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Report to Parish Councils – January 2021

This report is written in late January and is for Parish Councils meeting in February. It is for all 7 parishes in Northern Rother

January has started slowly at county, but budgeting is progressing. As I write this, cabinet has just met to approve the draft budget and this just needs approval at full council on 8th February.

Budget Update

As anticipated last month, the draft budget implies increases in ESCC council tax of just under 4.5% made up of:

- Core council tax of 1.99%
- Increase of 1.5 % in the adult and social care precept, carried over from last year when ESCC did not apply the full amount permitted by government
- Increase of 1% in the same precept for this year

At this time of financial hardship for many we would rather not make such rises but there are no obvious areas to make savings.

On the expenditure side we have reversed a planned cut in early years support, particularly important for some families as we emerge from the pandemic. Last month I also flagged some of the challenges which I repeat here for completeness:

- The increase in national insurance will be a significant burden, particularly for services such as care for the elderly and children where costs are dominated by staff costs. There are several increases in central grants such as the Services Grant and the Social Care Grant which should help. There is also a 'Market Sustainability and Fair Cost of Care Fund' which is intended to allow councils to pay fair costs for social care staff which will help with recruitment and retention. In theory the NI increase is intended for adult and social care but not at least for the first year where it is earmarked for the NHS.
- The settlement is for a single year only as there are to be consultations on funding reform over the next year. This makes medium term financial planning a little challenging though the underlying rationale is understandable.
- We still await details of a number of areas of special grants including for supported families, disadvantaged children, highways and SEND capital distributions and the new support for cyber security, all of which will affect our overall budget.

Final confirmation of the above is expected at a full council meeting, on 8th February

Cases

Each month I will give summaries/updates for a sample of current cases across Northern Rother. I currently have about 12 which are being progressed.

- **Flooding in Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge.** This continues to be a top issue with Huw Merriman's office dealing with National Highways, me dealing with Highways East Sussex and Councillor Sue Prochak dealing with Rother district council. There is some small progress – for example Highways East Sussex have raised a drop kerb which was enabling relatively small amounts of rain to go into some back gardens, but the main response needs to come from National Highways. More interim measures have been taken – for example there are now sandbags down one side of the A21 to help prevent water from land coming across the carriageway, into the layby and then to Northbridge Street. (Footnote – not checked but I believe these may no longer be needed as the blocked ditch has apparently been cleared). Immense pressure is being put on National Highways by Huw's office. One challenge is assessing if measures are working given that flooding does not occur every year and seems to depend on a combination of factors. Recent experience has apparently been good, with no evidence of flooding.
- **Robertsbridge Youth Centre.** This was closed during the pandemic but is now open. One further delay was caused when Legionnaire's bacterium was discovered in the hot water, requiring disinfection and further tests. This building is in fact owned by a trust for which ESCC is the trustee. Currently the fees from usage of the building just about cover day-to-day running costs but not larger maintenance costs. This arrangement is being reviewed to help determine a viable longer-term future for the building.

- **Road marking improvements near Robertsbridge Community College.** This predates my time as councillor but an application for matched funding for new road markings and dropped kerbs has been submitted by Salehurst and Robertsbridge PC. I will be speaking in support of this when it comes up for approval. Several other potential matched funding opportunities are in earlier stages of consideration but often the budgets exceed what parish councils can afford, even at the 50% funding level.
- **Designated wildflower verges being used for parking.** This is occurring in one road in the division – I am being vague for data protection reasons. A verge designed as a wildflower verge with a yellow flower sign has been used for parking and is a mass of mud. Sadly, this is not enforceable as it is not illegal. There are few deterrents than might be applied. Double yellow lines are a solution but there is no way they could be funded. Recorded here simply for information.