

**COUNTY COUNCILLOR REPORT
TO
ALL PARISH COUNCILS
IN PETERSFIELD HANGERS**

1 FEBRUARY 2024

1. Highways update and weather impacts

Hampshire Highways coped well with a difficult month in January due to the high number of storms. The teams have been on virtually constant duty clearing fallen trees and branches. Ground water is also 5 metres higher than usual at this time of year which has led to a surge of flooding issues. The seasonal challenges are not interfering with routine maintenance thanks to pre-emptive work clearing gullies and storm drains. I am extremely grateful to the Highways teams for their dedication and professionalism in difficult conditions.

Luckily the two-week cold snap in January did not coincide with rainfall. We have not seen the same weather pattern as last year which involved heavy rain followed by overnight freezing, and which led to a surge in road defects. I am hopeful that we are past the worst now this year and that the overnight temperatures will remain above zero as we head into the Spring. Time will tell if I am being overly optimistic!

2. New 20mph policy approved at HCC

At his Decision Day on 15 January, Executive Lead Member for Universal Services Cllr Nick Adams-King approved a new policy on 20mph speed limits. The development of this policy followed a review by the Select Committee. The Decision report, including the new Position Statement, can be read at this link:

<https://democracy.hants.gov.uk/documents/s115742/Report.pdf>

A process whereby Parish Councils can nominate their area for consideration will be in place on the hants.gov.uk website by April 2024. This helpfully gives some time for Parish Councils to consider formally whether this is something they want to do.

3. Hampshire Forest Partnership update

The Hampshire Forest Partnership is having a busy planting season. So far, we have planted 24,300 trees and hedges which is more than double what we achieved in our first year. We have an ambition to plant one million trees by 2050 and so we are determined to keep building each year. I would like to highlight two exciting opportunities to work with the Hampshire Forest Partnership:

- **Free Elm Trees available!** We have purchased 700 disease-resistant elms and we are still looking for homes for about 600 of them. Please help us by coming forward with a request for up to 20 Elm trees in your patch! The English countryside was once dominated by elms, but since the 1960s these trees have been ravaged by Dutch elm disease, accidentally introduced to Europe in the early 20th century. The Hampshire Forest Partnership with support from The Tree Council are funding disease resistant hybrid elm trees to help local nature recovery. Selective breeding of elms now means that we can bring these back to Hampshire; trials have shown that these hybrids show resistance to the disease and also support our native wildlife. We are particularly interested to plant the trees within hedges, in community spaces and as specimens in areas that have lost trees from ash dieback.
- **Shoots along the Routes** scheme seeks more projects. This scheme aims to improve landscape connectivity outside woodland areas. We'll be providing free trees to landowners and land managers to create over 630km of new green networks across the county. These networks will follow the routes of several A and B-roads across Hampshire. The scheme will also support eligible tree planting schemes within a 2km wide corridor along the routes to boost nature recovery.

If you are interested in proposing a location for either of the above, please email treeplanting@hants.gov.uk. And by the way, it is the same email address for Community Orchards and Mini Forests! We have funding for both so we can provide trees, stakes, guards and even information panels.

4. Ashford Hangers: closure of contour path

It has regrettably become necessary to close the contour path (also known as the middle path) at the Ashford Hangers National Nature Reserve. I went up there last week with Pete and Hazel from the Countryside Service to see the situation for myself. At this time, the path is incredibly dangerous due to fallen trees and surface damage to the path caused by uprooted trees and erosion.

These two photos illustrate the issues:



The steep slope means that anyone who falls could potentially end up falling quite a long way down. And we all know that the chalk and clay get slippery. I have therefore agreed that HCC has to take the difficult decision to close the path. HCC is the owner of the land and so we have extra responsibility for safety here. We have a duty of care to ensure that people do not access dangerous parts of the site. The closure of the contour path will come into effect from 2 February 2024. I would strongly encourage people not to side-step the closure. It is really not safe.

I would like to explain that the contour path is a “permissive path” – it is not a formal Right of Way and so does not appear on the definitive map. The bridleway along the bottom will remain open, and the permissive path across the top will also remain open.

The cost of removing fallen trees and removing trees which pose a clear threat to the contour path has been estimated at £40,000. The cost of resurfacing the path is unknown. It may be difficult to find a contractor willing to undertake the work, as there is no vehicular access. HCC will explore the costs further and see what funding may be available from partners. The Countryside Service is facing budget cuts and does not have funding available in-house, so external funding will be required.

I realise that the Ashford Hangers is a much-used and much-loved site and that many people will be disappointed by the situation. I give my commitment that I will continue to work with the Countryside Team and with all key stakeholders to try to find a way to get the path made safe and re-opened, however long it takes. Finally I am pleased to report that this Summer HCC will reconstitute the Ashford Hangers Consultative Committee and we will invite local representatives to attend a meeting in June.

5. Future Services Consultation

As mentioned in my January report, HCC commenced a consultation on 8 January about possible service changes which are needed to bridge our budget gap of £132m. I would like to stress that no decisions have been made yet. The consultation is designed to garner views from the public and elected representatives. The responses will then inform the decision-making process. In my experience, HCC is genuinely good at consultations (unlike some public bodies). All responses will be carefully analysed by the Insights and Engagement Team and the HCC Cabinet will meet to discuss the analysis. Parish Council responses will be grouped, so I would encourage Parish Councils to submit a collective Parish Council response. Councillors can also then submit their individual responses.

The consultation questionnaire at this link must be completed by 31 March 2024:
<https://www.hants.gov.uk/aboutthecouncil/haveyoursay/consultations/future-services-consultation>

You may have seen that the Government announced on 24 January £500m of extra funding for social care. We believe that Hampshire will receive about £10m of this which is very welcome. It is not enough to fix our budget problems but it certainly makes it a bit easier for HCC to bridge the gap through the use of reserves.

6. Dark Skies Festival gets underway

In February the South Downs Dark Skies Festival gets underway, celebrating our National Park status as an International Dark Skies Reserve. There is an early evening event taking place at QE Country Park on 15 February called Walk the Planets, where the planets will be laid out to scale and stargazing through telescopes will be happening. Please help us to spread the word about this! You can book tickets at this link:
<https://www.hants.gov.uk/thingstodo/countryparks/qecp/visit-us/whatson/SDNPA-dark-skies-2024>

The SDNPA page which lists all the events during the Festival can be found here:
<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/dark-night-skies/dark-skies-festival/>

Let's hope we get some clear skies so that we can all enjoy looking up at the stars.

RUSSELL OPPENHEIMER
County Councillor for Petersfield Hangers