

2022 ANNUAL REPORT FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR RICHARD SMITH, MVO

The last year has been the second consecutive year severely affected by the Covid-19 virus, from which I suffered during November and December 2021.

In the main, County Council staff have been encouraged to work from home and to hold meetings via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. This edict has also applied to Councillors who have been discouraged from going into the County Council's headquarters, Endeavour House in Ipswich.

These restrictions are gradually being lifted and life is to some extent resuming some of its former character, with Councillors having unrestricted access to County buildings and staff being encouraged to come to the offices "two or three days a week". It seems to me, among other Councillors, that many staff are very reluctant to come back at all, as they have become used to the advantages of home working. I have criticised this reluctance, and wonder what is really happening to productivity levels. But politicians lack the power and authority to ask staff to work more often from the office as the decision lies with the Chief Executive, acting as 'Head of Paid Service'.

We have all become used to on-line meetings and, to be frank, sometimes they are useful, especially for short meetings which for participants avoids the need to travel. But I do not enjoy them because I prefer face-to-face contact, and especially looking Officers who are giving me advice straight in the eye. It may be shocking but Officers have been known not always to tell Councillors the whole truth! On-line meetings also lack a spontaneity, the ability to spark ideas off one another and to have conversations to one side of the meeting.

As Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Transport Strategy and Waste I do try to have my briefing sessions each month with Officers with all of us in the room at Endeavour House. This has been happening as much as it can, but has been somewhat scuppered by the large incidence of staff becoming infected by the Omicron variation of Covid. Even though their infection has usually resulted in mild symptoms, often little more than a nagging cough, they take a week or so before two consecutive negative test results can enable them to return to work. This is all frustrating, but totally necessary, of course.

The work of the County Council has continued despite everything. In February we approved a 3% increase in Council Tax at the budget-setting Council Meeting. The fact that the increase is considerably less than inflation is down to two main reasons – first, the County Council's careful financial monitoring

and second, that we received more in grants from Central Government than we expected. In this financial year the County Council will spend £625 million. Yes, that is a large sum of money but three-quarters of it, that is £3 in every £4 that we spend, goes on our care services to a relatively small number of people in Suffolk such as those elderly people in care homes who cannot pay their own fees, individual care packages to help adults with disabilities and other mobility needs and to safeguard children against the ever-present risk of harm and abuse. None of this comes cheap, and I am pleased that when we are judged by external assessment bodies, we do score well. A baby 'P' or suchlike in Suffolk would necessitate spending on a huge scale to correct failings and I hope we never have to face such a dreadful scenario.

All other Council services have to be funded from the remaining 25%, and that is the main reason why available spending on our roads is so constrained. Almost all of us use our roads and we all know that they are not in the state that we would wish them to be. We do urgent maintenance, but the more routine tasks have to wait ever longer. That is one reason why we have borrowed £20 million which is now starting to be spent on two specific targeted areas – improving our pavements and tackling roadside and property flooding. This extra money will not solve all the problems, but it will make a considerable dent in the backlog of cases awaiting attention and action.

It is an honour for me to represent Blything Division – Saxmundham and the twelve parishes of Blythburgh, Bramfield, Darsham, Dunwich, Kelsale-cum-Carlton, Middleton, Theberton, Thorington, Walberswick, Wenhaston, Westleton and Yoxford. I try to attend as many Parish Council meetings as I can to give a report and to allow Parish Councillors and any parishioners present the opportunity to ask me questions. My contact details are widely disseminated and I always try to reply to emails as quickly as I can. I can't always promise to fix every person's problems, but I do try, and I feel I work well as part of a team with my Town and Parish Councils, and their Clerks, who are a first-rate body of people.

My elected mandate was renewed a year ago and I have three further years to serve as your County Councillor, until May 2025. I will continue to try to serve you well and to do the best for you all, both individually and collectively.

Richard Smith May 2022

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