

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 are 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).

County Council campaigns this month:

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.

The end of disposable vapes

The government is outlawing disposable vapes. This is good news not just for the sake of preventing the epidemic of vaping among children but also for the environment.

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.

Contact me

You can contact me on Catherine.rowett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk for Council-related business, and I look forward to helping with a range of issues that people have already brought to my attention. I'm always delighted to attend award ceremonies, events, centenaries, lectures, exhibitions, conferences, debates, litter picking parties, campaign events and protests, so don't hesitate to add me to your mailing lists! I also have a facebook page which includes updates on what I am working on, posts about events and opportunities relevant to residents, and a place where you can comment and leave your views on things I want to ask you about. The link is [here](#).

Catherine Rowett

4th March 2024