

Birling Gap, East Dean and Beachy Head Traffic Issues

Minutes of a meeting held on 19th May 2025

Present:

Stephen James (National Trust), Ian Brown (Beachy Head Chaplaincy), Cllrs Paul Seeley and Phill Hill and Parish Clerk Phil Burgess (East Dean and Friston Parish Council).

Background

The meeting had been convened at the request of EDFPC following grave concerns expressed by village residents and contact from Ian Brown (BHC) regarding the following traffic issues:

- Parking on Gilbert's Drive
- Parking on verges near Birling Gap to avoid car park charges
- Obstruction caused by above vehicles
- Anti-social driving around the "circuit" (Village/Birling Gap/Beachy Head)
- Speeding and dangerous driving, particularly around Beachy Head
- Congestion around the NT site and approaching roads

This has already been brought to the attention of Eastbourne MP Josh Babarinde by Ian Brown. The area spans two parliamentary constituencies. James MacCleary is responsible for the constituency which covers East Dean and Birling Gap.

Matters discussed

Ian Brown introduced himself as a former Town Cllr in Oxfordshire & a Trustee of the BHC. Chaplaincy interventions average two per day in the Beachy head area and these interventions are carried out by staff trained to recognise signs of distress.

Ian would like to carry out a risk assessment on the whole issue of traffic and roads safety.

Eastbourne and Lewes Borough council had rejected an application for speed bumps on the Beachy Head road but there remain at least 3 councillors still sympathetic to the cause.

He feels safety signage on the roads around Beachy Head and Birling Gap is too small and easy to miss.

There is a precedent for speed reductions on major roads. This has been achieved by Steyning and Bramber Parish Council.

Ian knows of 27 organisations that would give backing to traffic controls.

Paul Seeley suggested an approach to Katy Bourne the Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner who is also understood to be standing for Mayor of the three unitary authorities (East and West Sussex and Brighton and Hove) which will be formed in April 2027.

Paul gave some background to EDFPC actions thus far:

- An application for a speed reduction through the village from 40-30 on A259
- Reduction of speed limit from 30-20 in most parts of the village is well advanced.
- Gilbert's Drive was excluded from the above measure as expensive speed bumps were stipulated.
- Stats on accidents are held by EDFPC and he will forward to the clerk for distribution.
- A PSPO (Public Space Protection Order for anti-social activities) exists but is rarely enforced at Beachy Head and does not cover East Dean and Birling Gap.

- A road closure has been mooted and is potentially possible. This has potential for re-wilding and an accessible pedestrian link from the East Dean to Birling gap.

Stephen James advised that the coach ban at Birling Gap came into force on 1st April and he feels it has had limited effect on the parking problems as around 90% of coach passengers were students.

Coach bans are being introduced in many places (SDNP will bring one in for the June to August period).

A holistic approach to the issue is required so a change is not introduced which benefits one issue but has a detrimental effect on others.

A risk assessment is a good start, but we perhaps need a risk and opportunities assessment as there is potential for advantages in addition to tackling the problems. We would also get a clearer picture of what we need.

NT projections for visitor numbers to Birling gap were 200,000 per year. The actual figure is now 600,000 p.a. and rising. The facility is overwhelmed.

Physical deterrents to parking on the verges may not be the answer since parking on the verges may be a lesser evil and deterrents may move the problem elsewhere.

We must be clear what we are asking for before escalating the issue.

Ian Brown told the meeting that a highly visible police presence was in evidence at the last Bank Holiday and had a positive effect. The future vision is not clear, and we should involve more stakeholders once the main requirements are identified.

Footpath signage in the village itself could be improved.

Phill Hill felt we need to look at the extent of the group and involve ESCC and not just in respect of Highways. (Post meeting Note: ESCC jurisdiction covers the whole area, whereas parliamentary constituencies and district and borough councils cover only parts of the area. District and Borough councils will also disappear under devolution in April 2027.)

Vanessa Rowlands of SDNP should be invited to join the group.

Our county councillor Stephen Shing has advised that ESCC will not be making decisions on the way forward for the future East Sussex unitary authority until September, which gives us a window of a few months to prepare a submission to ESCC.

Conclusions

- All 3 organisations should compile a list of key issues
- A risk and opportunity analysis needs to be formulated
- The group would remain limited to the 3 organisations initially in order to clarify needs.
- ESCC, Vanessa Rowlands (SDNP) and Katy Bourne (Sussex P&CC) would be invited to assist later.
- A shared area would be provided by Stephen through the NT to collate all information

Provisional date of next meeting 10 am 14th July