

County Councillor Brian Watkins

NEWS FROM COUNTY HALL

Dear Resident

Since May 2013, I have been privileged to represent Eaton on Norfolk County Council. During that time the council has cancelled the controversial King's Lynn incinerator project, seen its Children's Services come under heavy criticism from Ofsted, scrapped the cabinet system in favour of a more transparent committee system, and faced unprecedented cutbacks to many of its vital services.

Devolution

You may have heard about plans by the Government to devolve more powers to local councils. This could involve Norfolk County Council (perhaps jointly with Suffolk) having more control on things like transport and infrastructure, local growth initiatives, health, care and safety, and how money is raised and spent locally. Whilst I firmly believe that devolved powers could provide long term benefits, I am concerned that the Government has imposed a very tight timescale for councils to properly consider their proposals. Most importantly, the general public should have their say if the bid is taken forward. Any proposed change in governance has to have legitimacy and people need to be persuaded about the merits of devolution and how local services might improve as a result.

Finances

County Hall is facing unprecedented financial difficulties as a result of reductions in central government grant. In the next three years it is going to have to find further budget savings in excess of £100 million on top of the already significant cuts that have already been made in recent years. In reality, this means some services are likely to cease whilst others will be run jointly with other councils and other partners. The five main service committees were due to consider detailed options for cuts at the October round of meetings. However, there is now a prolonged period of public consultation, so I urge you all to let County Hall know what you think. Final recommendations will be made to the Policy Resources Committee early in the New Year, with the budget-setting Council taking place in February.

Education and Children's Services

One of the biggest challenges that the current Rainbow Alliance administration (Labour/Lib Dem/UKIP) has had is turning round the fortunes of the Children's Services Department. The department has faced heavy criticism from Ofsted about school performance and 'looked after' children. Although significant progress has been made in addressing many of the concerns, there is still much to be done. A further report from Ofsted is due to be published shortly.

Despite strong public opposition, the Hewett School has now become an academy run by the Inspiration Trust. As a former pupil of the school I deeply regret this development, but hope that fears about its future will prove to be misplaced and that the quality of education delivered to the children will exceed expectations.

Health and Wellbeing

The Council is also facing increasing demands on its adult social care services. During the past few years the continued reduction in funding from Whitehall has meant it has had to do more with less. With an ever increasing elderly population in the county, the Council is moving away from direct provision (residential and care homes) towards a policy where, if at all possible, people are looked after in their own communities. In the coming years, there are also likely to be more people with dementia, learning difficulties and mental health issues who will also need to be properly supported.

I was delighted to have been appointed as Chair of the Norfolk Health and Wellbeing Board back in July. This is a forum where key leaders from the health and social care system work together to improve the health and lifestyles of local people, and to reduce health inequalities. In the past few weeks, I have been meeting representatives of different stakeholder groups and with former Lib Dem Care Minister, Norman Lamb, to talk about future priorities.

Transport

Liberal Democrat county councillors are pleased that the 'green light' has finally been given to build the Norwich Northern Distributor road (NNDR). Work on the 12.5 mile route from Postwick to the Fakenham Road is expected to begin during the autumn, and it should be open for traffic by the end of 2017. The £30m shortfall in cost (now likely to be around £178m) has now been covered, with the Council, Government and the New Anglia LEP each pledging an extra £10m contribution. Whilst recognising that there are those who hold a different view, I believe that the NNDR will boost the Norwich economy whilst removing congestion from the northern suburbs. However, I feel strongly that this must happen in conjunction with continued investment in public transport and walking and cycling initiatives.

Road and junction improvements in Eaton

Your Liberal Democrat City and County Councillors have been keen to work for road and junction improvements in the Eaton area. Officers at County Hall have been working on a number of ideas and these were recently discussed with councillors representing the Eaton and Cringleford area. Amongst the ideas being put forward are a pedestrian refuge at the bottom of the slip road/or a crossing on the Bluebell Road and the possibility of a right filter for traffic turning into Church Lane from Cringleford. A public consultation on the plans is due to take place during October and November. A toucan crossing will be installed before April 2016 on the Newmarket Road close to Poplar Avenue.

Yours sincerely

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PS. Please get in touch if you want to talk to me about any of the issues raised in this letter, or if you would like to bring another matter to my attention. It would be good to hear from you!