

Council budget

The main issue in February at County Council was setting the budget for 2024-25. There is a huge shortfall in the central grant from government (it's been cutting the grant to local authorities year on year, in real terms, ever since the Conservatives came to power). Initially the Council received a very disappointing settlement, worse even than their pessimistic expectation, putting at risk the very possibility of delivering even a basic level of statutory services required from a county council. The settlement wasn't enough to cover inflation, the increase in minimum wage, nor the extra burdens of a rural and aging population, nor the widespread deprivation caused by long-term illness after covid and by poverty, especially child poverty in many of our most deprived towns.

The problem was then mildly alleviated by additional emergency funding injected by the government, once it became apparent that many councils were likely to go bankrupt. The extra funding was ringfenced for social care, especially children's services (which are especially strained by the increasing child poverty and deprivation in working families who can't cover the cost of food and heat at home). There was also a boost to the rural services grant (which is helpful for Norfolk) but again the funding won't actually cover the extra costs of storm damage, flooding, coastal erosion, damage to the waterways from pollution from roads, fields and sewage. It's annoying that the government seems to think tax cuts for the wealthy are helpful, when everyone stands to suffer from the damaged roads, underfunded education systems, rising crime and ill health. In my view, we need better distribution of the country's wealth, and better funding of public services, not tax cuts for the rich.

At the budget meeting of the Council, opposition groups presented a variety of proposals to improve the outlook and to ensure that the most vulnerable people aren't the ones to lose out most from the cuts. The Green group proposed some amendments to address poverty, hunger and malnutrition among children in Norfolk, to restore the flexi bus provision for rural villages, and to recoup some money by raising revenue by imposing a small charge on companies that provide free parking for their workers in Norwich

Sadly the proposals were turned down, with, to my mind, some very disappointing misunderstandings and lack of vision from those who responded. More below on the MIG and the railways.

The MIG

The Minimum Income Guarantee is a way of subsidising the cost of care, including residential care, for severely disabled people who need to pay for care out of their allowance. It ensures that however much their care costs, they will have some income left to spend on basic necessities such as clothing, shoes, toiletries, outings and so on. The council is required to ensure that people have a certain level of income left, so even if their care costs more to provide, the council will cover the remaining cost so as to leave the person with a little income left over, and families will not be out of pocket if they have a disabled person living with them.

The Council are currently consulting on their plan to save money by reduce the MIG in Norfolk, which would mean that disabled people have to pay more for their residential or home care. This will have a considerable impact on the quality of life and personal dignity of young and working age disabled people given that we are facing considerable inflation in costs for clothing and other necessities. The consultation will open on 19th February.

I, together with my Green colleagues proposed an amendments to the budget for the Council to produce a budget that would keep the MIG at the level it has been at in recent years, and not to make these cuts at a time of such hardship in many families. Sadly the amendment was voted down by the Conservative group.

A new station for South Norfolk?

In our budget proposal we also suggested making capital purchases of two plots of land with a view to having the resources to reopen a rail station near Long Stratton, and, in due course, one near Cringleford. The land on which the old Fornsett station used to lie is currently available for purchase and much of it is effectively a brownfield site since it was formerly the station yard, sidings and other facilities at the junction with the old line that ran to Wymondham. You may have seen the report on my proposal getting this station reopened in the newspaper. I'm keen that communities that have a railway running nearby should have easy local access to speedy travel to Norwich and London. The plan was to hold the land as part of the County Farms portfolio, until such time as the plans for restoring the station were complete, and then recoup income from it by leasing it for the station and associated car park and businesses etc., while potentially retaining some (or selling it) as farm land. We are also concerned that huge amounts of council funding are being put at risk in plans for new roads that don't have adequate funding, while the condition of our ordinary county roads and small lanes is so dire that people's lives are at risk and the damage to verges and drainage is becoming irreversible. We need better priorities that favour access to good rail travel for everyone, rather than destructive road building that encourages more road traffic, more congestion and more carbon emissions. Sadly, this project was also rubbished by the Conservative councillors, with some particularly

impressive misunderstandings and misconceptions. Nevertheless there are many campaign groups who are keen to rebuild a good railway system, and to increase the ambitions of the county towards making that happen properly.

Road Safety Schemes:

Having had disappointing results from the road safety scheme, and no luck so far with my motion to review the speed management strategy, I'm now working with Adam to try to find other solutions for some villages. I have to spend my highways budget this Spring, and will then have next year's budget after the new financial year starts. I'm planning to get a feasibility study for a safe crossing point for the children in Bunwell, on the Turnpike, where we failed to get a lower speed limit. I'm also working on two places where we have problems with lorries taking unsuitable lanes and getting stuck, causing damage etc. So we're looking at new signage and potentially some bollards or other physical controls. I'm also in discussion with other villages about additional signs, paint etc for bends and junctions that are problematic or where people walk and ride horses.

This month, I'll have another go at putting my motion to Council for making it easier for villages to get safer speed limits where they want them. This involves revising the Norfolk Speed Management Strategy to prioritise safe speeds in rural areas, for proactively reducing accidents before they happen, not after.

Wet weather and floods

The wet weather and flooding problems have continued to afflict the county, not just in West Depwade but everywhere, with devastating effects on the resources we have to help everyone who has had problems. The officers have been working flat out, and have spend more than a year's budget on assistance and problem solving, so there has been a lot of activity to try to secure additional funding to help with the costs. I apologise to the many people who have been told that their problem isn't bad enough to merit intervention, but unfortunately it's been necessary to focus on situations where there is danger to life and flooding of properties, and that's meant many places where roads and gardens are getting blocked or inundated, because there simply isn't enough capacity to deal with it all. Do let me know if there are really serious problems you haven't been able to solve, and report road flooding or blocked roads to the County flood reporting site. [Report a flood - Norfolk County Council](#).

Anglian Water also needs to be held to account if there are sewage spills during wet weather. If this is a problem, I'm happy to attend public meetings if you invite Anglian Water to come and speak to us and explain what they are going to do to solve it.

Buses and active travel

I am pursuing some enquiries on behalf of some villages concerning the provision, or lack of it, of Flexibus and Borderhopper services, and the unsatisfactory timing of bus journeys (which are sometimes useless for the purposes one might travel for).

Government schemes:

The Community Ownership Fund: Round 4 - Expressions of Interest invited

The Community Ownership Fund will shortly be publishing an updated prospectus and guidance for Round 4, the final round of the fund. This fund helps community groups buy or renovate assets that would otherwise be lost to the community.

The government has provided a new Expression of Interest form. They ask that all prospective applicants, including those that have previously submitted a successful EOI form, submit a new EOI on the updated system if they have an interest in applying. Only applicants who submitted an EOI in the new system will be informed when a bidding window is about to open and will receive the link needed to apply to the fund.

The new EOI has been simplified to give applicants a result within minutes, so they will be able to see whether their project could be suitable for COF much quicker than before.

Further information and a link to the Expression of Interest form available [here](#).

Extension of Jubilee Village Hall funding

The government is providing additional funds for the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund. The original £3m capital fund to improve and modernise village hall facilities ahead of the Platinum Jubilee was announced in 2022. An additional £5m has now been allocated.

Health -Pharmacy First

The government has introduced a new scheme to enable simple illnesses to be dealt with at the chemist's instead of at the doctor's. Unfortunately it coincides with record numbers of local chemists closing down, so it seems unlikely that it will help with anything. There seems to be no plan to save the local chemists.

Dentistry

The lack of access to NHS dentistry is one of the main scandals of our time. The government has produced what it calls a “dental recovery plan”. Disappointingly, it fails to address the root cause of the problem, which is the dental contract. The plan is mostly just sticking plaster, like everything in this country at the moment.

County Council campaigns this month:

Food waste week 18th to 24th March

Norfolk County Council's Food Savvy team will be supporting national Food Waste Action Week, to raise awareness of food waste issues and give practical tips to help householders cut down on the amount they throw away. More information can be found on their food savvy website [here](#).

Norfolk Museums - free entry during National Lottery open week

Norfolk museums that are National Lottery funded are offering free entry in [National Lottery Open Week](#). You need to bring along a scratch card or lottery ticket. Free entry for up to six people on these dates: [Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery](#) : Sat 9 to Sun 17 March; [Strangers' Hall](#) Weds 13 and Sun 17 March; [Lynn Museum](#) Sat 9 and Sat 16 March; [Ancient House](#) Tours on 12 March (booking essential) plus admission Fri 15 and Sat 16 March; [Museum of Norwich](#), [Time and Tide](#) and [Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse](#) Sat 16 and Sun 17 March.

Contact me on

Catherine.rowett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk for Council-related business.

See also my facebook page [here](#).

Catherine Rowett

11th March 2024