

Annual Report to Parish Council – provided by Cllr Ian Morris

NCC Budget and Inspection

The County Council underwent a Best Value Inspection examining the financial management arrangements in place at the request of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Right Honourable Sajid Javid. The Government's Inspector Max Caller, identified a number of areas that required improvement and found the County Council to be failing in its Best Value Duty.

The County Council has for a long time been under severe pressure from the growth in population and the costs of social care that have been increasing year on year. Northamptonshire has one of the lowest Council Tax Rates of any county and an historically low level of reserves. .

As a Council we have always ensured that the most vulnerable in society are protected. Almost two-thirds of what we spend each year goes on social care to support vulnerable children and adults. This is a national issue but with the county council having historically low reserves and income, the transformation and savings that were required to deliver a sustainable budget position in many ways overtook us. The National Audit Office has recently backed up our view that social care is underfunded, with estimates of £2BN being cited. The Government has recently announced its intention to publish a Green Paper on the future of social care by the summer. It will be interesting to see if they set out any intention to address this significant national issue.

The previous Leader Councillor Heather Smith has resigned and Councillor Matt Golby has been elected as the new leader. Cllr Golby has acted quickly to acknowledge our failures to provide Best Value and has written to the Secretary of State setting out our intention to comply fully with the Commissioners he is likely to appoint to oversee the governance and decision making at the County Council. Matt has also announced a new Cabinet and as a leadership group Cabinet is committed to exploring every avenue available to protect our services and stabilise our budget position.

Unitary Council

The recent inspection of NCC had a key recommendation. That is reorganisation of local government into two unitary authorities. What this means is in effect all 8 councils in the county being dissolved and replaced with two new councils which would provide all services currently split across county council and district and borough councils responsibility.

The County Council has for some time wanted to see a removal of a tier of local government. The vital role of parish councils will continue but you would only be dealing with one tier council above rather than two.

The County Council wants to be a willing partner in the discussions that will ultimately lead to a proposal submitted to the Secretary of State. We want local communities to have their voice heard and be able to feed into the work on unitary councils. We believe that residents and central government alike want to see efficient and cost effective services. Local Government Re-organisation can help deliver these outcomes and help safeguard local public services in the county for the future.

Libraries

The response to our latest budget consultation was phenomenal, the largest ever. It is fair to say that the majority of feedback was provided on the various proposals for the library service. In running any business one must look at all areas if reducing expenditure is required. What was clear

was the high regard and value our residents place on these facilities. The traditional model of libraries as a place to borrow books or read the newspaper is long gone. There are so many other important services provided from our libraries that it was easy to understand why the public were so concerned. Cabinet and Members shared that view and rejected the option to close all but 8 libraries.

We announced plans for a Libraries Strategy. The strategy will be developed over the next three months, with all libraries in the county remaining open until August 31st 2018. Community groups and parishes who wish to establish an independent library will have until the end of May to submit a formal expression of interest to purchase or take on the leasehold for their local library. Individual project plans, including timetables for implementation and business plans to demonstrate affordability, will be worked up for each proposed independent library.

For viable project plans, libraries will continue to be staffed until September 30th 2018 enabling the sale or transfer of lease for the building to be completed. In cases where no formal expression of interest is received, staffing would be removed by August 31st. We encourage any parish with an interest in finding out more or helping to support a local library develop a proposal to contact us.

Positive News

With all the headlines on our budget position, we often forget all the vital work that goes on in the County. Our staff are fully committed to providing the best possible services to communities and residents, a feature noted by the Inspector.

Shared Lives

Despite our adult social care service being highly pressurised, the Council's Shared Lives service has recently won national recognition as best practice. The Care Quality Commission found the service which provides long and short-term support in a family home environment for adults with disabilities to be 'outstanding' in January this year.

Jeremy Hunt, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care wrote to the County Council to express his thanks. Mr Hunt said "From visiting organisations throughout the country, I know that the immense amount of hard work that will have been behind this outcome cannot be underestimated. It is greatly appreciated, not just by me, but by all who will be benefiting as a result. It should be particularly pleasing to you to have been recognised for your outstanding safety, care and leadership".

Women's Tour

After hosting the Grand Depart of the 2017 Women's Tour, the race returns to the county for the fifth time. This year will see Daventry host a finish for the first time with the stage also including a spectator friendly finishing circuit for the first time, while Rushden makes its debut on the route of the UCI Women's WorldTour event.

The world's top female cyclists, potentially including Northamptonshire sisters Hannah and Alice Barnes of the Canyon//SRAM team will be there. The new route will take in the south of the county, passing through Wollaston, Salcey Forest, Silverstone and Weedon Bec. We see attendance growing every year and always a huge boost for the local economy and people taking to their bikes.

Fostering

We are on target to exceed last year's record 379 children in care successfully placed with foster parents. The role foster parents play in providing a safe and secure home and family environment for some of the most vulnerable children in our county is invaluable. The positive effect this has on the personal and emotional wellbeing of children in care is profound. We thank all our foster parents and encourage anyone thinking about becoming a foster carer to contact our Fostering and Adoption Service.

Agency Social Workers

Northamptonshire County Council has reduced its proportion of agency staff from 45% to 29% in the past 12 months, saving a substantial amount of money spent on higher cost social workers.

Agency staff can play a vital role in filling vacant social worker posts but the authority has been working hard to increase its proportion of permanent staff in order to provide better continuity of care for vulnerable children and families. Since January last year, the number of permanent social work staff has increased from 202 to 248 in December, while the number of agency staff in social work roles has fallen from 210 to 144 over the same period.

The success has been achieved through ongoing recruitment campaigns, including an overseas recruitment programme, as well as a scheme to encourage costly agency staff to convert to permanent social workers. The conversion scheme has seen 34 agency staff become permanent.

The council's Social Work Academy is also having a positive impact on the permanence of the children's services workforce, and is now working with its sixth intake of students. The academy, which launched in October 2014 to recruit the best-quality social workers from universities, offers graduates reduced caseloads, hands-on learning, high levels of support and mentoring, and extensive training and qualification opportunities.

Economy

We have seen the Government announced support for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge growth corridor and associated road and rail links, which would be the focus of new housing and economic expansion. The blueprint for the proposal by the National Infrastructure Commission incorporates parts of Northamptonshire. The investment in the roads and rail will help improve journey times and increase capacity but we also want to make sure Northamptonshire is fully included in this initiative that could see significant inward investment. We have a strong local economy with historically the highest employment rate in the East Midlands. This is a hardworking county and we want to ensure it continues to be so in the future.

We have seen great success of the Northamptonshire Growth Hub – which has so far helped more than 4,000 businesses and the County Council's Superfast Northamptonshire programme has so far brought superfast broadband to 68,800 homes and businesses.

A45 Development Link Road

Work on the A45 Daventry Development Link Road, which started in 2016 is progressing well. The road will form a new 3.5mile long single carriageway which will improve transport links between the towns of Northampton and Daventry, and improve access between Daventry and the M1 motorway.

The project will also relieve communities in Flore, Weedon and Upper Heyford of through traffic as well as supporting future growth in the Daventry district. Construction of the scheme is due for completion in the Summer 2018.

Teach Northants

Our Teach Northants campaign has been a huge success in attracting new teachers to the county. This year we have seen 5,000 applications and 2,300 jobs advertised across our 357 schools. There are currently 237 vacancies available in schools across the county. We encourage any promotion of the benefits of a career in teaching in the county that parishes can provide.

Winter service

We saw significant snow fall this winter across Northamptonshire. The gritting teams totally 125 staff from Northamptonshire Highways and Kier WSP worked around the clock to keep key routes open. The Beast from the East saw our vehicles on gritting runs that were the equivalent from Northampton to Rome, with the cumulative runs the equivalent of here to Beijing.

The council will be working hard to repair road surfaces damaged by this particularly hard and wet winter. Nationally, local government estimates it would cost £9BN to bring all carriageways up to standard. We will need to continue to prioritise ad hoc repairs to the criteria we specify but anyone who needs to report a pothole should continue to do so via the Council's Street Doctor website.