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## Report to Parish Councils – October 2022

This report is written in late September and is for Parish Councils meeting in October, 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.

### Grass Cutting of Verges

As last year I receive many comments and feedback on this. It is true to say that it divides residents. Some would like to see all verges in villages and perhaps rural roads cut frequently. Others would like most verges left to grow to support wildflowers and 'biodiversity'.

I offer the following comments:

- Cutting more frequently costs more, whether paid directly by parish councils or indirectly by ESCC, both of which come out of council tax.
- Where verges are left to grow but there is a safety issue, typically a 1m swathe will be cut from the edge of the road if this gives sufficient visibility even if this looks untidy in some cases
- The weather in the last few years has varied. For example, this year in the summer the drought meant that growth was low, but recent rain may cause a spurt in growth. In other years it is different, making scheduling difficult.
- Typically, wider verges are cut to 2m from the road. If the verge is wider this means

that more persistent vegetation can grow such as small bushes. Apparently, such locations are cut back to the hedge (i.e. further than 2m) every 3 years

ESCC Contracts Management have sent out the following e-mail asking for feedback and I **would encourage all parish councils to complete it:**

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### **Rural Trial Update**

I wanted to get in contact and give you an update on the rural grass cutting trial as we are nearly at the end of the season.

As you are aware, this is the second year we have undertaken this trial with the hope that it would be a more typical season. In contrast to last year, it has been a very dry season which has limited the amount of grass growth. However, this variation still provides us with important evidence of the impact of the trial.

Going into September the rain seems to be making up for the earlier summer months which may cause the grass to suddenly spring up. Therefore as always, if you see a problem you can [report it as per normal via our website](#) or through the East Sussex highways contact centre.

In comparison to last year, this year we have seen a reduction in contact and feedback around the rural trial. What we have received has been generally positive.

### **We would like your Feedback**

The point of a trial is to allow us to understand the impact this change could have if rolled out wider, so your feedback is very important to us and we welcome both positive and negative comments. If you have any comments on the trial, including what you have been hearing from your residents or anything we could have done better, please let me know.

The [online feedback form](#) is also still open, so please feel free to share it with your residents.

As you are aware Beckley from your area have been taking part and we have recently asked for their feedback as well.

### **What happens next**

We will review any feedback along with any operational issues encountered, costs and an overview of the flora and fauna observed in the verges during the trial to allow us to take a decision on any changes going forward. At present I cannot advise an outcome, but will be able to let you know more in the coming months.

If you have any questions, please do let me know. Otherwise, I look forward to receiving your feedback.

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### **Current Bus Services**

Issues and concerns about bus services continue. Some of these concern school buses and these issues seem to have been resolved, though I am still looking at issues regarding payments/season tickets.

More recently there have been issues with Stagecoach announcing that some services will be

discontinued or reduced. These are mostly commercial services (i.e. not subsidised) but may have some ESCC subsidies for some particular services such as in the evening. Stagecoach believe that a number of services are no longer viable. I can sympathise with this as we know that drivers are in short supply and fuel more expensive, both of which push up costs.

I have been keeping in touch with ESCC officials on this. At the time of writing (30<sup>th</sup> September) from a meeting this morning, it is looking like ESCC has reached agreement with Stagecoach to provide some significant subsidies to allow services to continue, though perhaps with some changes. I expect an announcement early next week. The situation is changing rapidly so there may be more information by the time you read this.

I recognise that this is important to many people, particularly those with limited or no access to cars.

### **Bus Service Improvement Plan**

As I said last month, ESCC has been recently successful in winning about £42M from central government for the 'bus back better' programme, more formally known as the Bus Service Improvement Plan and this has just been confirmed. The funds have some constraints, for example some monies are for bus infrastructure which will not really help us in rural Northern Rother. However, I am pushing for some funds to help us make more use of buses, particularly for those without cars, but ideally for many more as it reduces congestion and carbon dioxide emissions.

One option which is included in the proposal is for Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) which is somewhere between taxis, which are booked for a specific person or persons, and buses which run to a fixed schedule. I expect DDRT to be implemented as a bus/minibus but with a route and timetable which depends on demand. Potentially this could be a very good solution for the villages of Northern Rother. Watch this space!

### **Community Hubs**

As part of addressing the pandemic, ESCC in partnership with district and borough councils established a series of 5 community hubs, one per district/borough, to support those with particular vulnerabilities or with a need for social contact or similar. These were intended to refer people to other services and involved council staff as well as those from the voluntary/charitable sector.

This worked well in many ways, but an organisation has been commissioned to review the engagement with stakeholders. These are seen as a key part of the social and healthcare integration where East Sussex has the Better Together programme.

Although initially these were seen as physical hubs, at least some of the services provided are online, so they may be renamed Community Networks.

Many parishes are developing emergency plans which have some overlap with such hubs, probably not for online access but for physical help. I am exploring whether and how this could work alongside the main hubs and would welcome feedback.

### **Cases**

Each month I will give summaries/updates for a sample of current cases across Northern Rother. I currently have about 20 which are being progressed. For ones which have been on

this list for some time, this month's updates are shown in italics.

### **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.

National Highways have completed the surveys though are waiting the detailed report, though the drains do appear to be clear. However, they have found a number of other issues including infilled ditches and pipework which they are addressing. We should have another update shortly.

Update from June. A survey has been carried out. Full results are not yet in but two more possible factors have been identified:

- A ditch from an adjacent parcel of land which connects into the watercourse, and which is heavily silted. Discussions continue with the landowner
- A catch pit just off Northbridge Street which is silted up. Fixing this may also help. Apparently, this is up to the 'local authority'. I am establishing if this is ESCC or Rother DC. ESCC do not have this as a county asset. Their advice is that it probably dates from the time when the A21 included Northbridge Street which would make the catch pit the responsibility of National Highways.

### **Development off the Paddocks, Northiam**

I have received multiple correspondence from residents and others about this development, but there are clearly several misconceptions about this, for example the need for a stopping up order. I have had multiple discussions with officials at ESCC and have passed on their comments to residents.

Some key points:

- Planning permission was granted in 2019 and mentioned stopping up orders but county have confirmed that none is required.
- Parking places are being moved not lost. In fact the number of parking places available seem to be more than guidance would require. *Recently I noticed that one of the layby parking spaces seems to have gone due to a raised area by the entrance to the new site. I believe the new site parking will replace this but in the short term one slot often used by Paddock residents seems to have gone. I am checking this against the approved plans.*

- One part of a water drainage pipe (sometimes called a sewer though in fact it is not for foul water) is being rerouted. This was put in by a previous developer and the parish council given some funds which are held in a 'sewer account' to be used in case of problems and which I believe now total about £80k. I know of no evidence that the rerouting will cause problems. The sewer account has never been needed. I understand that the developer has agreed with the Parish Council to fund a survey of the modified route and will await the results of this.
- There is understandable concern amongst residents about the disruption during the construction process itself. The developer is aware of this and *has built* a car park for contractors within the site. They are also trying to maintain good communications with residents. ESCC officials are keeping close to this as am I. I would encourage residents to keep me informed of any issues. *I have regularly visited the site and it seems to be running well.*

I understand that there was opposition to this development and sympathise with this, but planning permission was granted and it is going ahead.

### **Burst Water Pipes Affecting Robertsbridge, Staplecross**

This was caused by burst water mains in Flimwell and has affected a number of villages including Robertsbridge, Mountfield, Staplecross and I believe Wadhurst. My understanding from South East Water (SEW) is that this was made worse by high demand for water in the recent hot weather which reduced the water available in the network and limited the ability to redirect water around the burst pipe. Apparently, the dry weather also caused conditions making burst mains more likely. I am not expert enough to comment on this.

However, the situation was exacerbated by poor communication and planning as regards where bottled water was delivered. For example, those in Robertsbridge, a sizeable village, were asked to go to Flimwell. This is unacceptable and I have been in communication with SEW about this. They have improved communication via their web site after storm Eunice but accept that the location of bottled water stations is not ideal. Our MP has been in communication with the CEO of SEW and is putting pressure on SEW to improve this.

I have suggested to SEW that each village has a designated bottled water location which is identified and publicised in advance and included in the parish resilience plan which I know most parishes are developing. SEW have said 'we are looking at how we can use local Parish Councils in the area to help distribute water more effectively in the future' so I am hopeful that we can be better prepared.

*I have received suggestions from nearly all 7 parishes for the location of bottle stations. I will be checking these, taking photos and the exact coordinates, then pass these to SEW. There are no guarantees, but I am hopeful that they will see this as a good model which could be adopted elsewhere as well.*