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Report to Parish Councils – February 2023

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

Potholes

I can do no better than give the latest update to Councillors from the Assistant Director responsible for highways (dated 26th January):

Our contractor continues to work hard, around the clock, to repair potholes and has again taken on additional resources again this week and now has 23 gangs repairing potholes, 13 more than usual. They have repaired 2861 potholes since the beginning of January, 1086 in the past week. We have 3762 potholes in our reporting system awaiting repair, the majority of which will be 28 day repairs, but the number of potholes being reported has slowed now that the weather has been dry for a few days and the ice has disappeared.

A number of you have spoken to me about reports of potholes that have not been repaired, or that have been repaired but failed again. The Council policy is to repair only those potholes and other safety defects that meet our intervention criteria, we are not required, and do not have the resources, to repair every pothole or defect on the highway. Where a pothole or cluster of potholes doesn't meet the criteria for reactive repair, the Highway Stewards can recommend them for inclusion in our planned maintenance patching

programme. Where our contractor carries out a temporary repair of a pothole, or if an earlier repair fails, they will repeat the repair at the contractor's cost.

Needless to say, most, and probably all, ESCC Councillors are unhappy with road conditions and potholes. The challenge will be how to fund extra expenditure on roads. I am hoping that we can reach an agreement on re-prioritisation of some funds in the highways budget.

County Services and Budget

Following the RPPR process a draft budget was approved at Cabinet on 24th January and is expected to be approved at Full Council on 7 February. The key headlines are:

- No cuts in services
- Increase of 3% in council tax and 2% in social care precept, the maximum permitted by government without a referendum

I believe this illustrates the council's careful and prudent approach to budget planning. We have not had to make the cuts that are necessary in some other councils. We would all like to spend more on areas such as roads but at a time of the pressures on cost-of living it is unfair to try to increase taxes more than necessary.

Fire and Rescue Service

Last month I highlighted that we were forecasting a deficit of about £3M on a budget of £42M for this service. In fact, the government settlement was better than expected so the deficit, while serious, is less than this. Two options for funding were considered based on government limits: a £5 flat increase in the band D precept for the FRS (proportionally adjusted for other bands) or a 2.99% increase. The former would result in a budget deficit of about £1M, the latter about £1.6M. The proposal going to the Fire Authority on 9th February is for the £5 increase which reduces the cuts needed.

The legal requirement is to produce a balanced budget, though we can use reserves in the short term if we have a plan showing we are moving towards balance. But we will have to make some cuts and have identified some changes to manning, appliances and similar. These are all based on the IRMP (Integrated Risk Management Plan) as our top priority is clearly safety. Most will require public consultation and we are initiating this, though the local elections in May which give a period of purdah and which include the 6 Brighton-based councillor members of the Fire Authority mean that these have to be delayed until mid-year. So many savings will not occur until 24/25, which is one reason for using some reserves next year.

There is concern over our use of reserves which are in any case below what is considered sensible and our medium-term plan shows these increasing again after the next two years.

Unfortunately, there continues to be misleading information being circulated, spreading unnecessary fear amongst residents. I would encourage everyone to wait for the proper assessments and strategy.

A second challenge to the FRS is, of course, the decision by the Fire Brigades Union to call a strike having rejected a pay rise of 5%. Detailed planning to minimise risk to the public is being undertaken. Our budgets only include provision for 5% so a higher settlement would

post some challenges.

Finally the inspection of HMICRFS of East Sussex FRS has been published. I will report on this next month but it is good and shows excellent progress on the recommendations made last time.

Bus Services 254,304,305 - Hastings-Hawkhurst-Wadhurst-Tunbridge Wells

Stagecoach withdrew a number of bus services at the end of October 2022. These were operated on a commercial basis up to that point. These are key routes which support an important public transport need. To maintain the service East Sussex County Council (ESCC) have urgently adopted them as contracted services paid for by ESCC.

Cases

Each month I will give updates for a sample of current cases across Northern Rother. I currently have about 20 which are being progressed. I now only show updates or new information on significant cases. Please look at previous reports for the full background.

Flooding in Northbridge Street, Robertsbridge.

Recent bouts of heavy rain have given some concerns to residents, but it does appear that the improvements made to the A21 and layby are helping. Leaf fall partially blocking some drains in the layby has not helped. I have been checking regularly and liaising with local residents, particularly during heavy rain. One local resident deserves particular praise for clearing leaves from some drains. The layby is the responsibility of Highways England. Our MP's office has continued dialog with Highways England to give more frequent clearing of leaves and other improvements.

More actions are needed, in particular a permanent solution to diverting any overflow from the layby. I have suggested to Highways England a 'speed bump' to ensure that runoff does not reach Northbridge Street itself rather than the current temporary sandbags.

Development off the Paddocks, Northiam

The major issue at the moment is contractors parking in the Paddocks or Goddens Gill. Whilst this is legal in most cases, it causes inconvenience to local residents. I have continued liaison with the site manager and developer. This has helped in some cases. Some contractors have parked on the A28 but this in itself causes other issues. The use of the parking by the scout huts has been agreed.

The HGVs delivering heavy goods to the site have caused some damage to the corners by the green. The developer had already agreed to remedy this and has committed to agreeing the best approach with highways.

I am continuing to monitor this. Some contractors have needed to be reminded about using the scout hut area.