

County Councillor's Report to the Parish Council meeting, Thursday 1st February 2018

Care, Wellbeing and Health Cabinet Committee

The committee appeared to agree my proposal to ask cabinet for a commitment to increasing the proportion of journeys people make on foot and by cycle by a defined amount with a defined budget. But I shall not be holding my breath.

Cutting of free school buses and post 16 travel subsidy

The reason I can't be with you this evening is because I am attending a county wide meeting with teachers, parents and councillors at Thurston School to hear their alternatives to this proposal which is open for consultation up to 28 February 2018. Thurston School will be one of the worst hit by the plan.

I would urge you all to respond – the consultation can be found here:

<http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/schooltravel>.

I am strongly against the proposals, and I am very concerned by the lack of financial evidence in the consultation documentation. A change in policy will harm rural families, it will increase congestion and pollution, and it could destroy some of our county's best schools.

Lower Road

Happy to attend with parish councillors and the relevant highways officer to try to get some action here.

On Water Street, I have been brushed off by the new highways cabinet member Cllr Jane Storey and have had no reply from the engineer responsible or his immediate boss. The attitude from the cabinet members seems to be that I am personally responsible for managing Kier staff.

For the future – “community self-help”

I have established that the county intends to consult this month on what they are calling “community self help” with a plan to allow parish and town councils to manage or procure works that are not mandatory or low priority. This would be things like the maintenance and repair of directional signs, cleaning of signs, cutting back of undergrowth on pavements etc.

This is all work that highways have stopped doing because they have no money for it. The only problem is that it appears that parish councils will only be allowed to hire Suffolk Highways to do the work.

Budget cuts

On 23 January, the Conservative Cabinet confirmed the final budget proposals for 2018-19. These will be voted on by all councillors on 8 February.

Along with the rest of the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group, I am very concerned by a number of the cuts proposed as part of the council's savings plan. These are outlined below:

£12m cuts to Adult Care – at a time when the budget is already very stretched. £20,000 cut to Citizens Advice, even though an analysis of the impact of Citizens Advice services shows that, for every £1 invested in 2016/17, £1.96 in savings to government and public services were generated. £15k rural bus subsidy cuts. I am concerned that this will target some of our most vulnerable residents and increase rural isolation. There is currently no more information on which services could be affected by this cut but I will keep you updated.

Suffolk's plan to borrow £21m for three years of road resurfacing.

The plan only accounts for a quarter of the Suffolk road network. Meantime the Council are planning to cut the highway maintenance budget in 2018-19 including a £300,000 reduction in winter gritting. There is little point in borrowing £21m to patch up Suffolk roads, if the Council are not willing to invest in prevention.

Increased hourly funding rate for childcare providers

On 11 January, the Schools Forum decided that the base hourly rate for providers should increase to £4.00 (previously £3.87), whilst the amount retained by Suffolk County Council should reduce to 3.8% (6.3%).

You may remember that, back in October 2017, my group supported a motion which called on Suffolk County Council to increase the amount of funding that was passed on to providers. We also criticised the lack of transparency over how the council was spending the £2m of funding that it retained centrally.

Unfortunately, the Conservative majority refused listen to the concerns of providers, campaigners and councillors, and voted against the motion in October. They made it very clear that an increase in funding was not an option.

This change therefore is a complete U-turn by the Council, and is a step in the right direction. However, childcare providers across the county have warned us that £4.00 an hour still is not enough to keep their businesses afloat and viable in the future. More will need to be done, by Suffolk County Council and central government, to support providers if the government's "30 hour free childcare" policy is to be a success.

R Lindsay
February 2018