

Report for 2021/22 from Rother District Cllr Andrew Mier

(Based on Cllr Sue Prochak MBE 's report to Salehurst and Roberstbridge PC)

In 2022-23 we anticipate the council will spend £16.7 million for services in Rother. The cost of services in 2021/22 was £16.3 million. More detailed information on the Council's finances can be read in our medium-term financial strategy, along with past and current budgets on the Council's website <http://www.rother.gov.uk/article/1059/Budgets-and-accounts>

The Rother Corporate Plan 2020-2027 was adopted in July 2021. It has our vision of putting our residents at the heart of all we do. The plan can be found on our website at [Rother District Council Corporate Plan 2020-2027](#). Our top objectives are to reduce our and our contractors' carbon footprint and to ensure a secure financial footing.

Some highlights over the year were:

Waste and Recycling

The proportion of household waste that goes for reuse, recycling and composting has risen slightly from 50% to 51% based on current estimates.

Work during the year has been focused on reviewing the Governments draft UK Environment Bill which achieved Royal Assent in December 2021 and will positively impact recycling rates in the future.

A 'Rother District Litter Strategy' has been agreed which focuses on getting the 'Right Litter Bin in the Right Place' and work will continue on implementing the strategy, clamping down on littering and fly tipping.

Environment Strategy

Completed projects in 2021 include:

- a.a) Training with our various partners in conducting tree surveys, carbon literacy training and reviewing the carbon footprint and carbon reduction.
- a.b) 200 survey plots were completed in 2021 for our tree survey
- a.c) Engaging with local volunteers to complete the tree surveys
- a.d) Working with our contractors to facilitate bio-diversity, reduce carbon emissions and reduce energy usage.

The Council agreed to contract out the provision of electric vehicle charging points in our own car parks.

Car Parks

The Rother District council owned car parks task and finish group review which focused on the impact of the new Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) on-street parking scheme introduced by East Sussex County Council in October 2020, was completed in 2021. Changes to car park operating hours and charges were adopted in response to public consultation; residents were encouraged to submit responses to East Sussex County Council's CPE review by end of September 2021 and just under 1000 were received which is a huge success; and written feedback from the Rother review has been given to ESCC for inclusion in their annual CPE review. The task and finish group implemented various changes including designating long stay car parks with lower daily charges in Bexhill, Battle and Rye in August 2021 to reduce congestion and carbon emissions.

Planning

When the Alliance took administrative control of the council we found the planning department to have become practically dysfunctional, insular and largely working in a silo. The service was understaffed and struggling to keep up with getting planning applications decisions made. This was causing significant problems and a high level of complaints.

Sadly, because Covid struck the situation got worse with planning applications falling behind creating a nine month backlog.

Once the Authority came to grips with working with Covid, the administration was able to restructure the top level of management to create a single Chief Executive and then restructure the management of the planning department to integrate it into the rest of the Authority. The then Head of Service and Development Manager left the service.

Since that restructure in September 2021 **we have doubled the rate at which decisions are made** on planning applications and hope to have cleared all the backlog in the next few months. This is in the face of a dramatic increase in planning applications this year with new applications up two and a half times in the first three months of 2022.

In addition to this, every process in the planning department is undergoing a complete review to make the service 'resident friendly'. This is taking longer as it affects all the underlying systems used by the department. We hope to see some of the changes come through in the next few months leading to easier, quicker and more open communication between the planning department and residents. Recently a newer more efficient pre-application advice service has been launched and a better process for dealing with enforcement.

One of the earliest changes the new administration put in place was to make speaking for and against applications at the planning committee very easy with Town and Parish Councils having an automatic right to speak on all applications going to committee. This has been extremely successful. With the new technology introduced by the administration it also allows speakers to join virtually.

Simply the planning department is well on the road to becoming a much more open, efficient and communicative department.

Meanwhile, we are working towards adopting a new Local Plan by December 2023. This would take a plan to 2039. There has been a call for sites and these are being assessed and new policies introduced. This will be available for consultation. The Parish Council plans to update and revise their Neighbourhood Plan.

Housing

- a) Between April and December 2021, 83 new affordable homes were built in Rother, the best ever number. In 2020/21 there were 77 new affordable homes, therefore, there is a substantial increase compared with previous years.
- b) In December 2021, 1,867 households were on the council's housing list. This is an increase of 148 households since March 2021.
- c) From the pandemic, there is a rise in households applying for housing and placed in temporary accommodation. In March 2021, households in temporary accommodation peaked at 87 and held at 87 households by June, falling to 69 by December 2021.
- d) Blackfriars in Battle is a housing initiative led by Rother Districts Council. It will provide 200 new homes. Wates Residential, our partner contractor is building the development. The project includes 42 affordable rented homes and 28 homes for shared ownership, starting in Spring 2022. In November 2021, the Blackfriars development was named best housing development in the UK (suburban and rural category) at the Inside Housing Development Awards. All new homes are designed to significantly reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions.
- e) As part of the Council's Temporary Accommodation Support Scheme we have purchased 10 houses and flats for use as temporary accommodation, providing a dedicated support service to secure alternative accommodation.
- f) As part of the national pandemic response, the Council has actively supported the Government's call to bring all rough sleepers off the streets and into accommodation. All rough sleepers have been offered temporary accommodation solutions and we continue

to accommodate over 25 rough sleepers who would otherwise be forced to sleep on the streets. The Council has stepped up to play its part in supporting the resettlement of Afghan nationals who are former employees of the British Armed Forces during the recent conflict. We have welcomed 2 Afghan families to date and have a further 2 arriving in March.

Community Grants

In 2021 our Community Grants scheme paid out over £150,000 to 23 completed projects, including a grant for drainage at Pett Tennis Club, as well as numerous small grants to celebrate HM Queen's Platinum Jubilee. The next funding round opened in April 2022.

Queens Platinum Jubilee Grants

The fund available for grants to celebrate Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee has now been fully spent and no further applications will be considered. This funding was a first come, first served basis and Cabinet provided delegated authority in September 2021 to agree grants up to the value of £500 within the allocated budget of £10,000 (plus additional bonus grant allocated from small grants not used).

We have been delighted with the range of activities proposed and also the spread across the District. All we need to do now is hope for good weather when the events are occurring!

Community Lottery

RDC has been delighted with the response from organisations to the launch of the Rother Community Lottery. The Community Lottery aims to help raise money for the many charities, not-for-profit community and voluntary groups that work within the Rother District. From every £1 lottery ticket purchased, 60p will go towards good causes.

It is a way of fund raising with little effort except encouraging your group's supporters to nominate your group when they buy a ticket. Rest assured this type of lottery has been researched and found that it is low risk in terms of encouraging gambling, particularly as there is no immediate win or lose.

Those already participating include Icklesham Trusts Committee, Fairlight Parish Council and Strandliners CIC. It's not too late for other organisations to sign up.

We are really excited about this new lottery scheme. Not only will it help local organisations and charities but will also support projects that benefit the residents of the Rother District.

Further information can be obtained at [Rother Community Lottery – Rother District Council](#).

Accessible Rother:

Beach access matting was used at Camber Sands for the first time in July 2020. Camber Sands is a beautiful sandy beach but sometimes difficult to access for wheelchair users, those with mobility issues and families with children in prams or pushchairs. The matting sits above the sand, can be configured in different ways, and helps more people access and enjoy the beach. The equipment is getting a lot of use and the feedback is extremely positive. The council is working with access groups on this project.

Discretionary Disabled Projects Grants (DDPG) (*currently suspended pending central government clarification*) have been introduced to provide grant funding for community disability projects to eligible voluntary/community groups, parish councils, faith groups, and not-for-profit organisations. The grant is intended to support smaller projects that are easily deliverable, and which promote access to buildings and spaces for the general public i.e. access is not exclusive to particular groups or individuals. The grant is discretionary and as such is subject to capital funds being available, thus the provision of the grant may be limited or discontinued at any time. For further information, please see our website at [Discretionary Disabled Projects Grant – Rother District Council](#) Fairlight Village Hall and Fairlight PC have received small grants for improved disabled

access.

Age Friendly Rother

In September 2020, the World Health Organisation approved the council's application to join the global network of age-friendly cities and communities. This was an important step to help older people in Rother feel valued, supported and lead healthy and active lives. As part of its commitment to becoming recognised as age-friendly, the council works with East Sussex County Council and Rother Voluntary Action to support and engage with older people in the district. Through the Healthy Ageing and Innovation in Rural Europe (HAIRE) project, volunteers have held over 200 hours of in-depth conversations with local older people about their lives, needs, and aspirations. Robertsbridge was chosen as one of the pilot sites and now Helping Hands, our Community Friends Group is implementing action based on the findings. The council, in conjunction with Active Rother, held the 'How to Age Well in the 21st Century' event at the De La Warr Pavilion to support over 50s stay healthy and active.

COVID-19 Support for Businesses

Throughout the year the Government has continued to supply funding for businesses suffering due to the COVID-19 pandemic. So far during 2021/22 the Council has paid out just over £9 million in business grants, of which £1,7 million has been discretionary awards where the eligibility criteria has been set by the Council

1066 Country Walk

The walk relaunched in 2021. It brings history to life along a 31-mile footpath from Pevensey, through Battle and ending in Rye. The route has sculptures, new signs, and information boards about William the Conqueror and his invading Norman Army. The project was led by the council's cultural development officer and was only possible with the support and enthusiasm of landowners, local champions, tourist destinations and partners, working together since 2018.

Bexhill Town Council

A Parish Council for Bexhill-on-Sea (subsequently called a Town Council) was created on 1 April 2021 meaning that the whole of Rother is now parished. The first elections were held on 6 May 2021.

There are on going discussions about devolving Bexhill services to the Town Council.

An open council

- a) All public Council meetings can be viewed online (live or later as a recording) with links from our website.
- b) We have started a review of our customer service strategy.
- c) We are in the process of updating and modernised the Council's constitution.
- d) In 2021, the council gave local people an opportunity to have their say on a wide variety of local issues, such as: high street shopping areas, our budget and financial plans, our draft Corporate Plan, the Bexhill Bike & Skate Park, the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Rother's public space protection order and anti-social behaviour and extending street trading in Bexhill and Ticehurst.
- e) We are sharing events and training sessions on line for our parish and town councils.
- f) We have reintroduced the conference for our Town and Parish Councils giving them to opportunity to work with us and communicate issues.
- g) We have regular meetings with both MPs, giving us opportunities for two-way dialogues over the various challenges we face.
- h) My Alerts, the weekly email for residents has been improved to give more information including local planning applications and advice on reducing energy use. To sign up go to <https://www.rother.gov.uk/my-alerts/>

Emergency Planning

Recent weather events and the subsequent consequences have certainly focused minds on the Council's emergency planning role and response. The Council's in-house Emergency Planning Officer is leaving us later this year and in order to fill the role, we are proposing to join the East

Sussex Resilience and Emergencies Partnership (ESREP). It is made up of the District and Borough Council across East Sussex. Apparently Rother was the only non member.

An essential feature of ESREP is to share emergency planning resources, create common approaches, mutual aid and strengthen emergency management capabilities. The team also act as a single point of contact for partners and to provide year-round 24/7 Duty Officer cover for when emergencies occur or threaten, and to ensure that relevant information is shared with relevant officers to provide an appropriate response. This includes representing ESREP at the Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF).

Environmental Enforcement

We are all aware of the problems caused by issues such as dog fouling, littering and fly-tipping, along with the associated difficulties in actually identifying offenders.

Other authorities use contractors, who employ uniformed staff to patrol their districts, identifying offences and issuing fixed penalty notices (FPN). This service includes the prosecution of offenders who fail to pay an FPN, which is a statutory requirement.

Cabinet approved agreed to undertake a procurement exercise to seek a provider to carry out such enforcement for RDC. The intention is that there is no costs to the Council, as these would be met from the income received by the company by issuing FPNs.

Prior to this activity starting it is recognised that there needs to be a publicity and education/information drive to inform people of the issues caused by environmental offences and that there will be people out and about enforcing the relevant legislation.

At the Cabinet meeting Councillors were very conscious of the fact that enforcement activity shouldn't just focus on 'easy' targets and were keen to see this reflected in the contract with the successful company.

Cllr Andrew Mier
May 2022