

County Council Report from Peter Bellfield for the year 2009/10

The Election in 2009

Early in the year we had our four yearly election, the only difference this time was that we did not know whether we were being elected for one, two or four years because of the Local Government review. The result produced an increased number of seats for the Conservatives, 55 (45 at the 2005 election), mainly at the expense of Labour, 4 seats (22 in 2005), with the Liberals 11 seats (7 in 2005), 2 Independents (one in 2005) and for the first time I believe 2 seats taken by the Green party and one by the UK Independence party. This made the Liberals the main opposition party for the first time.

Local Government Review

This saga has now been running for the best part of three years since Ipswich Borough Council first requested Unitary status in response to the Government seeking the views on the future of local government in Suffolk. All seven councils have spent very considerable time and money, although no one knows how much as a record of officer time spent was not kept by any council, in compiling reports to the Boundary Committee and the Minister. It has also had a serious detrimental effect on Officer moral because they have not known what their future holds. In a recent announcement from the Minister he said that he had found widespread support for a unitary government in Suffolk, but that there was no consensus for a particular proposal. He has therefore suggested that a solution should be found through a countywide constitutional convention. We have asked civil servants in the Ministry what this means and we are told that they have no idea. Clearly no further action will take place until after the general election. What will happen after that depends upon which party forms the next government.

The bad winter weather.

On the whole the Council performed well with the clearing and gritting of priority 1 roads (A and B roads plus a few well used C roads), but priority 2 roads were less well covered after the first week or so. This was because the forecast became "a prolonged spell of snow and ice" and the salt supply position was going to become critical. We started the Winter with our salt bins full and orders to replace used stocks as necessary but the Government took over the distribution and our replenishment supplies were diverted to areas deemed to be in grater need. If you did have any major problems in the parish please let me know and I will pass your comments on so that we can ensure that there is not a repeat in future years. The weather has also played havoc with the road surfaces. Please report potholes, if you have not already done so, to East Area Highways at Saxmundham giving as precise a position as possible and the depth of the hole, over 5 centimeters will be dealt with as a priority. The teams are working as quickly as possible, particularly with temporary repairs but the weather continued to disrupt and damage the work being done. From the 17th December to the 11th January the gritters drove over 101,000 miles and the cost was approximately £1,150,000.

Council Performance

Last month we had the result of our first Comprehensive Area Assessment (the latest name of performance judging by the Audit Commission) and received

***and “performing well”. Although this is one star down on previously we were told that we had done better than last year but that the Government had raised the criteria for attaining four stars. In fact they said that the “Council has a strong track record in delivering significant savings and continues to take positive action to manage and reduce costs.” We also received 3 green flags for excellence in three particular areas, more than any other council in the country. In addition, the Council has been short-listed for awards under the headings of “the Greenest County” and “e-government”, becoming the winner in one case. We must be doing some things right, or at least better than many other councils!

Pension Fund

There has recently been general comment in the national press, and specific to Suffolk in the local press, about employer pension fund contributions because of the deficit on most funds and the effect it will have on Council Tax levels. While the local press comment has been correct when it has said that the employer contribution would have to rise from 19% of salary to 31% when using the valuation criteria of three years ago, part of that criteria is now believed to be inappropriate. As Chairman of the Pension Fund Committee I do not expect more than a minimal rise at worst when we have the result of our next valuation later this year and which will have to be applied from April 2011. I think, therefore, that pension fund cost will not have a significant adverse effect on the council tax level from April 2011.

2010/11 Council Tax rise

As you know the rise in the council tax has been set at 2.45%, the lowest ever and below the pension rise of 2.5% and the consumer price index rise at that time of 2.9%.

The future looks very much more difficult, the Chief Executive has talked of the possibility of having to reducing expenditure by between 20% and 30% in future years. The recent press report of letters sent to senior managers by the C.E. concern the broad outline of what will have to be done if the Council is to achieve this degree of expenditure saving. Additionally, to attain this level of reduction ideas will have to take on a much broader concept. Interestingly, the state, through all its agencies, spent £4.9 billion in Suffolk in the last financial year, including £1.3 billion by local government, £750 million by the PCT and £100 million by the police. The balance of some £2.6 billion by the government directly and quangos. The Council is looking at ways of working with these agencies so that savings in partnership working can be achieved. There must be plenty of scope to save money out of £4.9 billion.

Lastly I should like to remind all of you that I am always available if you should have any problem or need any help with the County Council. Just telephone me and I will come and see you as soon as possible.

May 2010.