

County Council Report from Peter Bellfield

In the past twelve months the council has made two long term major policy decisions. Firstly, the decision was to adopt a two-tier system for schools in that part of the county, which currently operates a three-tier system. Secondly, it was recently decided that the council should proceed with an energy from incineration policy to increase recycling and replace landfill as the lack of space and the cost of the latter becomes prohibitive.

The schools reorganisation, where consultation with parents, governors and staff has recently been completed in the first two areas to change to the two-tier system, has proved controversial with those associated with the middle schools. However, the independent advice is overwhelmingly to continue to implement the change, which we are doing.

The County Council has named its preferred site at Great Blackenham for the incineration plant producing electricity. However, should one of the bidders for the PFI be able to offer a better alternative this will be considered. It is not expected that a planning application will be made before 2011. The total cost of the project over 28 years is estimated at around £640 million, a little over a third being the capital cost of the plant, the balance being the operation of the plant over the years. By following the PFI route we should recover about half the capital cost from Government and almost eliminate the council from any risk should the project fail at any stage.

We were pleasantly surprised by the amount of the grant from Central Government for the coming year. The Council received £155m, which is £10m (7.3%) more than last year compared with our expectations of less than £4m. This will help us to reduce the adverse effect of some of the £16m of savings, which we were having to make. As you will have seen the proposed council tax increase is 3.75%, which compares with RPI of 4.1% and the pension increase from April of 3.9%.

The U turn on the Ipswich Unitary Bid, and it was a last minute U turn because at 10.00 am on the morning that the announcement was due to be made to parliament both Ipswich B.C. and Suffolk C.C. received the final draft of the conformation to be announced in the afternoon, at 10.05 am they both had an e-mail saying that the bid was not going ahead. What the future for local government in Suffolk is now we do not know. While the three tier system (i.e. County, District and Parish) is not quite dead, it does appear that some form of Unitary is much more likely. Indeed the Boundary Committee has said that the terms of reference from the Minister make it clear that the Government is seeking advice on alternative unitary proposals in Ipswich and the surrounding county area. The Committee started work on the 3rd March. Between the 14th April and 4th July it will consider concepts and seek information from local authorities and other stakeholders. From the 7th July and 26th September it will consult on the draft proposals and boundaries and then provide advice to the Secretary of State by the end of the year. Suffolk Coastal District Council has given the Committee the contact details of all the Parish Councils in the hope that they will seek information from and consult with you.

Those of you who are interested will have seen that the planning application on Debach airfield was withdrawn. This was due in considerable part to the County Council Highways authority recommending refusal on the grounds that the local road network was unsuitable for a warehouse and distribution (B8) operation on the site. More recently the District Council's Development Control Sub-Committee has authorised enforcement notices on parts of the site, but has had to accept a report that has admitted that the bulk of the site (four buildings and the compound area) can continue to be used for B8 as warehouse and distribution activities have continued for more than ten years.

The County Council's Policy Development Panel (upon which I sit) on Heavy Goods Vehicles has held its fourth meeting. Some interesting situations are beginning to become apparent, particularly the lack of a joined up approach between Councils and between councils and other bodies like the Highways Agency, Traffic Commissioners and representatives of road haulers. The panel will be making recommendations to Cabinet which I hope will be far reaching but our hands are significantly tied by Government legislation.

There has been considerable comment on the salary level of the new Chief Executive. While I am not going to comment on her pay, I do believe that Suffolk must have the best that we can obtain to ensure that the four star status of the Council is maintained. Andrea Hill would not come to Suffolk for less than she was receiving in Bedfordshire.

I have mentioned in the past the work that the Council is doing to reduce its operating costs. The project is called Securing the Future and the structural reorganisation recommended was implemented on the 1st April 2008. There is still much work to be done down through the organisation, but we are expecting to achieve significant savings in the years ahead.

As always, if any of you have any problems with the County Council please contact me and I will do all that I can to help.

Peter Bellfield

19th May 2008.