

# Hastings Council Leader's Report: February 2018

from Peter Chowney

*1<sup>st</sup> February 2018*

## Hastings Council Budget 2018-19



This year, we've seen continued cuts in the government grant funding we receive. Revenue Support Grant, the main government grant, has been cut by 24%, to £1.5m. In 2010, this grant was £9m. On top of that, another of our big grants, New Homes Bonus, was cut by 36%. These grants have not been replaced by any other sources of government funding.

To cover this gap, the council has had to do two things: firstly, it has to run its own services more efficiently; and secondly, it has to generate more income.

Making the council more efficient has involved a range of actions, from reviewing the detail of the way staff work, to IT systems that replace manual administrative tasks, as well as improving online reporting and service applications through the 'My Hastings' website. By the end of this year, we're hoping that all transactional council services will be available to apply for and pay for online. We've also been able to cut down on the amount of paper we use – we'll be saving an additional £55,000 in paper and printing costs over the coming year.

Income generation remains a high priority. There are three main strands to this: commercial property purchases, the council housing company, and energy generation.

Commercial Property Purchase is the easiest way to generate significant income quickly. The council has recently bought, for example, the Sedlescombe Road Retail Park (Dunelm and Pets at Home) and the Bexhill Road Retail Park (TK Maxx). This and other purchases have generated a net income of over £600,000 in a full year. More purchases are in the pipeline.

The new council-owned housing company is now buying properties in Hastings, to make them available for rent. As well as boosting the supply of good quality, well-managed rented housing, this will bring in net income too – we're aiming to generate at least £60,000 in this way over the coming year, but it could be more if the right properties can be identified quickly enough.

Energy generation is a potential big earner, but longer term. Hastings Council is intending to establish a local supply network for electricity generated from local sustainable sources, which would both earn the council income and make cheap electricity available for local people and businesses. To begin this process, the council will this year be installing solar panels on properties it owns, bringing in around £280,000 in income.

However, even these initiatives won't cover the massive cuts in government grant, and further service reductions will be needed, in the medium term. We'll need to continue our transition to be a different kind of council, doing what we do more efficiently, and doing different things in different ways, funding more of our activities from generated income and competitive grants.

During 2017-18 however, efficiency savings and rent from new commercial properties generated more income than expected, so we have not needed to make any frontline service cuts. There will be no staff redundancies, and car park charges will be frozen. We will however need to increase the Council Tax by the maximum allowed without a local referendum (2.99%). This will mean the Hastings Council portion of the Council Tax will increase for a band D property by £7.48 a year, to £257.81. East Sussex County Council, Sussex Police, and East Sussex Fire and Rescue service will also be increasing their element of the Council Tax, but Hastings Council has no influence over this.



There will be some growth in the budget, although this will be limited. We will need to set money aside for the cost of producing a Local Area Action Plan for the town centre, which will allow us to press ahead with the redevelopment of White Rock Gardens and the potential for a new performance venue to replace the White Rock Theatre, and a new Leisure Centre. But we have also had to earmark an additional £163,000 to cope with spiralling homelessness, which means over half a million

pounds extra funding will have been spent over two years to cope with what has become a national crisis.

On top of our annual budget however, there will be other projects the council is able to pursue, thanks to our successful bids to EU and other external funds. The Fisheries Local Action Group has secured another million pounds for projects to support the local fishery. There will be further improvements and enhancements to the seafront, thanks to money secured from the Coastal Communities Fund. The local Clinical Commissioning Group is funding a £3m joint initiatives with the council to develop preventative healthcare initiatives. And the Community Led Local Development project will be spending around £7m on special projects to tackle unemployment, training, and social exclusion in our most deprived communities.

So despite the cuts, the council remains ambitious. Over the past year, new projects have ranged from improvements to the seafront and the installation of the UK's longest continuous lighting installation in Bottle Alley, to our selective licensing scheme for private rented housing, issuing 5,000 licences, leading to improved conditions and security for many private tenants. We intend to continue our interventionist approach to improving our town by, for example, continuing to tackle derelict and scruffy buildings, through the Grotbuster scheme and our compulsory purchase programme of empty homes. And we'll keep up our successful programme of cultural regeneration. Hastings is a borough that has

transformed its reputation in recent years, from a shabby seaside backwater to the creative capital of the south-east coast. We want that to continue.

The full proposed budget and corporate plan is available for consultation on the council website till 9<sup>th</sup> February:

[https://www.hastings.gov.uk/my\\_council/consultations/draf\\_corp\\_plan/](https://www.hastings.gov.uk/my_council/consultations/draf_corp_plan/)

After that, the budget will go to full council for decision on 21<sup>st</sup> February.

## Community-Led Local Development

After several years' wait and fulfilling endless requests for further information from the funding agencies, we've finally heard that our funding bid for the CHART CLLD (Connecting Hastings and Rother Together, Community Led Local Development).

And yes, I know 'connecting together' is a tautology, but the first rule of EU funds is that they have to be squeezed into tortured acronyms.



This one was especially complicated because it was a bid to two independent EU funding streams: the European Social Fund, and the European Regional Development Fund. The amount awarded was £3.7m, which with match funding, will make over £7m available, for projects in the most deprived Super Output Areas (small neighbourhoods), which are in:

Ore, Tressell, Hollington, Gensing, Wishing Tree, Baird, Castle, Central St Leonards, Old Hastings, Central Bexhill, and Sidley (the last two are in Rother).

The fund will be available for local organisations to bid into (which can include the councils themselves), to deliver services to address some of the key problems leading to deprivation. Hastings Borough Council will run the programme as the 'accountable body' and will oversee the administration and management of CHART.

The programme is led by a Local Action Group (LAG) ensuring a 'bottom-up', community-based approach to investment within the area. The CHART LAG is made up of local residents as well as public, private and voluntary organisations. It has been helping to put together the Local Development Strategy, which sets out the objectives for the programme. The CHART LAG is also responsible for assessing and approving project applications.

The programme comprises four 'work packages', which bids will be assessed against. These are:

1. **COMMUNITY ASSETS:** investment in physical assets for employability and community benefit;
2. **ENTERPRISE AND BUSINESS SUPPORT:** stimulating local entrepreneurship and business growth;
3. **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH:** work with local communities and organisations to build confidence and capacity;

#### 4. EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT: direct support to the most vulnerable unemployed/economically inactive CHART residents to get jobs.

The first call for expressions of interest, leading to bids to the fund, will open on 15<sup>th</sup> March.

### Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

Homelessness is growing dramatically and has become a national scandal. There are no reliable figures for homelessness – most people don't report as homeless to the council, as they know the council can't offer them accommodation unless they fall into a priority homeless category (households with people under 16 or over 65, or with a disability). So they stay with friends, parents, or relatives: 'sofa surfing'. The numbers of people sleeping rough is only a small part of the total numbers of homeless people, but this too has increased dramatically – five years ago, there were two people sleeping rough in Hastings on any one night. Now it's around 40. Hastings now has the fifth largest number of people sleeping rough per 10,000 population in the UK (after Camden, Southend, Luton, Bedford, and Brighton).

Many of the people sleeping rough in Hastings are not from Hastings. Similarly to the other areas with high numbers of rough sleepers, people are attracted to sleep rough in Hastings because of the level of support they get here – that's from the council, from local charities, and from the local population. Not all councils offer the same level of support – the picture shows Tory Bournemouth Council's response to the rough sleeping crisis. Traditionally, relationship breakdown was the main reason for homelessness and rough sleeping. But increasingly, factors such as benefit sanctions and a simple inability to afford accommodation, caused by rents escalating way above housing benefits, are becoming the main reasons. Rough sleepers often have mental health problems, as well as addictions (many take drugs and alcohol as a way of coping with being on the street) and need a lot of support to find their way back into accommodation and help them keep a tenancy. Some are suspicious of the council and other support agencies, and resist support. So it's not an easy problem to deal with.



Hastings Council spent £960,000 dealing with homelessness last year. That will rise to £1,085,000 in 2018/19 – around 7% of the entire council net budget.

The Council, Clinical Commissioning Group, and local charities in Hastings all provide and fund a range of co-ordinated services to help rough sleepers. Some of the services provided include:

- The Hastings Street Community Partnership: This is made up of a range of services which specialise in working with rough sleepers and the street community. The group formed in 2017 in response to the rising number of rough sleepers and street based antisocial behaviour and is developing a

range of new initiatives to improve outcomes for these groups through a combination of support and proportionate enforcement measures. The HSCP is dedicated to providing support to enable access to meaningful housing, health, and employment solutions to the range of groups who make up the street community which includes rough sleepers.

- The Housing Options Service: Hastings Council operates a Housing Options Service which is focused on homelessness prevention. The service offers temporary accommodation to the most vulnerable individuals alongside intensive levels of advice, assistance and support via its dedicated Rough Sleeping Housing Officer, funded by the CCG. The council also offers assistance with rent in advance and deposits to all local people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness.

- The Housing and Wellbeing Hub: The Hastings and Rother Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in partnership with Hastings Council funds a weekly service attended by a range of providers from across health and housing sectors and takes place at the Seaview Project. In 2016/17 the Hub permanently housed 47 rough sleepers and is on target to improve on this number in 2017/18.



- The Rough Sleepers Outreach Service: This service is funded by the council and delivered by the Seaview Project. The service carries out proactive outreach work, generally between 5am and 7am, to identify rough sleepers and offer appropriate interventions, including reconnections.
- Sussex Rough Sleeping Prevention Project: Hastings Council is the lead local authority delivering this service to the 13 local authority areas across East and West Sussex. The service is delivered in East Sussex in partnership with the Home Works. Dedicated support workers target intensive levels of support to prevent homeless or insecurely housed individuals from being forced to rough sleep for the first time.
- Snowflake: The Snowflake Night Shelter is a network of seven churches which provide accommodation for rough sleepers in the winter months.

But even with all these services, the problem continues to worsen, because local authorities simply can't keep pace with the national scale of the homelessness crisis. The presence of rough sleepers is a national scandal in itself. But the real scandal is that people are allowed to become homeless in the first place, because of cuts in care and support services, and because of a benefits system that punishes people for being poor, and doesn't pay enough to cover private sector rents. The consequences are not only catastrophic for those affected, but it also costs far more to deal with people who end up rough sleeping than it would be to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place.



## Bottle Alley Light 'Shows'

Now for something a little lighter – literally. Some of you will probably have gone along to look at the wonderful new LED lighting scheme in Bottle Alley. At most times, this is set to restful waves of light running along the alley (blue and green last time I looked). But at 6.30pm every day, a much more spectacular light show gets displayed, with waves of different colour flowing up and down the alley is a special pre-programmed show. On Friday evenings, there's a special half-hour show. These light shows will continue through the summer, getting later as the days grow longer. Don't miss it, it's an extraordinary and quite spectacular effect!



## My Hastings

We've been improving our online services recently, through the 'My Hastings' pages on the Council's website. This makes it much easier to apply for services, pay for services, and report problems.



**My Hastings, open 24/7**



You can do all of the above and much, much more.  
Visit [my.hastings.gov.uk](http://my.hastings.gov.uk) to set up an account today.

'My Hastings' has recently been upgraded, making it simpler and quicker to report problems online. You can see if anyone else has reported the same problem, and you get a notification when the problem has been

dealt with. You can report dog fouling, litter, flytipping, eyesore properties, and more. The system is already well-used, with around 20,000 reports made during 2017.

Signing up for a My Hastings account lets you find out other things too. You get a record of all the issues you've reported, but you can also see your council tax account online, and your benefits account, if you're claiming benefits. You can also see current planning applications in your area, your waste and recycling collection days, information on your local elected representatives, your nearest doctor, dentist, schools, and more. Over 22,000 people now have a My Hastings account. You can already apply for, and pay for, some council services online. Over the next year or so, we'll be putting all our applications and payments online. We will, for example, be introducing 'virtual' parking permits, so no paper permit will be necessary.

However, not everyone has access to the internet, so we have computer terminals available at the Council Contact Centre in the Town Hall, and it's still possible to contact council services by phone. Using the online service will always be quicker though, and get a quicker result.

## **St Leonards Post Office Update**

Just a very short one – following the council’s expression of interest in buying the freehold of the building, and running a post office franchise, we have been invited to view the building on 6<sup>th</sup> February. Following that, we’re hoping Post Office Ltd will ask the council to work up a proposal for the building and how the post office could be run. We would also need to get our own valuation done on the building, to check whether the PO Ltd.’s asking price was reasonable. More details next month, hopefully.

That’ll do for now – if you’d like more information on any of this, leave a message on 01424 451066, or e-mail at [cllr.peter.chowney@hastings.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.peter.chowney@hastings.gov.uk)