

REPORT FOR ANNUAL PARISH MEETING, 2018

FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR RICHARD SMITH, MVO

REPRESENTING BLYTHING DIVISION, SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL

Blything Division covers the town of Saxmundham and the parishes of Blythburgh, Bramfield, Darsham, Dunwich, Kelsale-cum-Carlton, Middleton, Theberton, Thorington, Walberswick, Wenhaston, Westleton and Yoxford

I have served as a Suffolk County Councillor since 2010. For the first seven years I represented Aldeburgh, Leiston, Knodishall, Aldringham and Thorpeness, but took the opportunity presented by Michael Gower deciding to step down in Blything to move and stand as a candidate here in the May 2017 County Council elections. I worked hard during the election campaign and was pleased and honoured to be elected as your County Councillor.

My reasoning for moving Divisions included wanting to live within the area that I represent and, being a resident of Saxmundham for the last 27 years, I have achieved that. But to be frank the disadvantage has been the greatly increased number of parishes I now represent – rising from four to twelve, if Dunwich Parish Meeting is included as it should be.

I have been fortunate to be a member of the County Council's Cabinet, first responsible for planning, environmental and economic development and more lately having political responsibility for finance (which encompasses a net annual budget of around half a billion Pounds), first combined with responsibilities for arts, museums and library services, but now combined with transformation of the way the council delivers its services, and also since last May for the Sizewell C Project.

I hope you will understand that this workload keeps me busy – for perhaps 70 hours each week – and thus I have not been as frequent a visitor to Parish Council meetings as I should wish. I am trying to settle down to an attendance at every other parish meeting, but even this can prove difficult. Examples include Middleton, Darsham and Blythburgh Parish Councils usually meeting on the same evening and the same applies to Saxmundham Town Council, Bramfield-with-Thorington Parish and Walberswick Parish also meeting on the same evening each month.

But I do attend where I can and my contact details are widely available. Indeed I am contacted by constituents throughout the area when they need my help

or advice and I always follow-up their issues, some with greater success than others. Planning matters are not my responsibility, save the highways aspects of larger developments, and I try to direct these to their Suffolk Coastal District Councillor. This has proved difficult in the last few months with the severe illness of Cllr Raymond Catchpole who covers the northern part of the area, and recently Ian Pratt has resigned his seat representing Theberton and Middleton. A by-election will be held in due course. Yoxford has Cllr Stephen Burroughes as its District Councillor, and he is just completing a particularly busy year as Chairman of the County Council. In normal times I pledge to work closely with all three District Councillors for the best interests and outcomes for our residents.

I have a Locality Budget of £8,000 which can be spent largely as I wish within my Division. I have been happy to make grants (or offers which will be honoured) over the last year to organisations within Saxmundham, Bramfield, Darsham, Kelsale-cum-Carlton, Theberton, Thorington and Wenhaston. Over the course of my four-year elected term I aim to have distributed funds as fairly and proportionately as I can manage across all areas of the Division, but this can be achieved only in part in just one year.

I am well aware of complaints from Parish Councils about highway matters. I always ask Parishes to lodge their complaints first; my job is to follow them up when there appears to have been no action. This is a difficult area for me, as I understand very well the financial constraints on the highways budget in a time of severely restricted local government spending. The severe winter we have experienced has meant spending £1 million more on salt and grit for the roads than estimated. So money is very tight and priority has to be given to filling the 10,000 or so pot-holes reported after the bad weather. Other schemes have had to be delayed and, where luckily they have not, such as drainage works within Yoxford, other controversies about traffic management and parking arise. In most cases I listen to and take the advice of Council Officers – but not always. The footpath from Yoxford towards Darsham railway station had become seriously overgrown, but no action was deemed necessary. I challenged this at the very highest level with the result that the assessment was changed and the necessary work was done. Alas, I cannot do this in all cases! I also understand well that two of my parishes need a Highways Officer to walk round the village to discuss and give advice on a range of highways problems. I had tried to arrange this, and had spoken to a person who had agreed to meet villagers, but postponement has been

necessary with the sudden death of that very Officer who has died young, leaving behind a very young family. I am also aware of the problem of speeding motorists, something not easily tackled. Community Speed-Watch teams operate in various villages and do a good job. Vehicle-activated speed signs are now commonplace and are effective to some degree as long as they are moved around every three or four weeks. But new deterrents are necessary, and a trial period using Automatic Number-Plate Recognition Cameras is underway within the County and will report its results later in the year. But the problem remains that the data gathered requires access to the police main computer database, and this has to be done under strict conditions by approved people, who are usually police employees – and the police budget is as stretched as ours! Yet other parishes are awaiting approval of or implementation of schemes which have been drawn-up over recent years. Most will be done eventually as funds allow, but there has to be a strict regime of prioritisation in place when money is scarce, and many of you will have read that some of Suffolk's bridges need urgent attention – so this prioritisation is very necessary to keep the whole road network safely usable.

I want to end with a brief update on Sizewell C matters. In brief, nothing very much has happened since EDF Energy reported-back (very inadequately, I thought) on the results of the Stage Two Consultation. The final consultation, Stage Three, is promised for the end of this year or very early next, before the District Council and Parish Council elections in May, 2019. I hope it will contain meaningful items, because I (and I believe the community) have been somewhat underwhelmed by both previous stages of public consultation. Huge questions remain about the effect on our precious natural environment, traffic routes and lorry numbers, the effect on coastal processes and many other important matters including the modal split giving the split between sea, road and rail use in transporting goods to site. EDF have been giving contradictory messages about the reality of a Sizewell C development, and have lately said that this is the 'crunch' year for a decision. What we do know is that they want our development to come in 20% cheaper than that at Hinkley Point in Somerset, now being developed. The corollary of this is that community benefits will also have to be cut by 20%, not a welcome prospect for our communities who will be so directly affected for the ten-plus years of local development activity and all that goes with it. I am not, and never have been, anti-nuclear power, but this is the only such development in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, encompassing very sensitive wildlife and

landscapes, including the world-class RSPB Minsmere Reserve and the National Trust's Dunwich Heath. We really must protect them and ensure that the quality of life throughout our area remains of the highest quality. I will not fail the residents I represent and will fight for the fairest and best deal for our communities if the development proceeds.

May I place on record my thanks to Parish Councillors for welcoming me and for working alongside me. That thanks also needs to be extended to Town and Parish Clerks with all of whom, I think, I have a good working relationship. It is an honour to represent the people of Blything Division. I have worked hard doing so since last May and will continue to do so in future years.

Richard Smith, MVO

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