

County Councillor's report for 2014/15

A personal comment

From a personal point of view this is a year which I would rather forget. However I am now making good progress. I have nothing but praise for the NHS, Ipswich hospital and all those who work in the three specialist areas that have treated me in the last twelve months, not forgetting my own GP. My gratitude to them all is immense.

Unfortunately this has meant that I have not been able to provide the service to you all which I would like, particularly in being unable to attend meetings which help me to appreciate the problems and concerns in the 26 parishes I represent. My apologies, but I hope that from this summer "normal service will resume"

Council Tax

I am sure that you all know that for the fifth year in a row the County Council has frozen council tax. This means that Suffolk residents will not pay any more than they did in 2010/11. We have delivered savings of £130m over the last four years. However, if central government policies remain unchanged, we estimate that we will have to make further savings of £120 over the next three years, having started with £38.2 for the forthcoming year. A significant proportion of the savings have been achieved by a reduction in the workforce of 47% across all council services.

Two major operational changes

As far as what has happened at the County Council, two significant service changed responsibility in order to reduce costs just before or in the early part of the year. The CSD services which were in partnership with BT, were brought back in house after ten years, and the Highways maintenance contract was put out Kier MG.

CSD contract

The transfer of the CSD contract, which included the financial, IT and HR activities of the council, came back into our direct responsibility seamlessly. Even the few adverse comments which we were getting towards the end of the contract seem to have dried up. It is also saving us money.

Highways contract

The transfer of all highways maintenance to Kier MG has proved a very different matter. To start with we negotiated the contract with May Gurney with whom we had had a good relationship, but at the last minute they were acquired by Kier. The idea was that the council staff would transfer to Kier MG under the normal arrangements, but some of the more important staff decided to take redundancy where it was offered, thus resulting in a shortage in the workforce. It seems that the council did not insist in adequate corrective action being taken soon enough, although us Councillors were complaining to the highways department and the Cabinet member because of the frustration you and we were having in getting anything done. I am glad to say that it all came to a head in the second half of last year when meetings at the highest level within Kier MG produced action on their part. A list of all outstanding work was drawn up and given priority and most has been undertaken. However we discovered subsequently that a number of tasks which councillors and parishes thought were outstanding had never got on to the outstanding list, that is the reason why we still have work outstanding for more than a year but it is now being scheduled.

Highways fault reporting tool

A very important new highways fault reporting tool was introduced earlier this year and any member of the public can use this system by going to www.suffolk.gov.uk/report-a-highways-problem. The new highways reporting tool which allows photographs to be up loaded can be accessed by tablets and mobiles. This means that people can access the map on the go and these will be recorded and actioned straight away. The tool also allows anyone to follow up the report to see the progress being made to complete the work. This means that if any member of the public sees a highways maintenance problem they can report it there and then.

Energy from waste

Towards the end of last year our new energy from waste plant at Great Blackenham was commissioned. This was a major success for the staff responsible because we had relatively little opposition to the development, unlike Norfolk where the cancelation of the contract has cost the council over £30m. On top of that the plant was opened on time and on budget, again quite an achievement for a Government body.

High speed broadband

During the year we put in a second tranche of £10m towards high speed broad-band for Suffolk which should mean that 95% of the County will have improved speeds by the end of 2017. The latest news is that 75,000 premises are now connected to high-speed fibre broadband thanks to the Better Broadband for Suffolk programme.

Young people's employment centre

Last November we, in collaboration with other organisations, opened in Ipswich the very first young people's employment centre in the country for 16 to 24 year olds. What is notable about this project is that it is not just an employment centre but they are trained how to write CVs and approach interviews. In the first month more than 500 young had made use of the centre.

Education

Under the councils new School Improvement Strategy we have recently sent out the second risk-rating letter in which each school is rated red, amber or green, based on information the school has provided as well as government data. This is all part of the work we are doing to keep on top of poor performing schools and to be able to pin point where assistance to improve their outturn is required. Meanwhile last year's exam results showed an improvement at all levels, in some cases reaching national levels, but there is still a long way to go.

Locality and minor highways grants

During the year I was very pleased to be able to help various people and organisations with financial assistance, the locality grant being over- subscribed. However, due to the problems mentioned earlier, the highways grant was not fully utilised, but I am able to carry the balance forward to this year.

As always feel free to telephone me on 01473 735259 or e-mail on peter.bellfield@suffolk.gov.uk for any assistance you may require with the County Council.

Peter Bellfield, County Councillor for the Carlford Division

