of our highways has definitely deteriorated as it has across the country. Complaints about this form a large part of my case workload and I inspect many myself and speak frequently with the highways steward and coordinator (both who work for Balfour Beatty Living Places), as well as the officials at East Sussex. I am expected to get an update on this shortly which I will include in future reports, but a few points:

- The core pothole repairs are under a fixed price contract with BBLP. This includes 3 levels of pothole – category 1 needing repair in 2 hours, category 2 5 days and category 3 28 days. The contract means that if repairs need repeating it does not cost the county or taxpayers any more.
- Temporary repairs sometimes need to be done to make the road safe, particular for category 1 and 2. These should be marked with a T and should later be properly repaired within 28 days. Compliance with the T marking seems to be poor though has improved recently in response to complaints from me and others.
- Some newer methods and materials, such as jetting and other types of tarmac/mastic are also being used to speed repairs.

Please keep reporting potholes using the online portal (just search for East Sussex highways report a problem). I also have access to an online portal which allows we to see all outstanding pothole and other repairs.

Newenden Bridge

Newenden Bridge needs extensive repair work and is being closed during the weekends of 28th February, 7th March and 14th March from 0700 on Saturday to 1900 Sunday. Sadly this is for parapet work and not the main work on structure to which I have referred in previous reports and which is expected to take 3-5 months! This latter work will cause significant disruption. I am in regular contact with Kent County Council who are responsible for the bridge and the Kent County Councillor for Newenden. I have no update on the timing of the main closure, but it is expected to be after April due to budget constraints. It also needs reasonable weather and lower water levels.

East Sussex Highways liaise with Kent Highways all for such closures. A significant concern is the length of the main diversion which goes back to the A21 and reflects the fact that diversions must be of the same capacity as the closure. Bodiam Bridge has an 18-tonne weight limit so is not included in the diversion though it is fine for cars. This weight limit is sometimes ignored so I am pushing for camera and other enforcement. On Saturday 28th February Bodiam bridge was effectively closed due to an emergency road closure for works at the level crossing – causing even more disruption. As soon as I heard about this I raised it with Network Management but sadly as it was an emergency the rules meant that it could not be delayed.

Grants for Parishes

This section will occur each month and is a list of possible sources of funding for parish level projects. I have had a number of enquiries as to whether any of these could help with areas such as allotments. Sadly the answer is no – these are all intended for community/parish council projects. However I am asking this again as policies sometimes change.

- 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. The criteria for this used to be with 15 miles of Dungeness but this has been increased to 20 miles. Contact me for details.
- Veolia Green and Food Waste Composting Facility. As a member of Place Scrutiny I have 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. It seems that the best will be for those seeking funds to send me an email which I will then forward.

Please let me know if you come across any new sources of funding and I will add them to the list.