

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

1 MARCH 2024

1. New Growth & Skills Boards

I would like to explain some changes that will be coming into effect on 1 April this year as a result of changes to local government structures.

From next month, HCC will assume the economic development roles previously carried out by the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP). Those were the Solent LEP and the Enterprise M3 LEP (within which our area came). The intention of the Government is that these functions will be taken over by a Mayor for Hampshire under a devolution deal by 2030. Until that happens, the staff and cash reserves of the LEPs will come under HCC control.

I see this as very good news because it means we will have more democratic control over the allocation of economic development and regeneration funding. This funding is crucial for sprucing up our towns and villages and promoting active travel.

HCC is already in the process of setting up “Growth and Skills Boards” for each district comprising representatives from business, education and local government. There will also be a single “Place Board” for the whole of Hampshire which will comprise all the Leaders of Districts and Boroughs.

The work of the Growth and Skills Boards will be framed by the Hampshire Economic Strategy and based around themes such as Town Centre Regeneration, Housing Growth, Rural Economy and Skills Retention and Development. These themes and any other local priorities will in due course be discussed and agreed by the new Boards. I would expect the new Boards to want to engage with Parish and Town Councils as they seek to refine and define their local regeneration and infrastructure priorities.

I am also optimistic that the new Place Board will enable Hampshire to start to build alliances across the region so that we have a powerful voice for the South in regional funding matters.

2. Budget update

At our Full Council meeting on 22 February HCC formally approved the budget for 2024/24 with a Council Tax increase of 5%. Nobody wants to raise taxes at a time when the cost of living has risen so much. But with a budget gap of £74m next year it would have been irresponsible for us not to go for the maximum permitted Council Tax increase. To do so would have put services for vulnerable people at risk.

Thanks to prudent management over the last 27 years, HCC has reserves which will allow us to bridge this projected budget gap of £74m.

Hampshire County Council's council tax is among the lowest of any county council in England and we remain as focused as ever on delivering the best possible value for money for Hampshire's taxpayers.

The 5% Council Tax increase will help to generate an extra £39 million towards our overall service delivery costs – in areas like education and learning across hundreds of Hampshire schools, looking after vulnerable children and adults, maintaining over 5,000 miles of roads, libraries, outdoor spaces and country parks, household waste recycling centres, public health, and trading standards.

As you know, HCC is consulting on possible savings from 2025 through the Future Services Consultation. If you have not yet responded to the consultation then you still have time! The consultation closes on 31 March.

3. New School Streets policy approved

At our meeting on 6 February the HCC Cabinet approved a new policy around School Streets. This is a scheme which enables the temporary closure of certain roads around the school entrance at drop-off time. The intention is to encourage walking and cycling whilst reducing congestion and pollution. The full report can be read here:

<https://democracy.hants.gov.uk/documents/s116625/School%20Streets.pdf>

As a result of the new policy there is now a willingness for HCC to engage with schools and communities who wish to initiate their own School Streets scheme with local funding. The set-up costs are likely to be around £15,000. There are not high ongoing costs because the schemes are run by volunteers. Maintaining that voluntary effort has been a challenge on the pilot schemes and is something to think carefully about.

You will note in Appendix 1 of the Cabinet Report that County Councillor support is one of the criteria required for consideration of a School Street scheme. I can say that I will be likely to be supportive of such schemes as I think they are a very good idea.

I know that all Parish Councils have excellent links with their local schools. If any Parish Council wishes to work with a local school on a School Street scheme, I would direct you to this web page which also includes the link to apply.

<https://www.hants.gov.uk/transport/transportchemes/school-streets>

4. New role for HCC in broadband roll-out

HCC has decided to take on a strategic leadership role in the Digital Place strategy with three key themes:

- **Digital Inclusion**, making sure no-one is left behind so that everyone can access services easily.
- **Digital Infrastructure**, although our contract with Openreach is now completed, we will continue supporting BDUK with Project Gigabit and advocating for the final hardest-to-reach rural properties. This may include wireless technologies such as 5G and Satellite broadband.
- **Systems Leadership**, working with industry and other public sector bodies to identify and exploit cutting-edge opportunities for Hampshire.

For those with an interest in these issues you can read the full report at this link:

<https://democracy.hants.gov.uk/documents/s116628/Digital%20Hampshire%20Future%20Strategy.pdf>

5. New Local Transport Plan for Hampshire

After four years of gestation, the fourth Local Transport Plan for Hampshire has been formally adopted by Hampshire County Council. You can read the final Plan here:

<https://democracy.hants.gov.uk/documents/s116580/Appendix%20-%20Local%20Transport%20Plan.pdf>

As I have mentioned in previous reports, this new plan puts walking and cycling at the top of the hierarchy. It aims to create healthy and prosperous towns and villages.

Proposed schemes for further development are also included in the plan such as the roll out of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, higher quality bus services in urban

areas, better quality cycle facilities, changes to our roads to reduce congestion and improvements to high streets and town centres so they are more accessible and safer for shared use by pedestrians, cyclists as well as those pushing prams and those in wheelchairs.

The plan will now have formal status in planning decisions and in highways priorities. It will take some years for the shift to transform our road systems but I would encourage Parish Councils to familiarise themselves with the key points and be ready to challenge HCC to live up to the commitments made in the Plan.

6. Confiscated vapes poised to be sent for destruction

As Executive Member for Countryside and Regulatory Services I am responsible for the Trading Standards department at HCC. I am pleased that our crackdown on vaping over the last 12 months has been effective. Over £300,000 of illegal vapes have been seized from vape shops. I visited the Trading Standards secure office recently where there are about 25 cabinets of confiscated vape bags like this one.



Disposing of these vapes responsibly is a challenge. They cannot be sent to incineration because they contain batteries. It would be wrong to send them to landfill as it would cause contamination. So we need to employ a specialist contractor to take them apart. This is a very frustrating problem to have and I look forward to a time when we have less vaping in society and better compliance by retailers. Nobody knows what the long term health effects of vaping will be. I am glad that the Government is going to ban coloured and flavoured vapes.

7. Grants awarded during 2023/24

I am in the habit of publishing my grants list for the year once the grant round has closed for the sake of transparency. I always make efforts to spread the grants around the Petersfield Hangers Division. Here is my list for the year which has now ended.

| Applicant | Project | Grant |
|--|---|--------------|
| King George V Memorial Hall (Froxfield Village Hall) | Main Hall floor refurbishment | 1000 |
| Froxfield and Privett Parish Council | Parish Verge Cutting | 1000 |
| Petersfield Shakespeare Festival | Petersfield Shakespeare Festival 2023: Twelfth Night (Accessibility) | 800 |
| Ropley Parish Council | Improving access to Ropley footpaths | 900 |
| Petersfield Youth Theatre | 'Summer Fun' and 'Show in a Week' | 600 |
| STEEP FILM SOCIETY IN MEMORY OF SIR ALEC GUINNESS | Installation of Induction Loop, Public Address System and professional tuning of sound output | 500 |
| Steep and Stroud Newsletter (a part of Steep PCC) | Keeping Communities Informed and Engaged | 500 |
| Petersfield Musical Festival | Petersfield Musical Festival 2024 | 500 |
| Petersfield Community Land Trust | Reservoir Lane Self and Custom Build | 1000 |
| Friends of Sheet School | Laptops for school | 1000 |
| Home-Start Butser | Home-Start Butser Safeguarding Training | 200 |

The new grant round for the year 2024/25 opens in June 2024 and I am always happy to discuss potential applications.

RUSSELL OPPENHEIMER
County Councillor for Petersfield Hangers