



Cllr Paul Redstone
Email: Cllr.Paul.Redstone@eastsussex.gov.uk
Phone: 07510 074267
Address: Edgingtons
Cripps Corner
Robertsbridge TN32 5RY

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Report to Parish Councils – October 2023

This report is written is for Parish Councils meeting in September. It is for all 7 parishes in Northern Rother.

Some of the items here are from information circulated by ESCC but which may not have drawn the attention of parish councillors and others.

Water Supplies

As discussed in last month's report, in September I met with the Operations Director of South East Water (SEW). The main topic was how, in the event of a loss of water supply to the villages, water bottles could be quickly provided in locations within villages. I have previously identified 7 locations, one in each parish, which had been agreed by parish councils and passed these to SEW. We also discussed the strategic issue of water pumping capacity, lack of which caused lack of water for 5 days in Rotherfield and Mayfield this summer.

The meeting was constructive though I do not (yet) have all the answers I want. Key points:

- The regulatory requirement set by Ofwat is for alternative water supplies to be provided within 24 hours. (I had previously been told three meal times which is a little vague). However after 6 hours they contact their water bottle supplier (Water Direct)
- They like to set up 'drive through' sites which are not in each village but in larger locations. However they can also set up 'drop locations' which are the ones we identified within villages. All locations need to be staffed. In drop locations they typically use SEW

staff who are normally office based and volunteer for this work. Such staff need to have health and safety training given by a video. I have suggested that we could identify volunteers from each parish who could also be trained by watching the video.

- Both drop and drive through locations need HGV access to the site or close by. The trucks carry forklift trucks which unload pallets and take them to the agreed place. They need to survey sites for this. I have asked that they do the surveys for the sites identified in advance.
- Individuals on the vulnerable list should get water bottles delivered. This seems to work fairly well though it is patchy. They agreed that their list of those who are vulnerable needs refinement as they previously encouraged everyone over 65 to sign up, even though many of us are in no sense vulnerable.
- Care homes and similar should get larger deliveries of water bottles or in some cases bowsers. However some were definitely missed off in recent events. They know they need to improve this.
- Farms and similar with livestock may have their own water storage which can be filled with tankers. In addition SEW are providing static tanks in advance to others without storage – they have 48 of these
- Recent experiences have shown that when water is restored some areas still lack it, typically due to air locks. I stressed that they need to improve this with more local support.
- The web site seems to be often out of date. This is apparently due to technical constraints – the web site is provided by a third party. They plan to bring this in house which will allow it to be updated more frequently.
- Finally and crucially they have appointed a 'Water Station Manager' to plan for and coordinate these activities and will put me in touch with him/her. I am hoping to make our parishes pilots for more local supplies, with volunteers where possible. I will report back once contact has been made.

Strategically we also discussed two issues:

1. Reducing the number of bursts
2. Capacity of the system to avoid Mayfield/Rotherfield issues

They are investing heavily in the distribution network which will help with both of these. Their plans are agreed in 5-year segments by Ofwat and they have just submitted plans for the next period which I think will come into force in a year's time. Ultimately these are paid for through our water bills and it seems likely that these will increase to pay for the investment. (The same applies to Southern Water for wastewater systems – see below).

These plans including making the system more resilient – for example the reservoir at Staplecross supplies Beckley, Peasmarsh, Rye Foreign and Iden through one pipe.

The Place Scrutiny committee at ESCC, on which I sit, plans to ask the CEOs of SEW and Southern Water to answer questions early next year on water supply. Last year we had a similar meeting with Southern Water about sewage issues.

Wastewater Treatment

In our area and indeed for most of East Sussex this is provided by Southern Water (SW). We're all appalled at the discharges of untreated sewage into rivers and the sea. Two years ago SW were fined £90M for illegal discharges of wastewater but we also need to drastically reduce the 'authorised' discharges into water courses.

As part of this and following on from our questioning of SW at Place Scrutiny last year, a group of Place Scrutiny committee members visited Hailsham North treatment works to see how the plant operates and some of the newer investments to address the issue. They are open in acknowledging their guilt for such discharges and how they are addressing them but it is clearly an immense task.

Wastewater treatment works have a standard capacity for treatment. In the event of heavy rain this may be exceeded so the wastewater is passed into storm tanks which are processed through the treatment works later. Discharges occur when even these tanks are full.

There are several ways to help this:

- Clearly SW need to invest in more capacity as well as improved treatment works. Some of this will come from shareholders but ultimately some will come from borrowing funded by ratepayers.
- Configuration of the water system to reduce the surges. As more land becomes impermeable due to tarmac, concrete and even artificial lawns, run off becomes more rapid. Significant new housing developments need to have SuDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) which slow run off from deluges to reduce the peaks. For years newer houses are supposed to have water from roofs etc go into soakaways rather than the sewage system but sadly this is sometimes ignored by builders.

We will be questioning SW again later this year again at Place Scrutiny.

ESCC Peer Review

The Local Government Association (LGA) offers county, district and borough councils independent peer reviews approximately every 5 years. ESCC commissioned such a review in June this year which included interviews with staff and councillors as well as review of documents.

The results were very positive indeed. In summary:

- The Leader and Chief Executive are well respected by staff, partners and members, described as accessible, approachable and responsive. The peer team commented that the managerial and political leadership of the council is well established.
- The whole council is open, approachable and inclusive with a genuine commitment to equality and diversity.
- Staff are loyal, proud and dedicated. There is no particular fixation on hierarchy and staff work together collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes they can for residents.
- The council is financially prudent, an evidence-based organisation, with a strong foundation of financial and governance processes as well as robust procedures in internal audit, risk and assurance. The council has a good record of financial stability and on the delivery of savings.

- There is evidence of a strong track record of delivery across all key service areas and the peer team commented that ESCC is an organisation that does what it says it will do and does it well.
- The council has a strong commitment to partnership working and is considered to be a trusted and respected partner.
- There are good member-officer relations built on trust and mutual respect, with members reporting that they get good support from officers.

We were not perfect, but this is an outstanding report. The review team made several recommendations which we are responding to and addressing. The full report including recommendations and initial ESCC response to them are public and easily seen on the web – for example in the papers from the 28th September Cabinet which can be seen at

<https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/documents/g5521/Public%20reports%20pack%2028th-Sep-2023%2010.00%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10>

Finance State of ESCC

There has been much publicity recently about Birmingham City Council issuing a Section 114, which means that it is not financially viable and effectively bankrupt. In a section 114 all except statutory services are then at risk and may be cut.

I have had several enquiries about the financial health of ESCC. There is no doubt that we face financial pressures – for example as shown in the same cabinet meeting papers (agenda item 5) referenced above. Financially, as the peer review found, we are very sound in the way we manage our finances. Our costs are funded by council tax from residents and businesses, but also from central government grants. In the past governments announced funding for 3 years, but in recent years they have only committed to funding levels for 1 year in advance, typically announced in December for the year starting in April the following year. We continue to lobby for more and predictable funding.

Excluding schools which have separate funding, ESCC budget is about £500M. In the current year 23/24 our forecast budget was, as required, balanced (break-even). However currently we are over budget overall, driven in particular by an overspend of about £15M on children's care, mostly in 'Looked after children' requiring residential placements. This is rightly one of our statutory duties so cannot be cut.

In future years we are forecasting deficits in 24/25 and 25/26 – the latter in excess of £40M though based on prudent assumptions about central government funding. We have limited reserves and these can only be used as transition to a properly balanced budget.

In summary, ESCC is not in any way close to a section 114, unlike some other councils around us. We continue to try to improve efficiency and not waste money. I hope that reassures residents.