



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

5th February 2024

Report to Parish Councils – February 2024

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

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.

Budget Update

ESCC has issued a draft budget which is expected to be formally approved at the meeting of the Full Council on 6th February. As I have reported previously, we, along with probably every other county, district and borough council, were very disappointed in the announced level of government support announced just before Christmas. We have been strenuously lobbying for a more realistic settlement to address our increases in costs, particularly in children services and adult and social care.

The draft budget has no cuts but for the first time in many years, has shown a deficit of £14M which we will have to fund from reserves. We have a legal requirement to set a balanced budget.

In response to pressure the government has announced £600M of extra funding directed towards social care. The conditions for this are not yet known, though we know we are expected to justify the use of it. We understand that it equates to about £5.3M for East Sussex but are awaiting confirmation. We are hoping that this might allow us to spend more on highways maintenance which we know from consultations is the wish of many residents.

The use of reserves to balance the budget is not sustainable. We do not have huge un-

earmarked reserves. The government settlement is only for one year rather than 3 years which does not help us to plan. Based on reasonable assumptions our summary financial forecasts are currently as shown below in £M, excluding schools which are ringfenced:

	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27
Income	538	546	561
Expenditure	552	591	623
Deficit	(14)	(45)	(61)

SouthEast Water

As I mentioned in some parish meetings in my verbal updates, I met with the Operations Director of SouthEast Water (SEW) again in January to discuss the frequent bursts which impact local residents, the time it takes for bottled water supplies to reach residents and some particular local issues, in particular the fact that so many bursts leave people at the top end of Brightling Road and surrounding roads in Robertsbridge with little or no water. The key points from my meeting:

- The configuration of the water system is not resilient in some areas with alternative pipe routes not available in some cases where there is a burst. There is a lot of investment going into improving this.
- Robertsbridge is generally supplied from Crowhurst water treatment works which is lower than some parts of the village. There is a booster to improve this but not enough. Loggers are being placed on pipelines in the area to help understand this with results expected in the next few months. Following this an action plan will be produced.
- Robertsbridge can also be supplied from a reservoir at Flimwell but in recent bursts this has rapidly drained. Pressure needed to be reduced to ensure continuity of supply but this resulted in loss of water at the top end of Robertsbridge. The plan is to connect the Flimwell reservoir to Bewl Water which would alleviate this.
- Water suppliers (and waste water treatment companies such as Southern Water) need to submit plans to Ofwat every 5 years. These have just been submitted for the period 2025 to 2030 and are being reviewed by Ofwat. The SEW plan has £1.9B of expenditure which is investment in running the network of just over £1B and capital investment of £830M. If agreed this will need to be funded by an increase in water bills, proposed to Ofwat to be 19.6% or £3.79 a month. SEW state that they have not paid dividends to shareholders in recent years with the exception of dividends related to interest payments.
- In the event of bursts, Ofwat policy is to begin providing bottled water between 6 to 9 hours after loss. Above 9 hours it must be provided as well as water being provided to livestock. SEW are doing the following to help improve resilience:
 - Purchasing more of their own tankers
 - As I suggested, working with local councillors and volunteers to allow more local

water supplies in village halls and other agreed sites

- Supplying tanks to farms, stables in advance of any bursts
- I also raised the fact that some care homes and businesses seem not have been provided with emergency water. However, in many cases this is apparently because their water supplier is actually through firms such as Castle Water who need to be contacted first, even though the end supplier is usually SEW. Care homes also need to be registered as having vulnerable residents.

Potholes and Highway Maintenance

I had a few comments that I had not mentioned roads in recent reports! I know that this is the top request from residents and the one on which almost all county councillors would like to spend more funds.

As I often report, we need at least £300M to get highways which are currently rated Red or Amber up to Green condition. This is way above our budget so our aim is to maintain roads at the current average standard. This is about potholes but also drainage which is often the cause of potholes or repairs which do not last as long. We also spend some capital funds on new or improved roads, but this is typically from separate government grants.

Our new contractor Balfour Beatty, which took over in May, seems to be much better than the previous supplier. They have service levels in terms of standards and timescales of repairs built into their contract. There have been some cases where we think potholes have not been prepared properly or within timescale and are raising this.

Strategically ESCC Place Scrutiny committee, on which I sit, convened a subcommittee to look at potholes. This comes to full council on 6th February and can be seen here <https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/documents/s54333/Place%20Ctte%2023Nov23%20-%20Appendix%20A%20Scrutiny%20Review%20of%20Pothole%20Management%20-%20Report.html?CT=2>

This is expected to be approved at Full Council on 6th February.

The key on potholes or other issues is the report them using the East Sussex Highways web site at <https://live.eastsussexhighways.com/report-problem>. Feel free to notify me of the case number and details which allows me to chase it.

Foster Parents

Looking after children is a major part of our responsibility. We can look after them in ESCC facilities, but this is expensive and more importantly not the best solution for many children.

Many people volunteer to be foster parents. They get paid but also know that they are helping some of the most disadvantaged in society. If you or any one you know would consider becoming a foster parent please get them to contact ESCC at <https://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/children-families/children-in-care/fostering>