

2012/2013 County Councillor Report for the Carlford Division

Leaders of the County Council

After the turmoil regarding the political and executive leadership of the council during 2011/2012 I am pleased that the choice of Mark Bee as political leader of the council and Debora Cadman as the executive leader has proved highly successful. Although we were not successful, we were nominated for the position of the most improved council in the country

Budget

We are again on track to achieve the savings aim for last year of £25 million and the budget for this financial year is to repeat this figure. This means that over a four year period that we will have saved almost £100 million from total expenditure, excluding schools, which is ring-fenced, of a little short of £600 million with only a minor adverse effect on front line services.

Council Tax

As you will know for the third year running the council has announced that the council tax will remain unchanged. Additionally, during the Budget debate the Leader of the Council stated that, if this administration is returned at the May election, the council tax will remain unchanged for the following four years.

Libraries

All 44 of Suffolk's libraries were transferred to an Industrial and Provident Society together with the mobile, school and prison library services last August. This is a first in the country. This enabled the council to make the savings necessary, about £3 million, with out any reduction in the front line service.

Education

The council has launched an ambitious project, known as "Raising the Bar", to drive up educational standards across the county. Although academic standards are rising in Suffolk they have fallen behind, except at A level, the national average and this project is aimed to correct this position. Additionally schools in the first phase of the move from three to two tier system saw a substantial improvement in writing (12%) and maths (6%) at key stage 2, this is double the rate seen in the rest of Suffolk. Mean while good news is that 97.4% of the 7,427 students who applied for secondary school places for this September were offered their first choice school, this is well above the national average.

Residential Care Homes

During the year the County transferred its existing 16 residential homes to a company called Care UK in return for which they undertook to invest £60 million in building 10 new state of the art homes, some on existing sites. The number of beds will rise by about 150 to 680, most of which will be specialist dementia beds.

Broadband

Last September it was announced that the county council would be working in partnership with BT to deliver superfast coverage to 85% of Suffolk and a guaranteed speed of at least 2 megabits per second to the whole county by 2015. To achieve this, one of the first counties in the country, the council invested over £11 million in the partnership.

Energy from Waste

In May last year construction got underway of an energy from waste facility for Suffolk. The site will start operating at the end of 2014, diverting 252,000 tons of waste a year from environmentally damaging and expensive landfill sites. The waste will generate enough electricity for 30,000 homes or, maybe, the largest tomato greenhouse in the country.

Fire and Rescue Service

Recently the council consulted with the county regarding the merger of the Suffolk Fire Service with that of Cambridgeshire, but before the findings were collated it became obvious that any merger would result in Suffolk subsidising Cambridgeshire. For that reason mainly the talks were terminated and any thought of a merger is dead. The mutual control room will continue and other means of cooperation will be explored.

Future Back Office Requirements

At October's Cabinet meeting it was agreed that the partnership between BT, the County and Mid-Suffolk D.C. to run back office services like finance, ICT and HR should not be extended or renegotiated after it ends in 2014. We are, therefore, now looking for other outside organisations to perform these functions at a lower cost because the BT contract has escalated significantly more than originally anticipated.

Records and Heritage functions

It has become clear that it is necessary for the county to reorganise and re-site its records and heritage functions and we are currently investigating the options available. They include merging the three Record Office sites into either Ipswich or Stowmarket.

Major Construction Sites Proposed

I have recently taken a very active interest in the three major construction sites which are likely to have a significant effect on the Carlford Division, namely Offshore One Wind farm electric cables laying, Ipswich Northern Fringe housing development and Sizewell C power station. In particular I have expressed concern about the lack of evidence that every effort is being made to minimise the adverse effect upon the inadequate highways structure.

Peter Bellfield

April 2013.