

2011/2012 County Councillor Report for the Carlford Division

Leaders of the County Council

The past year has been eventful, to say the least, for both the political leadership and the executive leadership of the Council. Last spring Councillor Jeremy Pembroke stood down as leader of the Conservative Group and the Council and while we went through the process of choosing a new leader Jeremy's deputy, Councillor Jane Storey, did an outstanding job at a very difficult time, to which I will refer in a moment. Three fellow councillors put their names forward for election and Councillor Mark Bee was elected on the first ballot. Under Mark the council's strategy has not changed, we still have to save around £120 million in four years, but the consequences have been approached in a more understanding way. Closer working with, and explaining to, the media has also ensured the Council no longer hits the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

One of the first problems Jane had to face when she took over the interim reins as leader was whistle-blower complaints about Andrea Hill, the Chief Executive, while on holiday. It was mutually decided that she would not return to work while an investigation into the complaints was carried out on the council's behalf by a specialist firm of solicitors. Although she was eventually exonerated, an understanding was reached that for the sake of her future and that of the Council it would be preferable if she accepted a year's salary and did not return to the Council's employment. We were then without a Chief Executive for almost six months while we went through the process of appointing a successor. Debora Cadman started work the week before Christmas on a salary of £155,000 and no bonus. She has had 28 years of public sector experience, six of which as chief executive of St Edmundsbury Borough Council and more recently as the head of the East of England Development Agency.

Budget

We are on track to achieve the £42.5 million of savings required under last year's budget with only minor adverse effect on front line services. Around 1,400 staff have left the council including, as you may have seen in the local press recently, a significant number of directors and senior staff. Additionally others will be transferred to new organisations which are taking over some council services like the libraries and traded services (catering, cleaning etc.). We are looking to save a further £26 million in each of the next two years and we consulted widely on our proposals in the latter half of the year. The majority of the savings will continue to come from reduced management and back office costs with all departments contributing 1.5% of their budgets. During 2012/2013 we anticipate that a further 2,660 staff currently employed in Adult and Community Services Directorate, out of a total of 3,557, will be transferred to new or existing organisations which will take over services currently run directly by the Council. There will be only three redundancies which are all voluntary.

Council Tax

As you will know for the second year running the council has announced that the council tax will remain unchanged.

Libraries

Last autumn we confirmed that all libraries would remain open with the management of them being taken over by an Industrial and Provident Society supported by the council. This will reduce the cost to the council of running the service by 28% to around £6 million per year. A final decision has yet to be made on mobile libraries which currently cost £7.70 per visitor, but it is likely that it will be change from a two weekly service to every four weeks.

Broadband

During the year we announced that we were contributing £10 million towards the delivery of a better broadband coverage in Suffolk, this secured a £11 million grant from central government. It is hoped that we will be in a position to select a company to deliver the coverage before the end of the summer. Meanwhile, more than 12,000 households have signed up to the better Broadband campaign.

Property rationalisation

The council is actively trying to rationalise its property portfolio together with that of other government bodies in the County. It is moving into Landmark House (near Asda) with the police in July with staff vacating several buildings throughout the County. The Council owns or occupies 360 sites in Ipswich alone and a total of 2,500 throughout the county. This project is estimated to save the council and the police £500,000 per year. Also the police are, or have, moved into four fire stations at Framlingham, Debenham, Ixworth and Elmswell. This will save the fire service over £400,000 with savings for the police as well. Another area of co-operation is the police with Suffolk Coastal D. C. Upon the closure of Woodbridge police station, the community support officers will be based in spare accommodation at Melton Hill.

Fire and Rescue Service

The combined control centre with Cambridge has now been working for six months and operationally has been a great success, and equally importantly the sharing it is saving each fire service £400,000 per year.

Country Parks

The County Council has been working with local community groups, district/borough and town and parish councils so that they can take-over these countryside sites. Most have now been transferred and only in Clare have we yet to agree a sustainable arrangement.

Local Government ‘Oscar’

Judges at the Local Government Chronicle have given the council one of their most prestigious awards for the building of the energy-from-waste facility at Great Blakenham as the best example in the country of a council and a business working together for the benefit of residents.

A personal note

I am pleased that I have been able to help several projects in my Division over the last year through my “Quality of Life Budget” (minor road improvements) and “Locality Grant”, the most notable being a new pavement at Half Moon corner in Grundisburgh. Regrettably I have only £17,000 from the two budgets which does not go very far between 26 parishes. In addition to the normal responsibilities as a back-bench councillor I am chairman of the Pension Fund Committee which takes up a considerable amount of time with the known difficulties that all pension funds have at present. I also serve on the five man/woman Audit Committee which has important overseeing functions to perform.

Peter R Bellfield 18th April 2012.