

Playden DC Report February 2019

1. Police and Crime

In August last year, I wrote an article and had a letter published in The Observer about coming across an example of modern slavery whilst carrying out licensing duties in my district councillor role. My point was that crime prevention and the maintenance of law and order are generally seen by the voting public to be the responsibilities of the police. But they are equally the responsibilities of local communities, using a “working together” approach. Modern slavery is not the only criminal behaviour present in Hastings and Rother; we have an increase in violent and sexual crime; ongoing drug abuse and drug related crime; an increase in a sordid practice known as ‘cuckooing’ (where criminal gangs use vulnerable people’s homes to sell drugs, making the drug dealers less easy to identify); cybercrime; domestic and child abuse. Much of this criminal behaviour is committed behind closed doors and the police cannot solve these problems alone; individuals, communities, public bodies, GPs, social workers, hospitals, schools, businesses and so on can all play our part. But to do so, it needs to be known what are the issues, what can be done and what a targeted working together approach will achieve.

I am really pleased to learn that Sussex Police launched a campaign on 21st January to raise awareness of the signs of modern slavery in Sussex. The campaign will run for three weeks on the Sussex Police Facebook and Twitter accounts. Modern Slavery is a crime hidden in plain sight involving the criminal exploitation of people who are often forced to work in horrendous conditions, live in cramped and often overcrowded accommodation and are at risk of violence and sexual exploitation. The police are asking communities in Sussex to look out for signs of modern slavery on their doorsteps. We need to be aware of the symptoms and behaviours attributed to victims of modern slavery and to report something we think is suspicious.

Detective Superintendent Jeff Riley who leads Sussex Police’s fight against modern slavery said:

“Victims of modern slavery cannot be defined by any one particular behaviour, circumstance, industry or characteristic but a combination of these could indicate that someone is a victim. Some of the signs to be aware of include people living in overcrowded or cramped conditions; being picked up for work very early in the morning and being dropped off late in the evening. Sometimes people are isolated from the community they live or work in, barely speaking or not joining in conversation, they may avoid eye contact and not interact with people around them. There is no one stereotype to define victims of this crime, they can be from the UK or abroad, men, women or children, all coerced into a situation against their will.”

In the six months to the end of September 2018, Sussex Police had identified more than 80 cases of potential victims of modern slavery. Over the same period more than 30 arrests had been made on suspicion of offences potentially linked to modern slavery.

For further details see Sussex Police [Modern Slavery advice](#) webpages.

You can also contact the national Modern Slavery [helpline](#) on 08000 121 700 or the Salvation Army Modern Slavery [helpline](#) on 0300 303 8151, or the independent charity [Crimestoppers](#) on 0800 555 111.

2. Cabinet Meeting 19th December 2018

I was away for this meeting but can report the following of note:

2.1 Draft Revenue Budget - Consideration was given to the report of the Executive Director on the preparation of the draft Revenue Budget for 2019/20 (the Report). The draft Revenue Budget showed an increase of £1.6m in the cost of services over the 2018/19 position. It was acknowledged that the Council had already achieved significant savings through the Council's 2020 programme.

Details of the Budget consultation will be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 28 January 2019. Thereafter, the results would be presented to Cabinet and full Council in February 2019.

The Report outlined the likely financial position and key issues that Members needed to consider as part of the budget setting process. As explained in previous DC Reports, RDC will no longer receive the Revenue Support Grant from 2019/20 and will be reliant on income from business rates, council tax, charges for services and income generation (hence our new Investment Strategy).

In respect of business rates, RDC had expressed an interest to take part in the Government pilot scheme (75% business rates retention scheme) in 2019/20, as part of the East Sussex Business Rates Pool (ESBRP). The pilot will enable the Council to retain a greater share of any business rates growth, as currently only 50% is retained. It is good news that the Government has confirmed that the ESBRP's application has been successful. It will be interesting to see how far this benefits our finances.

The new waste contract will cost significantly more than the current contract. Provision had been made in the financial forecast for an increase of £750,000. Following consideration of the final waste contract services bids, it became apparent that it will be necessary to increase the draft Revenue Budget by a further £750,000 to £1.5m. It is hoped that this cost can be reduced, but this may not prove possible.

There are some upcoming financial uncertainties, including income delivered via the Council's Property Investment Strategy; decreased planning fees during 2018/19; increased homelessness applications; and continued funding of East Sussex County Council's grass verge cutting in Rother. The grass cutting cost was anticipated to be in the region of £40,000, which would require compensatory savings to be identified due to the expected shortfall over the next five years. Cabinet agreed that up to £40,000 be made in the draft Revenue Budget for 2019/20 only to meet this cost.

2.2 Both the Ticehurst and Rye Neighbourhood Plans came before Cabinet as a matter of urgency so that RDC could forward the Neighbourhood Plans to the Independent Examiner, with RDC's representations before relevant deadlines. Cabinet granted the Executive Director delegated authority to do so.

2.3 Following the early exit from the Kier contract, Biffa has been appointed to provide waste and recycling collection services to all households in Hastings, Rother and Wealden Districts and to provide street cleaning in the Rother and Wealden areas. Hastings Borough Council has decided to bring its own street cleaning in-house. Services will start on 29th June. The procurement process was robust and we hope that Biffa's sound reputation and up to date technology will provide not only a better service for Rother residents, but also a safer one for drivers and residents.

3. Cabinet Meeting 14th January 2019, of note:

3.1 The draft Public Realm Strategic Framework was approved for consultation with key stakeholders and the public, with a report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the spring.

The draft Strategic Framework addresses the key issues and opportunities discovered by the Public Realm Working Group, including the challenge of traffic management - reducing speeding and making our roads safer; opportunities for economic growth through major public realm works; strategic planning of public realm improvements; conservation of heritage assets and historic streetscapes; and maintaining and enhancing the character of our towns and villages. Please see paragraph 4 of November 2018 DC Report for further explanation.

The Strategic Framework addresses the need for better and more co-ordinated plans, standards and procedures. It does not contain specific protocols, but it is recognised that each of the actions set out in the document will be a collaborative task between different departments within RDC and liaising and working with relevant outside agencies.

3.2 RDC's Debt Management Policy is to be amended. This essentially revolves around the Annual Governance Audits; a 2015 Credit Management (Debt Recovery) audit recommendation is still outstanding, being that there are no debt recovery targets in place (although for clarity, this omission does not have a detrimental impact as RDC's debt recovery processes for local taxation and sundry debts are well established). Recovery should be 100% - but this is not possible for a variety of reasons. RDC's collection performance is reflected in its bad debt provisions which identify different categories of debt; this is to form the basis of monitoring performance on debt recovery on an annual basis.

3.3 Members' Allowance Scheme 2019-2023. The Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) on Members' Allowances for 2019-2023 can be found on RDC's website. Note that RDC decides the level of remuneration for Members' Allowances, but should 'have regard to' the advice of the IRP.

Cabinet resolved to take on board the recommendations of the IRP, of note:

(i) to cease the Broadband Allowance of £200 per year from May 2019, on the basis that most people have and pay for it anyway as part of general living. This will save RDC £7,600 per year (or £30,400 over the next term).

(ii) whilst remuneration is not and should not be a driver to be a councillor and acknowledging that the work of a councillor contains a strong element of voluntary public

service, it was agreed that the current Basic Allowance (£) should increase by 2% - in line with staff pay award for 2019/20 and each subsequent year in the next four years based on staff pay award agreed in the previous year. Special Responsibility Allowances (SRA) (such as Cabinet role) should also increase by the same, but that a Member can only receive one SRA even if performing more than one such role.

By way of illustration, RDC Members receive a current Basic Allowance of £4,517.64; Wealden DC £4,431; and Hastings BC £6,030.

(iii) Shadow Cabinet; there was discussion as some opposition councillors felt that consideration should be given to 'Shadow Cabinet allowances', on the basis that this may help to provide a more effective opposition and improve the challenge and scrutiny of Cabinet. RDC does not have a Shadow Cabinet as there is currently a small opposition. This could of course change in the future. It was felt that should there be a Shadow Cabinet, such Members would not have any responsibility nor obligation - other than the normal challenge of Members - which would warrant additional allowances at the expense of the taxpayer.

3.4 The Crowhurst Neighbourhood Plan, with RDC representations, was recommended for submission to the Independent Examiner for consideration.

4. Fuel Poverty

Way back in 2016, I was concerned about fuel poverty in our District and RDC's policy in this regard, especially regarding our more deprived residents, including those living in some housing association properties with electric night storage heating. I liaised with AmicusHorizon (as it was at the time) which was exploring alternative forms of heating. RDC officers were very helpful and facilitated a meeting between Your Energy Sussex and AmicusHorizon to consider how they could work together to address fuel poverty in some of the Amicus homes.

I was delighted to be recently invited by Optivo to see an example of their new heating and water systems in some of the homes in Pelwood Road, Camber. It was great to hear (and feel!) that the new air source heat pump/solar panel/battery system was providing warmth at less cost. I was told by the residents at the home I visited that they had not experienced condensation (or black mould) since the new system was installed. This is excellent news all round, particularly for their health and well-being. A step in the right direction!

A reminder to residents about fuel poverty initiatives in our District; RDC has been training frontline staff about fuel poverty, assisting residents to get help, identifying people at risk of fuel poverty and promoting various local fuel poverty reduction initiatives for vulnerable residents. It does this as part of the East Sussex Energy Partnership (ESEP). ESEP was formed by the local councils in 2007 to promote home energy efficiency, insulation and renewable measures. ESEP aims to help protect individuals and communities in East Sussex from the effects of living in a cold home.

www.winterhomecheck.com

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