

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2023/24 YEAR

TO PARISHES IN BLYTHING DIVISION

FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR RICHARD SMITH, MVO

This report by its very nature has to generalise its contents to be relevant to my one town and twelve parishes I cover as the County Councillor for the electoral Division of Blything, which I have had the honour and pleasure to represent since 2017.

Overall it has without doubt been a difficult year. At its start inflation was high, but the increase in Council Tax was limited to four per cent. Now, even though inflation is much lower, and heading down towards the Bank of England's target, we have had to increase Council Tax by five per cent, a higher figure than I have ever voted for since I first was elected to the County Council in 2010.

The reasons for this are many, as well as being complex. First, inflation has 'caught-up' with Suffolk County Council, albeit like a delayed time-fuse. This has brought increased costs, indeed very considerably higher costs in many areas, but especially in the areas of social care, which now accounts for 77% of all County Council spending, and a stratospheric rise in the cost of home-to-school transport, especially for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, who often need to be transported to and from school by taxi and, to meet our legal duties, these children often have to be accompanied by an adult as carer during the journey.

We are prone to these costs as a rural County; costs are much less in urban areas. To cope with this we have built and expanded our Special Schools across the county, and the number of places available has risen by 700 in the last three years. But the demand still continues to rise inexorably, and I hope another Special School can and will be established on the Saxmundham SET High School site when that school closes its doors at the end of July. I am working hard to achieve that outcome, but we are dependant on winning funding from the Department for Education for this project to happen.

This last twelve months has otherwise been dominated locally by two topics: off-shore energy projects and their effects on-shore (and Sizewell C comes into this category), and our mightily wet Autumn, with huge

amounts of rainfall starting with Storm Babet in October, and seemingly not ceasing for the next three months. Both have had severe effects on Blything Division.

Work on the Sizewell C project has started, despite the lack of an announcement on how it is to be funded. Indeed this 'Final Investment Decision' is not now expected until the Autumn, as it appears to be difficult finding commercial concerns who are willing to invest in a project like this. I fear that the vast majority of funding may end up coming from central government and, if so, this could well become the next 'HS2' project, with costs and timetables completely out of control. Local communities are already noticing the effects of extra traffic, and this is just the precursor of much more to come, with considerable disruption to the way we live our lives locally.

Off-shore wind farms and electricity connectors between Holland and Suffolk and Suffolk and Kent are extremely problematic. Because we have good grid connections here, which costs huge sums of money to provide from scratch, our area is very attractive to developers and National Grid Ventures. SeaLink and LionLink especially have caused great concern across our communities, both in their possible landfall (LionLink may choose Walberswick), but also in their likely cable route and the disruption that will cause (for example being routed directly under Darsham Marshes, a site of very high ecological significance) and the siting of absolutely huge Converter Stations where the electricity is converted from direct to alternating current, before the electricity is sent to poor Friston, which is so badly affected by all these schemes, where it is likely to be uploaded into the Grid.

Saxmundham is the proposed site for one or more of these truly vast buildings, and it or they will be sited to the east of the town, on comparatively high ground. I have tried to do all I can to support local opinion in both Saxmundham and Walberswick, and also elsewhere in my Division, both via the County Council and locally. Both communities mounted a high-profile and reasonably-argued fight against LionLink's proposals, but the most recent result seems to indicate that all their objections have been ignored. It is both disappointing and depressing that the weight and quality of local objections have been ignored. The fight must, and will, be continued and I will play my part as an elected

representative. I try to support some local objection groups, but do not always find that I can agree with *all* their objections and suggestions, but I do feel that they are doing a good job and are well led.

Some villages I represent have experienced premises flooding on a scale unparalleled in living memory. To have your property flooded is a horrible, depressing and life-changing experience. The volume of rain we have had is vast, and garden and road flooding has also been widespread. We will all retain images in our minds of the scenes in Framlingham and Debenham, but local experiences were also bad. Frankly, the resources available to the County Council were overwhelmed and, even now, we are still catching-up dealing with the consequences. Responsibility is shared in a complicated way with East Suffolk Council, but we have tried to work together as closely as we can. I feel I must give a personal apology to those who suffered most grievously, and can promise that, over time, lessons will be learned and faults fixed, but we have to act within our tight budgets, even though it has been agreed that an extra £10 million will be borrowed to give funds to employ more staff to investigate where and why the problems have been, and to fix them.

More generally, I have tried to attend the meetings of my Town and Parish Councils as regularly as I can. I always give an oral report and am available to answer questions and note problems for onward transmission to those who can help. I enjoy good relations with my Town and Council Chairs and thank them for the considerable amount of work they undertake, ably backed as they are by a cadre of excellent Town and Parish Clerks.

Blything Division covers a remarkable, historic and beautiful part of Suffolk. I am proud to represent it and its electors, and I will continue to work hard for all who live, work and visit here.

Richard Smith, MVO
Suffolk County Councillor for Blything Division
Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Skills, Transport Strategy and Waste

2 April, 2024