

ROTHER ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS (RALC) Meeting & AGM

**Minutes of meeting held on 9 October 2024, 2.30pm
Staplecross Village Hall TN32 5QG**

Attendees: David Young (Chairman & Ewhurst), Keith Robertson (Deputy Chair & Catsfield), Martin Griffiths (Brede, Guestling), Jonathan Vine-Hall (Sedlescombe), Pauline Glew (Sedlescombe), Karen Ripley (Salehurst & Robertsbridge), Natasha Vadorin (Beckley), Julie Ramus (Rye Foreign), David Penfold (Pett), John Barnes (Etchingham), Keith Lloyd (Burwash), Bob Franklin (Udimore), Andrew Brown (Battle), Nigel Jacklin (Bexhill), Alan Thomas (Bexhill), J. Harding (Northiam), Lorna Ford (Rother DC), Andrew Vallance (Rother DC), Holly Harrison (Rother DC), Alice Nolan (RALC Clerk)

AGENDA

Item Number	Agenda Item	Actions
1	Welcome	
2	Apologies for absence Cllr Stewart (Fairlight), Cllr Allard (Iden), Brightling Parish Council, Cllr Todd (Salehurst & Robertsbridge), Cllr McGregor (Etchingham).	
3	Accuracy of Minutes of the meeting held on 10 July *attached Members agreed the minutes, subject to an amendment on item 8 (CIL) – removal of ‘in principle’ from resolution.	
4	Matters arising or reports from Members from previous meetings (items on agenda only) a) Survey of Members - RALC Clerk will resend survey to Members. It is available on the website and Members can contact the Clerk for further information.	RALC Clerk to resend Member survey.
5	Election of Executive Officers, Committee, Secretary, Treasurer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair - Cllr David Young. • Vice Chair - Cllr Keith Robertson. • Executive Committee - Cllr John Barnes, Cllr David Penfold reappointed. Cllr Natasha Vadorin appointed. • Treasurer - Cllr Keith Robertson. • Secretary - Alice Nolan. 	
6	Appointment/confirmation of representatives to outside bodies a) Rother Standards Committee - Cllr Keith Robertson; Cllrs David Young and Martin Griffiths appointed as substitutes. b) ESALC Directors (x3) - Cllrs David Young, Keith Robertson, John Barnes.	
7	Finance accounts to March 2024 / Budget & Fees for 2025-26 Noted and approved at the meeting. Accounts are available to view online. Members gave thanks to Cllr Keith Robertson for preparing the accounts. The budget for this financial year is on track, so it was agreed that membership fees are the same for next financial year.	

END OF AGM

8	<p>Update from RDC (see briefing notes on page 2)</p> <p>a) Financial stability</p> <p>Andrew Vallance shared his slides on the RDC budget, and the following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This financial year, the RDC budget is £14 million, with a savings target of £2.5 million. £1.5 million of savings are banked and another £900k is forthcoming. The only doubtful savings total £124k and are related to parking income. • Unfortunately, there are overspends of £900k reflected elsewhere. The main variances are related to homelessness, which is a national issue. Additionally, planning fees are down and appeal costs are up- the Interim Head of Planning expects a pickup but is unsure when this will happen. The shortfall in car park income is mainly weather-related. To address this, the parking income targets will be reduced in the next budget. This council is undergoing a period of restructure, and this accounts for overspends on interim staff. • The Capital programme (£250 million total) is currently under review. The affordability of schemes has changed, and the revenue implications are £7 million per £100 million. The future programme will total £250 million (£50 million has already been spent) with projects to be self-financed or funded through third parties. Business cases for each new scheme will come forward. • The 25/26 draft budget is currently being put together. It assumes a savings target of 10%, c. £1.5 million. • Last month, budget challenge meetings were held with senior officers, the Leader, and the portfolio holder for Finance. Looking ahead, Cabinet will present their savings for agreement on the proposals this month. In November, the budget consultation begins. Information on the settlement is likely to be received in December. Parish precept information will be requested in January and the budget/council tax setting will be finalised in February. • Udimore: Highlighted need for Enforcement to be better resourced. Andrew: Additional resource is dependent on the fee increases by central government. • Catsfield: Are the savings targets and overspend added together? Does the revenue on the balance sheet from capital projects change the savings/costs? What is the impact on available reserves? Andrew: No, the overspend is the main driver of the gap. We would aim not to change the numbers on the balance sheet. The available reserves are around £6 million which is a high level compared to some authorities. 	<p>Holly Harrison to investigate whether CIL monies can be applied to devolved services.</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beckley: Why are RDC so dependent on grants? Andrew: The Council's finance system reflects previous outdated information. • Northiam: What is the rationale behind the distribution of CIL monies? Holly Harrison: CIL monies go to different funding pots. A proportion goes directly to parish/town councils and the rest is divided into 3: Rother Infrastructure Fund (for infrastructure providers, excluding towns/parishes), climate change, and a parish/town councils pot that is separate to the direct monies and split between Bexhill/rural areas. The funding round is now open, and the CIL officer has asked for expressions of interest for the last pot. The recent changes to CIL distribution have only affected the Rother Infrastructure pot, which is no longer split between Bexhill/rural areas because infrastructure affects the entire district. • Northiam: Has the impact of debt recovery been considered? Andrew: Recovery of all debts would total the low hundreds of thousands- not enough to fill budget gap. • Battle: Can RDC help with opening the Mount Street toilets until the devolution process is open? Why is funding targeted more to Bexhill than other areas? Lorna Ford: At a recent meeting with Battle Town Council, it was agreed with them that they had all the relevant information on Mount Street toilets. Discussions on devolving conveniences are still ongoing with a number of parish/town councils. RDC will be moving to the next stage of devolution which is asset management. Work is ongoing to value the conveniences. This is expected of RDC as they are operating on a deficit budget. There were more public conveniences in Rother than any other council in the region- half of these remain open and we still have more than most neighbouring authorities. • Sedlescombe: A meeting among parishes on devolution of the toilets raised issues about the freehold and leaseholds. Could the Council give parishes/towns the freehold to address this? There are additional problems with surveys highlighting renovation/ running costs that are higher than the figures RDC offered. Lorna: The original aim of the Protecting Discretionary Services policy was to protect services. But there is a need to progress to the next stage. RDC have considered feedback on which conveniences were most in demand and reopened where appropriate. • Bexhill: Highlighted dissatisfaction over the closure of toilets in Bexhill. • Salehurst and Robertsbridge: Have the parishes been offered a first look at assets for devolvement? Lorna: Work is progressing but currently, just related to the toilets. 	
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- Catsfield: Could the CIL pot be applied for devolving services?
Holly: Will follow up on this.

b) Local Plan update

Holly Harrison updated, and the following points were noted:

- The Planning Policy team continue to develop the Local Plan. A 12-week consultation was held over summer, with 30 public exhibitions. 3700 individual comments were received from over 600 respondents. Most comments relate to the Housing Development Strategy.
- The new government has published a consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF, which includes an extension to Local Plan submissions- from summer 2025 to December 2026. The proposals also increase the district's housing target to 880- we typically deliver c. 200. To justify lower delivery numbers, stronger evidence will be required. The team will likely need the additional time to prepare additional evidence for the new Local Plan.
- Etchingam: There is a danger of losing planning appeals because the Local Plan is outdated. Could information on the countryside and High Weald landscape be added to the new Plan?
Ewhurst: This could be raised with ESALC as it is a regional problem.
- Sedlescombe: What is the new timetable for the Plan?
Holly: The new deadline is December 2026 but the Plan can be submitted as soon as it is ready. The current Plan runs to 2028.
- Salehurst & Robertsbridge: When do developments stop counting towards the new housing figures?
Holly: Once permission is granted, this helps the annual housing supply figure. Numbers are site-led and infrastructure/sites to accommodate are considered as part of this.
- Pett: Will the Plan go to public consultation again?
Holly: The final Plan would be open for comments, and these would be submitted to government along with the final Plan.
- Etchingam: When will the allocation of sites take place? Where does this leave neighbourhood plans?
Holly: HEELA informs the Local Plan in terms of potential housing numbers and sites. Not far developed in process yet.
- Sedlescombe: Does RDC need to revisit looking at sites because of the new target?
Holly: Yes- will need to review site suitability/density. The call is still open for new sites.
- Bexhill: Highlighted walking as a priority but recognise that cars are important. Would ask that transport points are reconsidered. Will town/parishes be able to have input into the Plan?
Holly: Informal workshops were held, and future ones will be considered.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catsfield: Highlighted issues with urbanising villages e.g. transport points. Lots of concern over policies not matching life, can this be investigated? • Beckley: Are there plans to look at reducing numbers of second homes/Air BNB properties? Lorna: Overview and Scrutiny Committee have called for reviews. There is a paper on Monday for consideration. Holly: Planning has limited powers because these types of properties are still considered a dwelling. The new Local Plan can support action and proposes that developments are for primary residences only. Another proposal supports the subdivision of large properties. The team are also seeking to commission evidence on tourism accommodation. • Battle: Highlighted that RDC could levy taxes on developers to make them build and reduce land banking. 	
9	<p>To note the RDC Council Plan 2024-2028 consultation date</p> <p>To note that Planning Enforcement will be an agenda item at the Parish Conference in November</p>	
10	<p>To confirm dates of next meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15th January 2025 at Staplecross Village Hall, 2.30pm start. 	RALC Secretary to send invite and publish date online.

Item 8 Briefing notes.

8a Financial Stability

The financial challenges and risks facing RDC have been a subject we have returned to over the past year. RDC have worked very hard to understand and manage these risks and have been transparent about the process.

We know that balancing the budget for this and next year will be very difficult and that savings are still to be made. This agenda item invites RDC to update RALC members on the financial challenges for the year ahead and how it may tackle these. This could include corporate risks, capital programs, savings targets and trends in expenditure such as the cost of homelessness.

It is not our role to challenge RDC. If appropriate this can be done via our relevant district Councillors, but we do need to understand the challenges they face, the implications for all of us in the year ahead and what we can do to help.

8b Local Plan update

The draft Local Plan and HEELA sites were sent out for consultation which closed in July. The results are being analysed now by RDC. This agenda item invites RDC to share any key themes arising from the consultation and to invite RALC members to share any comments they feel important relevant to the consultation.

The Local Plan will play a vital part in the development of the district. There are limited future opportunities to comment and influence this plan. By sharing any emerging thoughts on the plan now we may be able to assist in its development.

An example of comments that have been heard since the consultation closed concern one of the principles that underpin the vision of the Local Plan, which is that the plan will support communities to walk, cycle or use public transport to access services. Rural communities rely and will continue to rely on the car. Urban communities may well be able to rely less on the car. If this principle also directs decisions on development of both scale and location there may be a fundamental flaw in the Local Plan for rural communities. We would like to hear the from both RDC and RALC members on this and any other comments made within the consultation.