

Annual Report to Gipping Valley Parishes April 2019

Introduction

I am sure I don't need to remind you of the turmoil and chaos at national level focused on the Brexit disaster, but the County and District also have had their challenges.

Government funding cuts driven by the austerity programme have been significant with all direct grant now gone. This makes it difficult to accommodate increasing demand from a growing, ageing population and from increasing numbers of children with ever more complex special educational needs and disabilities.

I remain Vice Chair of Scrutiny at County, and on Planning and Scrutiny committees at District. I represent you at planning meetings on significant Bramford and Blakenham developments.

2019-20 Budget and Cuts

Suffolk County Council's 2019-20 budget was agreed in February. This saw an increase in council tax of 3.99%, and cuts across the council's directorates totalling £10.1m. Within the £10.1 m cuts there are staffing reductions across all directorates, totalling almost £3m, but just which jobs will go is a yet unknown.

A particularly concerning cut was the decision to remove all grant funding from Citizens Advice, a charity that yields great value for the money spent. After intervention by Scrutiny, the cut will be phased over two years, with a 50%, £184,000 reduction per year. Fortunately, the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG) stepped in for this year only, to make up for the County Council cut but the longer-term problem remains.

New Council Leader and Chief Executive

In May, the Conservative Group leadership changed, and Matthew Hicks became the new Leader of Suffolk County Council. He brought with him several new Cabinet members and established cross party "Policy Development Panels" (PDP's), time-limited groups to look at particular issues or policy.

The County Council appointed a new Chief Executive, Nicola Beach who joined the council from Essex County Council, where she was Executive Director of Infrastructure and Environment.

Changes to School Transport Policy

Since September 2017, I and my group have been fighting against changes to the County Council's School Transport Policy that would see numerous children losing free school transport. Despite two successful call-in attempts and a lengthy delay, it was finally agreed by Cabinet in July 2018 and changes will occur in September 2019. Free school transport will be restricted to children who attend their nearest school. You will pay for transport to your catchment school if it is not the closest school.

Although it is deeply disappointing that this change was made, I am glad that through our consistent opposition to the policy, we were able to reduce the severity of the changes. In particular, children who are currently attending a school will continue to receive free school transport and will not be forced to move schools in the middle of their education to maintain that right.

One sensible move will be that parents will be required to "opt in" to school transport. No longer will there be empty places which you can't purchase reserved for families that don't want them.

OFSTED rates Suffolk SEND service inadequate after second inspection

Inspectors from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) returned to Suffolk in January to see how SEND services had progressed since their inspection in December 2016 and subsequent improvement notice. They ruled Suffolk had not made sufficient progress to improve the serious weaknesses identified at the initial inspection and was not effectively meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.

I am very concerned that the SEND service needs to be dramatically and quickly improved. We have received assurances that an oversight board made up of councillors from all parties, as well as CCG staff and user organisations will be set up.

Investment Special Educational Needs & Disability schools and specialist units

On a more positive note, a cross-party PDP had recommended that the County invests £45.1 m to develop new SEND schools and specialist units in Suffolk. This plan is going to Cabinet during April with a recommendation to proceed. Some 800 places in the county to provide pupils the support they need locally will be a leap forward and will save money and the stress of travel to distant facilities.

Children's Centres

Less welcome is the news emerging from the cross-party PDP on the Family Services. Regrettably this panel appears to be pushed in the direction of significant cuts to a successful service that has great value providing the help and guidance young families need and a place where they can learn and swap experiences.

The single-minded focus on cuts as a solution to budget pressures has caused the Lib Dem Green & Independent Group and the Labour Group to withdraw from the PDP. What a sad decision to be forced into.

Roads & Lighting

Cllr Mary Evans took over as Cabinet member for Highways in May 2018. Response times for pothole repairs do seem to have improved, and a new policy is in place that allows teams to fill additional potholes near those they have been sent to fix.

This year I managed to get work done to prevent the flooding that occurred regularly on Station Road in Claydon. Long term drainage issues were resolved, and I have had feedback that they are effective.

On the issue of the footway along Bramford Road I have received assurances that work to cut back the verges will be undertaken later in the year. It is likely to be during the summer months

In Great Blakenham the work around Hackneys Corner and the low voltage connections for the street lights and the crossing are progressing well. After problems in Baylham which were made less annoying by the contractor keeping the village informed with a Facebook page, the contractor in Great Blakenham has been feeding up to date progress data to the parish to put on their Facebook page.

Mary Evans is convinced that this is a good thing to do, so after years of asking, we may have a communication breakthrough!

Not so good news is the fact that the budget carried, as a tactical saving, a little noticed reduction in the time for which streetlights are operational. They will be turned off at 11:30 rather than midnight. Not a problem for smaller villages that have no street lights, but more difficult in areas where there are significant numbers of workers returning home late and where there is a greater likelihood of antisocial behaviour.

SnOasis

The "reference group" to liaise with the developer, modelled on the liaison group which I chair at the Suez EFW plant has yet to emerge. The importance of effective communication with residents and their ability to influence the way forward is paramount. The group must be set up as soon as the district election is over.

Lib Dem, Green and Independent Group "Climate emergency"

My group proposed that Suffolk County Council recognise the imminent dangers of climate change and declare a climate emergency. Support was near-unanimous with 60 councillors voting in favour.

The Council will form a cross-party panel by September 2019, to develop policy ideas to help the authority cut carbon emissions on a spend to save basis. The Council has also agreed the ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030 and has committed to working with partners in Suffolk to help them achieve the same goal.

We also proposed the County develop a strategic, costed five-year cycling plan to improve investment in cycling infrastructure in the county. This would improve the options for sustainable fitness enhancing transport.

Finally, we persuaded councillors to commit the County to reducing single-use plastic waste in Suffolk.

If you have queries, please phone me on 01473 831306 or 07545423808 or email me at: john.field@suffolk.gov.uk
My www site is at www.suffolklibdems.org/johnfield/