

Report from County and District Councillors – 9th April 2019

Report from County Council – Cllr John Barnes

The County has had another difficult year financially, but has either delivered the planned savings or has met the overspend out of the contingency set in place in anticipation that demand led services, particularly where the service is statutory, may not come in on budget. Hence the budget continues to be delivered to plan. There is a danger that the extremely difficult financial situation in which the East Sussex County Council finds itself, in common with local government more generally, can cause us to overlook the progress it is making in delivering some very worthwhile goals. It is probably worth reminding ourselves that in the coming financial year our current expenditure will be £375 million and that we are therefore a major economic entity in our own right.

Perhaps our most important task at the moment is the leadership we are giving, not least through the Health and Well Being board, of which I am a member, to the integration of Health and Social Care. Our success in this field was praised recently by the Secretary of State for Health when he visited Hastings. I think it true to say that this proceeds more successfully where local government is in the lead, which is true of East Sussex, but what is notable is the readiness of all concerned to innovate to the benefit of those who use either the health service or care services. The overriding goal is to ensure that as many people as possible are treated in community settings and that all are treated in the right place at the right time. Obviously the aim of public health is to keep people well, but where they are not early intervention is essential and some measure of our success is that our record on health checks is second to none in the South East. Currently we are piloting Home First, a discharge system that assesses people after they have been discharged to their own home or an intermediate care bed as this seems to work best. Delayed discharges, which have at times been a major problem, have substantially improved over the year from November 1917 to November 1918, down from 12.7 per 100,000 to 10.3, and I am told that the improvement is continuing. Those attributable to social care rather than health have been brought down by 68 per cent. Where people have been discharged successfully, it is important that they do not make an unnecessary or unwanted return. In the past we have had rather too many “frequent flyers” as the NHS terms those continually in and out of an acute care setting. Here again we are moving to a better position. No less than 93 out of every 100 people discharged from hospital are still at home 91 days later. Those who are frail often deteriorate rapidly if admitted to hospital, hence it is best to ensure that wherever possible that their frailty is managed with extra care in the community and our local teams have made substantial progress to see that is the case. Against a background of large financial deficits in the NHS, which preclude “double running”, progress is inevitably slower than we would wish, but it is real and ultimately it will deliver a system that is more cost effective for the country and better for those served.

I will be brief about our Children’s services which rank among the very best in the whole country, with our work with vulnerable families rated as ‘Outstanding’, The Hastings Community Support Service, based in Bexhill, which helps people with learning difficulties to lead independent lives has also been rated ‘Outstanding’ recently. Partly through government policy and partly through the economies have been forced to make, we are going to be able to do less to support schools in the future, but the good work we have done in recent years means that 4/5ths of our secondary schools, 93% of our primary schools and 100% of our special schools are rated good or outstanding, levels that are now better than the national average, and we are now going ahead with a Careers Hub to help those in education to make the right career choices.

Although the condition of our roads overall is better than it has been for a good many years, and we have been able to use the capital budget to do something for minor roads for the first time this century, I cannot pretend that there is not a lot more to do. Last year, as I understand it we resurfaced 26 miles of highway and over 160 carriageway improvement schemes were completed in the last nine months of 2018. The reconstructed Heathfield High Street was completed ahead of schedule and at long last Burwash High Street was resurfaced. A good deal of capital is going into major schemes. The Newhaven port access road and the second stage of the Eastbourne Town Centre Improvement scheme have been started and these of course like improvements to the main through routes under our control are part of our regeneration strategy that looks to enhance the local economy. Our wage levels remain low (Rother is still the poorest area in England) but they are improving faster than the rest of the South East. More than 150 new jobs were created in the last nine months of 2018; and some thirty businesses were helped to move into or to relocate within the County. Some of the businesses that we helped to get off the ground are now international players. The company that we created in partnership with Rother and Hastings, Seachange, continues to deliver for those towns, not least in the progress being made in north-east Bexhill, where recently the northern access to the link road has been completed. Although Trading Standards is now a key player in the partnership to fight scams, and continues to deliver the 'Buy with Confidence' and 'Support with Confidence' schemes, it has nevertheless found the time to create a new Business Advice and Support Partnership, which delivered fifteen workshops in the nine months to the end of 2018.

In the course of last year we consulted upon and finalised our core offer. This was not designed, as some supposed, to identify where we could make further cuts, although some are likely to be made, but rather to educate the Government about the situation in which we find ourselves after the complete removal of the Government's general grant to local authorities and to start a national debate. Considerable lobbying took place on the back of it and a number of ministers visited East Sussex at our invitation. The term achieved national currency. Our lobbying had some effect, producing a substantial amount of one-off funding, part of which has been set aside to underpin our three year plan. We are also developing our use of AI, have become involved in a successful Business rates retention pilot, and developed ways of generating income that have enabled us to reduce the cuts we have to make in the coming year by about £12 million. We shall still have to deliver further economies of £5 million pound and have had to raise Council Tax by the maximum permitted without going to a referendum. We are looking to the Comprehensive Review, the Fairer Funding Review and the Green Paper proposals on care for the elderly, all promised by autumn, to come to our relief like the US 7th Cavalry, but planning ahead in case neither they nor further one-off offers from Government offer relief. For this and other reasons I cannot recall a time when the future for local government finance looked as uncertain as it does now, but you can be assured that unlike some other authorities, our finances are being effectively managed and the overall situation remains under control. I think and hope that, now that the Government's finances are in better shape, austerity will be coming to an end, but our lobbying cannot. Local government both needs and deserves a better means of funding its services and there is much work to do to establish just what that is.

Report from District Council – Cllr Kirby-Green

Due to the up and coming elections there was no items to note.