

District Councillor's Report

First of all can I thank you all and particularly your Clerk on behalf of Eleanor and myself for all your hard work throughout the year, and for keeping us wholly in the picture on issues where she and I can help, not least planning. We have been pursuing concerns about enforcement recently, hopefully with some progress being made, but there appears to be some reluctance to admit that if the planning system is to remain credible, a strong enforcement policy is a necessity.

The Council adopted its new Corporate Plan last summer. It runs until 2027, but since some aspects of it did not have all-party support, it may be reviewed in part after the elections in May 2023. It can be accessed on the website and is a worthwhile read. Financial stability is proving hard to achieve. The Council will spend £16.7 million in the current year, up from £16.3 million, which means that the reserves will have to be drawn upon by over £3 million this year as indeed was the case in the financial year just finished. This contrasts markedly with the £4 million draw down that was planned over the whole four years 2019 to 2023 and more particularly with the estimate at the outset of the current term that only £250 thousand would be required from the reserves to balance the 2022/23 budget. Clearly the current level of expenditure is unsustainable. While some of the delay in raising income from regeneration schemes can fairly be attributed to the pandemic, government grants this year are marginally better than they were in 2019 and efficiency savings made have been cancelled out by fresh spending. It is also of some concern that we can only cushion the pay of our staff against inflation to a very limited extent.

The Environment strategy has made limited progress, but 200 plots in our tree survey have been completed and there has been useful work with our contractors to facilitate biodiversity, and to reduce both carbon emissions and energy usage. A carbon baseline has been identified which will allow us to monitor progress. There has been a slight increase in the amount of household waste re-used, recycled and composted, which now amounts to 51%; and a Litter strategy has been agreed.

A review of car parking charges has taken place which mainly affects Bexhill, Battle and Rye. A long stay car park with a reduced charge was identified in Battle last August.

We expect to have completed 100 new affordable homes in the last financial year and we have made some progress with reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation. About half the budget allocated to buy properties for those temporarily homes has been spent purchasing ten houses and flats. In addition we are accommodating 25 rough sleepers and 4 refugee families from Afghanistan. I have become aware of some concern that a registered provider, Optivo have been purchasing sites with a view to building only affordable homes, which appears not only to be contrary to local plan policies but means that no CIL payments are made. I have become concerned recently that they are also selling off rented properties in Burwash and Woods Corner, I suspect avoid the cost of making them more energy efficient. Since we are short of rented accommodation in our area, this latter action seems to me a retrograde step and one that I have been asked to question.

As you may be aware I have been appointed Vice Chairman of Rother's housing company, soon to be renamed. The Blackfriars site is our main concern, and oddly, even though building has yet to start, the scheme, which Wates are building for us, has been named as the best housing development at the Inside Housing Development Awards. It is an exciting development which will provide 200 houses (28 of them shared ownership and 42 rented) which will be energy efficient.

The Cabinet has recently adopted an anti-poverty strategy.

The Community Grants scheme helped 23 projects last year, including £30,000 for the Battle Health Pathway. A fund-raising lottery to help with the financing of this scheme has recently been launched.

Finally I should like to note that Rother's record in using Government monies to help business through the pandemic, which now totals £9 million, has been widely and rightly praised.