

Annual Report to Gipping Valley Parishes:**May 2017****Overview**

The population continues to grow as we live longer. The ageing population increases the need for health and care services and within that the complexity of need grows. All these impact on the volume and cost of essential County Council services. The Conservative administration has coped by changing work practices, by “externalising” services or parts of services and by “managing demand”.

The growth of car ownership and housing development has had a similar effect on the need for highways improvements and repairs.

Externalisation tends to introduce lower-waged staff, an increase in self-employment, zero hours contracts and much reduced pension provision. It may introduce people with more work focussed skills and with more freedom to adapt, and a greater pressure for performance.

It is not easy to give you a clear factual and honest assessment of how these various factors play out. County reports tend to be defensive, hailing success and not mentioning failure. Users tend to be less impressed and complain that they are often “sign-posted” round in circles and don’t get what they need. External inspection authorities such as Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission have produced some complimentary reports and some highly critical.

Finance

The County is funded by the Government through Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and a return of 50% of Business Rates (NDR) and by Council tax. Since the recession the RSG+NDR has fallen from £212m to £143.1M a reduction of £68.9M. There is an intention to let the council retain 100% of the NDR but just what the snags will be we don’t know, certainly some increased responsibilities. The district councils have compensated in part for the reduction by increasing council tax by just under 2% per annum and have benefited greatly from the “New Homes Bonus” of some £1500 per year for each new home built.

The County Council has not taken advantage of their freedom to raise the main element of council tax by up to 2% to maintain service delivery but last year opted for an additional 2% “social care precept” to help pay for increased demand for community services for the elderly. In 2017-18 this precept will be 3% and for 2018-19, 3% plus a 2% council tax rise is pencilled in.

Children’s Services

As I reported last year, the County initiatives: the “team about the child”, “family focused care” and “make every intervention count” continue to deliver the cost reductions that Government cuts make necessary with a preventative emphasis that is good for the long term. The Government appear to doubt the value of the family focused work but in Suffolk we have positive reports.

For “looked after children, increasing use of “Special Guardianship” orders placing children with other family members and increasing out-of-county placements has led to an overspend of several millions. I am pleased to see the County take a view that children’s needs come first and there is a £5M addition to next year’s budget. However it is clear that the various initiatives intended to provide care for the most challenged children have failed to produce the cost reductions targeted.

The recent Ofsted and CQC report on Special Educational Needs and Disability service in Suffolk identified significant shortcomings and a need for urgent action. To quote one item “Governance

and the strategic leadership of the SEND reforms have not been rigorous or effective in developing a coordinated, cross-service approach to identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of children and young people. Only in recent months have leaders acknowledged that the implementation of the reforms has not been good enough.”

Improvements are underway but we should not need external agencies to tell us we need to improve.

Education

The County is losing control of much in education. It will still have responsibilities to identify the number of places required and to hold competitions for new providers. All will be free schools and funded by the Government directly. Existing schools will be expanded, using housing developer funds and Government grants but academies I understand have to consent to such expansion. There will still be some responsibility for school standards in the area, identifying problems from Ofsted reports and acting via the Schools Commissioner for the East. Just how that will work I am not sure.

Almost all secondary schools have now moved or are in the process of moving to academy status, some like Claydon High as part of a “Multi Academy Trust” (MAT) with control from local leadership and Governor Teams. Primaries are beginning to move in significant numbers responding to Government threats. Locally the MAT approach is favoured and Henley will join the Consortium Trust under Andrew Aalders Dunthorne.

Across the county there has been improvement in attainment. “Raising the Bar” is having an effect but there is still a long way to go. The County remains at in the bottom third of performance tables having risen from 141st to 123rd for attainment in 2015-16. However, 89% of Suffolk schools are now judged “Good”, equal to the national result.

IT Systems and Broadband

The IT move to “the cloud” has been achieved and systems are being developed to allow much more mobile working. However the transformation programmes are not yet complete and the move of Mid -Suffolk to Endeavour House is forcing an inconvenient move of the County backup and business continuity resources.

The roll out by BT of the broadband upgrade to 2mbit/sec minimum is progressing although the speed target has been overtaken by the demands of modern equipment and software. 10mbit/sec is now the Government requirement but fibre to the cabinet should deliver that in most circumstances. Locally, most large villages have fibre available but it remains difficult if not impossible to get a clear view for the outlying hamlets. Promises for Henley Square and Hemingstone are vague and Baylham has just missed its target date without any feedback to villagers. This is another area where performance is not good enough.

Adult and Community Services

Most of the new care homes funded by Care UK are now in operation, with five out of seven “Good” and the other two “Requiring Improvement”. Two more have yet to be rated. Costs per week at one home are from £1175 for nursing care and £900 for residential care and are a major consideration for families. The County pays a lot less, but this area is still the major portion of the care budget.

This budget is being supported by money from the “social care precept”, £12.4M but then savings of £8.85M are proposed. The final budget rises by £6.41M to pay higher care fees in this area where suppliers have been leaving the market.

This is an area where if there is not enough service we get “bed blocking” higher costs in the NHS and delays to treatment, medical or surgical, for others.

Highways

After the failure of the Kier highways contract in its early configuration to deliver the service required, the teams have been re-organised as “integrated teams” with the County area people and Kier staff joined together rather than in a client and provider relationship. It is hoped that the efficiencies gained by avoiding duplication or triplication of work will yield more rapid, more effective work. There will be less emphasis on reactive work, fixing potholes with temporary materials and more preventative actions in line with the operational and Asset Management plans.

On Scrutiny, we have been pushing for change for a couple of years and may have just achieved it. These glacial timescales are just not acceptable as those of you still waiting for action know only too well. It shows that outsourcing or externalisation is not an easy process, needing good contracts to be written and managed by competent teams working in effective organisations. The County administration has just not put those in place.