

Local Government Review

Twelve months ago the uncertainty as to the outcome of the proposed Local Government review was still hanging over our heads. However the incoming government quickly made it clear that it would stop the process and that there would not be any change in the system of local government in Suffolk, so after more than three years of uncertainty we could start to plan ahead.

Central Government Grant

In my report to you last year I warned that we were expecting that central Government would reduce its grant to local government which ever party won the general election, and our worst fears have been realised. Last autumn the coalition announced that the grant over three years would be reduced by 28%. As a result Suffolk County Council will have to reduce expenditure by between £120m and £145m over the next three years from a budget of a little under £600m per annum excluding education, which is ring fenced. We plan to do this in three steps, £40m plus in each of the first two years and £30m in the third year. How are we going to achieve this? Some of you may have heard of the New Strategic Direction whereby we propose to be a facilitator rather than a provider of services. This means that we will look to the voluntary and the private sector to provide the service with County Council continuing to ensure that the high standards that we have achieved are maintained. This is not new, almost half the road maintenance is undertaken for us by the private sector and 80% of adult care is performed for us by the voluntary or private sectors. In those areas where we have gone out to consultation already we have had many expressions of interest in taking over the services. Examples being Suffolk Traded Services (catering, cleaning etc.), parkland, libraries, crossing patrols, safety camera services, highway maintenance and County Homes for the elderly and we are looking at ways of coordinating the work of the two large areas of expenditure, adult and children's services.

While we hope that the New Strategic Direction will account for most of the savings in years two and three, it is unlikely to contribute to saving in year one (2011/12) because of the time it will take to implement the divestment of these services. Therefore, to balance the budget for this year we have had to make savings of £42m which is on top of the £70m or so that we have saved in the last five years. Of this £42m over £17m is derived from lower salary and wage costs, including staff as senior as assistant director level. Efficiency savings have contributed to a substantial proportion of the balance, but regrettably we have had to reduce the level of service in some non statutory areas, notably the transport subsidy. The Burry Road Park and Ride is closing saving £200,000 out of the £650,000 subsidy we give to park and ride. Additionally a charge is now made to senior citizen bus card holders who will also not be able to travel free on ordinary buses before 9.30 am. We very much regret having to change the travel card arrangements but we are having to alleviate the anticipate cost, which is now the responsibility of the County Council and no longer the District Councils, which we estimate will be around £7m p.a. and which is no longer directly funded by central 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) and in most cases priority 2 roads. Although winter came early, in November, and was particularly severe in December, to date the number of gritting runs at over 110 is slightly less than last year. We will be ensuring that all potholes are filled, although it will take time.

Council Performance

Last year I mentioned that the Audit Commission had said the Council was the second most financially efficient County in the country. The Commission is to be wound up and all measurement has been ceased by the Government which is pleasing because the amount of work required to produce the statistics was very costly even if it did show how cost effective we were as a council.

Pension Fund

As Chairman of the Pension Fund Committee I am pleased to be able to say that the deficit on the pension fund at its three year valuation, did not cause a rise in the employer contribution as far as the County is concerned, this had been of great concern last year as brought out in the press. At least this is one piece of good news.

2011/12 Council Tax

Another piece of good news is that we have held the Council Tax at the level of last year. We have done this without assuming that we will receive a 2 ½ % grant for keeping the council tax low from central government.

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.

March 2011.