

## **Annual Report to Parishes in Blything Division 2019**

**from County Councillor Richard Smith, MVO**

It has been a busy year. I have attended as many Parish Council meetings as I could, a task made more difficult by Saxmundham Town Council, Bramfield and Thorington Parish Council and Walberswick Parish Council all meeting on the same evening at the same time each month. But with twelve parishes and one town council it is just not possible to attend every meeting each month, but I do try to get to at least every other meeting.

Local matters are many and varied, but planning matters (with the exception of associated highways issues) are the responsibility of the district councillor, now a representative of East Suffolk District Council. Following their boundary changes, I will have to work in concert with nine different District Councillors because although Saxmundham itself is now represented by just one, Kelsale-cum-Carlton and Yoxford will be the responsibility of the Councillor for the Ward now renamed Kelsale and Yoxford, Walberswick has been moved into the Southwold Ward, Theberton and Middleton are part of the expanded Aldeburgh and Leiston Ward which has (or will have) three elected Councillors, Blythburgh, Bramfield and Thorington, Darsham, Dunwich and Westleton are now part of the geographically huge Ward titled Wrentham, Wangford and Westleton, presenting a daunting task for their representative Councillor to cover such a very wide area, including so many parishes, and finally Wenhaston is now part of the confusingly-named Halesworth and Blything Ward, which has two Councillors, confusing because I represent Blything *Division* at County Level which at District level has only one parish in common actually defined as within Blything. Oh dear, oh dear!

Just to add to the general joy, Suffolk County Council electoral Divisions are also currently being reviewed by the Boundary

Commission, so most Divisional boundaries are likely to be different from now at the next County elections in 2021.

You will probably be glad to hear that I am not going to comment on the state of the Brexit negotiations, except to say that local government will be affected to some extent, perhaps mostly for us in having fewer Eastern European workers available within the care sector, and outcomes and eventualities possible as a result are being worked through.

Mention of the care sector brings me a little obliquely to the County Council's budget which this year will see £3 in every £4 we spend being used to provide care, support and safeguarding to our frail, elderly residents, adults with disabilities and children at-risk of harm. As our total net spending this year will be £520 million, which works out at £16.45 spend *each second of every minute of every day*, you will understand the problems we face with our social care statutory obligations which cost more every year as our aged population grows and more severely disabled children survive the traumas of birth. We know that the demand from young children with special educational needs or disabilities will increase by 18% between now and 2022 because they have already been born and as they approach the age for education, it becomes our responsibility to meet their needs and the aspirations of their parents. None of this comes cheap.

The other consequence is the £1 in £4 that is left has to cover everything else for which the County Council bears responsibility. This covers a wide area, but most people think of roads, increased HGV and other traffic, pot-holes and the like. We simply do not have adequate money to cover all the work we would like to undertake and as a result we have to face dissatisfaction and criticism from the users of Suffolk's roads, which includes virtually all of us. What funds we do have we prioritise carefully, especially where there are flooding problems which affect homes, and we are catching up on a backlog of such cases, but the honest facts are that we do not have

anywhere near sufficient funding we need to meet people's aspirations and, despite trying to work more efficiently and productively, we are well aware of public dissatisfaction. Some good news is that the third year of surface-dressing will commence shortly and will treat another 500 miles of Suffolk's roads during the warmer weather, which is a condition necessary to ensure successful adhesion and gives a surface which properly seals the road, and that road should then be good for the next ten or so years. This year's work contributes to our promise that 2,000 miles of our roads will be resurfaced between 2017 and 2020.

Despite what you may have heard, austerity is far from over for local government, although we harbour some hopes for increased government grants following a 'fairer funding' review to be carried out later this year (if those continuing Brexit negotiations do not get in the way) with an expectation that County Councils should be net beneficiaries. But, despite lobbying Suffolk's seven MPs, we will just have to wait and see and cross our fingers for a favourable outcome.

The other area I bear responsibility for at the County Council is the Sizewell C project. EDF Energy's Stage 3 Consultation finished at the end of March and all local parishes took the task of responding very seriously and I wish to congratulate them all for their hard work and commitment. EDF have received over 1,000 responses from local councils and individuals, and we look forward with interest to hearing what their analysis has shown and whether EDF will first listen, then decide to alter, mitigate or discontinue their proposals affecting our very special part of east Suffolk and its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

I continue to have at my disposal a small pot of £8,000 known as a Locality Budget. This does not go far when spread over the large area I represent, but I aim to give grants to local organisations where my contribution can make a difference and these have varied from funding publicity leaflets for Saxmundham Museum, buying a hedge-

trimmer for the community woodland in Yoxford, and helping towards the sterling efforts made by the Westleton community to raise match funding for an extension to their village hall. A number of other grants have been made and I am always pleased to receive applications, but with a warning that I sometimes have to say 'no'.

I believe I work harmoniously and effectively with my town and parish councils, their councillors and clerks. I am very proud of the area I represent, even moreso as a Suffolk boy born and bred. A great deal of good work is achieved by councillors, volunteers and others who are motivated to help and safeguard what is so special about our communities, and I sincerely thank you and them all.

Richard Smith, MVO

County Councillor for Blything Division

Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets

Suffolk County Council

Contact details:

Gap House, 8 Albion Street, Saxmundham IP17 1BN

01728 602714

[richard.smith@suffolk.gov.uk](mailto:richard.smith@suffolk.gov.uk)

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