

## Playden DC Report June 2018

1 RR/2017/1450/P Shellfield, Playden

Result! We all worked hard on this! Well done to everyone who wrote, voiced and fought for Playden and its residents. I hope that the developer does not lodge an appeal (see 3.2 below), but we must continue to stand together and fight against these opportunistic developers wishing to impose disproportionate large housing developments on our small villages.

2. Cabinet Meeting 14th May, of note:

2.1 Review of Local Pay Award - the 1% pay cap has now been lifted. People need to feel valued and treated fairly - employees absolutely need at least a modest rise. Inflation has been growing faster than both public and private sector pay, meaning that employees have seen their pay fall in real terms. Members were keen to reward staff and agreed to continue to support the Living Wage Foundation for the lower paid permanent staff (representing a 3.6% increase). Members also approved a 2% increase for two years. A 2% pay increase was considered fair and follows the national award pattern of 2%.

Point to note, the average public sector salary is around 3% higher than the private sector, even when adjusted for qualifications. However, private sector pay has been growing faster than public sector in recent years and current trends indicate that they will continue to do so - closing the gap. Whilst the private sector pays for public sector salaries, it is necessary to keep abreast of competitive pay to avoid difficulties in recruiting, retaining and motivating staff.

2.2 Call-in and Urgency Procedures - the Call-in procedure is a mechanism by which RDC's Overview & Scrutiny Committee can challenge decisions made by the Executive (Cabinet) that are not yet implemented. This procedure is monitored annually - it is a robust system which works well. Between 13th March 2017 and 12 February 2018 thirteen Executive meetings were held; one Executive decision was called-in and two Cabinet decisions were deemed and resolved as urgent decisions. Due to a reduction in the size of the O&S Committee, it was decided that any two non-executive Members (rather than O&S Committee Members only) can now call-in a decision made by the Executive.

2.3 Property Investment - in October 2017, Cabinet approved the establishment of a property investment strategy, supported by a trained up Panel of Members and officers to receive proposals for and agree property investments (to increase income for the Council - c.f DC Report October 2017). A revised strategy was approved allowing borrowing of up to £35 million, reflecting recent changes in legislation and RDC's regeneration ambitions. External specialist property investment advisers will be retained as necessary on each transaction, for which £100,000 was approved to be made in the Revenue Budget.

2.4 Leading on from 3.3 above, Members approved the formation of wholly owned local authority trading and holding companies. To support RDC's income generating ambitions, wholly owned subsidiary companies may need to be established due to current Government legislation governing such activity. We would need such companies if we invest in property or in partnership with other local councils. There may be financial and reputational risks with

this development, but transparency will be paramount so that the roles of officers and members is clear to Rother taxpayers.

3. Cabinet Meeting 4th June 2018, of note:

3.1 Provisional Revenue Budget - inter alia, RDC has received a number of Government grants to help and support the Council with the its new and amended homeless policy. During the last year the number of households presenting as homeless to RDC has increased (14 families). This has caused for additional spending for RDC on temporary accommodation (£452,000), in spite of Government funding of £230,000 which partly met the cost. Contrary to popular belief, Universal Credit has not caused homelessness, but has exposed issues in the housing situation. A Working Group has already been set up to investigate RDC's housing situation, needs and homelessness.

3.2 We have had to set aside £100,000 to fight an appeal against a Planning Committee decision to refuse planning permission for the building of 42 new homes on 'land north west of Shrub Lane, Burwash'. As the applicants have exercised their right to lodge an appeal, we must fight this - we have a good case; we cannot just roll over and allow developers to ride rough shod over Rother residents.

4. Rother Valley Railway and A21 Level Crossing - I have lodged an objection with the Secretary of State for Transport against the proposed level crossing on the A21 at Robertsbridge. I also wrote a letter to The Observer urging local residents to object and published an article in a political publication. My concerns are twofold in the main; the safety issues regarding level crossings and the negative economic impact a level crossing on the A21 will have on economic growth in Hastings and Rother District. Level crossings are and remain dangerous areas for both pedestrians and road vehicles. The number of level crossings across the country is gradually being reduced because the risk of accidents at level crossings is considered high. Back in 2004 the director of the UK Railway Inspectorate commented that "the use of level crossings contributes the greatest potential for catastrophic risk on the railways." The creation of new level crossings on the national network is banned (the exception being reopening unavoidable crossings on new/reopening railway lines and on heritage railways), with bridges and tunnels being the more favoured options. I accept that RVR is a heritage railway, but on consideration have determined that any level crossing raises serious safety concerns, especially on A21, which has the reputation as one of the most dangerous roads in the country.

My overwhelming concern is the negative impact a level crossing on the main road to Hastings and surrounding towns and villages will have on the economic growth of Hastings and Rother District as regards tourism and other business activity and generation. Hastings and Rother District are already at a disadvantage in this regard because of the single lane north and south for much of the A21, south of Tunbridge Wells; the tailbacks particularly during the summer months are a nightmare and already deter some visitors from making the often arduous journey to our glorious towns and villages. The A21 begs for dualling, rather than being made even worse by a level crossing which will disrupt traffic, reportedly 8 return journeys per day - that is twice per hour during a typical day. What a tragedy for Hastings and Rother towns and villages - and their visitor attractions. It will kill any hope we have of continuing to build tourism and economic growth, absolutely vital for jobs and economic activity in this region.

The A21 is renowned for being a “complete nightmare”, “a joke” and businesses have reported to “hate coming down the A21”. ESCC's Local Transport Plan [3 2011- 2016 4.48](#) recognises that "our strategic infrastructure, to carry longer distance traffic, is seen as a major constraint by local business to achieving economic growth and improving our connectivity with the rest of the region. This can result in traffic using less appropriate rural roads, creating a greater maintenance burden on those roads leading to higher accident rates and poorer connectivity between areas". The A21 Reference Group made up of business, economic and political representatives (including all our local MPs) has been campaigning for a number of years for improvements to the A21. I fail to see how RVR's plan fits in with the objectives of the A21 Reference Group.

Research shows that ‘well-designed infrastructure investments have long-term economic benefits; they can raise economic growth, productivity and land values’ (LSE Growth Commission - Infrastructure and Growth). Other research has found that road related accessibility improvements between 1998 and 2007 increased local employment. Road projects specifically, can increase business entry either by new businesses starting up or existing businesses re-locating. Transport improvements can stimulate the economy by not only raising the productivity of existing businesses and workers, but also by attracting new firms and private sector investment. This is precisely why our MP, Amber Rudd, is not only working to ensure a fast train service on the Ashford/Hastings/Rye line, but also lobbying for the dualling of the A21.

A major upgrade to the A21 north of Tunbridge Wells was recently completed. This was embarked upon because for decades the single carriageway, such as currently exists for most of the road south of Tunbridge Wells to Hastings, was a source of daily congestion, causing delay to drivers and frustrating businesses that depend on the road. The aim of the improvements was to speed up journeys, improve safety, reduce congestion and boost the economy. This has already proved successful and is precisely the sort of upgrade that Hastings and Rother are crying out for; not adding further impediments to economic growth by having to wait for steam engines to cross the main road.

I care enormously about the people and businesses that I represent in my capacity as a district councillor, particularly as far too many of them have limited opportunities; Hastings and Rother District are not affluent areas of the South East. On the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation, the region ranks little above the national average with pockets of deprivation and depends not inconsiderably on tourism for jobs and economic activity.

Tourism is recognised as an important part of our rural economy and has huge potential for growth, particularly in our more deprived areas, where there is untapped potential to generate tourism-related economic growth and employment. Rother and Hastings have a huge amount to offer tourists, visitors and locals alike - not just a steam train. It has an abundance of natural attractions; found in our beautiful beaches and glorious countryside for all sorts of outdoor pursuits. We have a wealth of historic towns, buildings and gardens. We have world-renowned art galleries, vineyards and attractions such as The Source skatepark in Hastings, as well as the truly pioneering centre for arts and crafts in Bexhill, the De La Warr Pavilion. To enhance this, Rother District Council works very hard, together with partners including the De La Warr, Hastings Borough Council, local businesses and community groups, to be innovative in boosting the tourist, arts and culture offer and local economy.

But the success of Hastings and Rother District tourism offer depends on the visitors coming. It is widely accepted that rural tourism is challenged by transport infrastructure. The proposed level crossing will add to the difficulties experienced on the A21 and will have a negative impact not only on current tourism, but also on its potential - and necessity - for growth in the region. It is therefore, I believe, disingenuous for RVR to underestimate the impact that traffic congestion and safety issues, caused by a level crossing across the A21, will have on economic growth. The socio-economic cost to Hastings and Rother District far outweighs any small increase in tourism that an extension of the line from Bodiam to Robertsbridge may bring, if that extension disrupts our main trunk road.

**SAH**