

County Councillors Report for 2016

Budget:

The County Councils budget for the year 2016/17 was set at the meeting of full Council held on 22nd February. The Conservative opposition was able to make suggestions to the leader of the Council on a more benign budget that would save some of the front line services that had been threatened with cuts. The budget that was presented to Council was a result of negotiations between all parties. It was agreed to increase the Council Tax by 1.99% however, the Government has recognised that Norfolk has one of the fastest growing population of residents between the ages of 70 and 85 which is placing a huge financial pressure on care for the elderly and has allowed a further Tax increase of 2%, the proceeds of which, £6.2m, will be ring fenced for adult social services. Therefore the total Tax increase for 2016/17 will be 3.99%.

By raising the general Council Tax by 1.99% we have been able to prevent any library closures, reverse the proposed closure of fire stations, increase (by £1.5m) the highways pothole budget, restore recycling centres to their previous opening hours and restore all the proposed cuts to the Norfolk Museums Service and the Norfolk Record Office.

An additional £7m over the next 2 years has been given to Norfolk County Council by the Government. This was announced only a week prior to the Council Tax setting meeting and has not been subject to discussions by the Service Committees which will have to allocate the extra funding.

However, there is still a shortfall in the 2014/15 budget for both the Children's Services and Adult Social Care amounting to about £11m which must be addressed. The shortfalls arise because of the number large number of children , between 1020 and 1055, in Council care and the previously mentioned ageing population.

Devolution:

The Government is keen to devolve some powers to local areas and invited bids some time ago from interested counties to outline what powers they would like devolved. Norfolk and Suffolk together proposed a combined authority which it was hoped would have control of infrastructure investment

especially road and rail improvements, accelerating housing delivery, skills training, business support and health and social care provision. (Not a full list but it gives a flavour of what is intended).

The direction of travel with this project changes daily, if not hourly. In the latest talk with Government they have indicated that a Norfolk/Suffolk combined authority would be too small and have insisted that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Unitary should join Norfolk and Suffolk to form an "Eastern Powerhouse". Talks are continuing between the government and the District, Borough, County and Unitary councils and 22 out of 23 of those authorities signed an agreement to consider the proposals .

The proposed combined authority would not replace any of the County Councils or indeed the District Councils but would be a separate entity. The governance arrangements of the combined authority are unclear at the moment however government is insisting that it should be led by an elected "mayor" who would be the single point of contact with Government.

There is strong opposition to the prospect of an elected mayor presiding over another tier of local government, indeed some Councils have debated the pros and cons of the deal and have voted to reject the deal with government if it is conditional on accepting an elected mayor.

The County Council debated the government's proposed devolution deal on Monday 11th April and despite some serious concerns raised on various aspects of the deal decided to continue with talks with the government to address what are felt to be shortfalls in the proposals. If the scheme progresses as planned there will be a public consultation lasting 8 weeks during July and August.

Governance at County Hall:

After the election of a new Council in 2013 a coalition with 44 seats took over the running of the Council, the opposition held 40 seats. Over the last 3 years there have been various by-elections and some members have changed allegiance so that the ruling coalition have 41 seats, the opposition have 41 seats and there are 2 members who are non-aligned.

Northern Distributor Road:

Work has started on the Northern Distributor Road (NDR) which will run from the newly completed Postwick Hub on the A47 to the A1067 to the north west of Norwich. The 20km dual carriageway is currently the country's largest local authority promoted road building project and is due to open fully by 2018 and is expected to provide access to 10,000 new homes and 12,000 new jobs.

Broadband:

The first Better Broadband for Norfolk (BBfN) has concluded ahead of schedule and under budget. Over 185,000 mostly rural homes and businesses can now buy a superfast broadband service of 24mbs and above, nearly double the number who could receive these speeds 3 years ago.

The money saved as part of the first contract is being invested in the next phase, BBfN 2. An additional amount of money (£7m) is being given to the project by NCC.

Villages which will benefit from BBfN 2 in this area are Weasenham St Peter and Little Fransham.

Waste:

The inter county agreement with Suffolk which sees some of Norfolk's residual waste dealt with at Suffolk County Councils energy from waste plant was extended to 2020. The extension was agreed as part of NCC work to secure 4 years worth of waste services using facilities either in Norfolk or elsewhere that are up and running. Norfolk produces around 210,000 tonnes of residual waste per year.

Children's Services:

You may recall that NCC Children's Services were found to be inadequate in an OFSTED report in October last year. The only major criticism was of a failure to provide adequate support for children in and leaving care. With the help of a Commissioner appointed by the government improvements are being made to that aspect of the service. The Commissioner reported to government at the beginning of March that progress in addressing the reported inadequacies was good and a rating of satisfactory will be achieved within an acceptable

timeframe. The government had threatened to take over Norfolk's Children's Services but the Commissioners report stated that to be unnecessary.

However, good news on GCSE results. Nearly 54% of students achieved 5 A* to C grades in 2015 an improvement of 2% over the previous year.

The number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (so called NEETS) in Norfolk has fallen from 16% to 4.2% which is in line with the national figure.

My Year:

As well as attending meetings of the full Council I have continued to work on the Children's Services Committee, the Standards Committee, the Joint Museums Committee and the Breckland Area Museums Committee and I represent Norfolk County Council on the A47Alliance and the Friends of Gressenhall Museum Committee.

Necton and Launditch Division which I represent covers over 80 square miles and consists of 22 parishes 18 of which have active parish councils that meet on a regular basis. I have endeavoured to attend every parish council meeting during the year but regrettably this has not always been possible; on some evenings there are sometimes 2 or 3 meetings at the same time!

I live in Litcham where I have an office from which I carry out my County Council work. I am always contactable on 01328701370 or 07917132430 or by email at mark.kiddle-morris@norfolk.gov.uk .

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