

2020/21 MY PERSPECTIVE AS COUNCILLOR

COVID

Obviously, the pandemic has dictated all activities and decisions throughout the year. Initially, this District was the hardest hit in Norfolk and the ONS reported more deaths in West Norfolk than elsewhere across the County. Of particular concern was the testing regime and the transference of untested people to and from the QEH to care homes. The deprivation and poor health of people living in Kings Lynn was an obvious contributor to the underlying cause, but people throughout the District were affected. I highlighted concerns over this to the CCG, but it took an open letter to our MPs to sensitise all concerned to this disproportionate effect.

Events improved after the first wave and through the first lockdown which gave time to bring in more testing of vulnerable people in hospitals and care homes to stem the tide until the next wave struck in November. By then, the Council were obviously better prepared, as were other bodies, but there was still an issue over testing, self isolation and sick pay.

No full Council meetings were held in April and May 2020, but then they started again using the Zoom video conference system and this continued until this month.

Since highlighting the early issues with QEH, care homes and testing generally, Council Members received specific update briefings from the hospital top team and throughout the year, the Council, via a cabinet member specifically appointed to manage the issue, Cllr Stuart Dark MBE, has issued progress reports and information to all Parish and Town Councils; also via the web site.

The position in this area is now in line with other parts of East Anglia.

The Council also supplemented its LILY system with council officers and volunteers to support vulnerable, lonely and digitally isolated people.

FINANCE

At the time of writing, I am still waiting for the February/March budget figures which are late. Late submission of financial information for Members has been a feature all year and those interested in our fiscal

position (and I can say that very few Members are) have been continuously frustrated by the lack of information. What has been published demonstrates that we have not had sufficient support from the Government to compensate for our lack of revenue. This is of course common across all sectors be they business, leisure etc, but a Council has statutory obligations to meet and the Government are not supporting them.

We have had to use a significant portion of our General Reserve Fund to ensure a balanced budget (a Council obligation) and remain a going concern. This situation will continue next year, but then there will be a black hole in the accounts, with no likelihood, on present trends, of this being filled in 2023/4 and beyond.

Notwithstanding this position, the Council kept the tax rise within designated limits and only raised a Band D property by £4.50.

However, there are a variety of funds available to the Council provided we can submit an attractive bid. Unfortunately, to date, the Borough has been unsuccessful. At present we have a Town Board consisting of some Cabinet members, local business leaders and Officers, (full details on Borough web site) to create a vision for Kings Lynn and submit bids for “Levelling Up” monies.

A bid is in against the ‘Future High Street Fund’ and we may expect to hear the result shortly. The Bid teams for ‘Levelling Up’ have been supplemented by representation from the Shakespeare Guildhall Trust and the CITB. I assume the latter for the Community Restoration Fund. There are too many funds to keep a track of!

Although small in comparison, we have been given grants for improving the look of the High Street through signage and benches etc. Monies for extra cleaning and COVID support in tourist areas, but, £600k, the majority of money received to date, has gone to ensuring the nurses training centre for the COWA and QEH comes to fruition.

There has also been a multitude of grants through the year to support smaller businesses and the Borough has processed over £60m to help keep these as going concerns and to support recovery.

'EVERYONE IN' INITIATIVE

This is also worthy of special note. Using a range of emergency accommodation options, including some new welfare cabins, we have ensured, as far as possible, that there are no rough sleepers in West Norfolk.

Districts across Norfolk have also joined a broader initiative for “no homeless in Norfolk”. Again, more Government money is needed and this initiative and our own ‘homeless strategy’, will be under threat when the moratorium on rent arrears is over.

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

This is one area where the Council has not come up to scratch. We started the year with Extinction Rebellion protesting in the Town Hall and daubing paint on the Council offices. A Cabinet member resigned and there was a vacuum for a few months. Following a reshuffle, Cllr Kunes was appointed as Cabinet Member for carbon reduction. A policy was agreed by Council, but with no strategy for aspects such as air quality, biodiversity, tree planting, refits for residents to make houses more energy efficient etc. etc. Furthermore, unlike many other Councils, a climate emergency has yet to be declared and most of West Norfolk is vulnerable to flooding. A cross party team of Councillors and Officers is currently looking to propose some goals, but I know of no timescale for this.

However, we have received £2.84m from the Government to decarbonize Council buildings. Received with thanks and the scheme should be finished by end-September. Whether this is the best way to spend nearly £3m at the moment is open to individual judgement. Perhaps if there were no foodbanks and more child care.....?

WASTE REMOVAL

North, Breckland and West Norfolk combined to secure a more efficient arrangement with Serco who, thankfully, TUPed the existing crews. As a result, we should retain at least the level of service we have enjoyed so far and from the teams who have been working through COVID. Also, we will have newer trucks with lower emissions, better fuel consumption, together with some hybrid vehicles.

There was a little controversy about why other party Members were not invited to participate in the well publicised clapping event, but that was the prerogative of those in power. The Independent's recognition event took the form of boxes of confectionary. Either way, both forms of recognition were well deserved.

HOUSING AND PLANNING

As you would expect, house completions are down this year and are running about half the previous year; 300 compared to 600. Planning Applications have been suppressed, but are now being submitted at a pace.

The Local Plan review has been completed and a series of briefings and presentations is starting. Representatives from Parish and Town Councils will be offered the opportunity to review the process to date and advised on the future programme.

However, the process of planning approvals for Council's own development applications on council land has been brought into question following disputes on 2 cases. Kings Lynn Parkway and Hunstanton South End Car Park. For a start, these and similar applications have been considered in camera when they should have been open to public scrutiny. This has now been corrected, but damage has been done. There is also the suspicion of predetermination by the Administration once significant sums have been spent through the planning process. Very often this expenditure is part of a Government Grant which has to be repaid if the plans are not approved, therefore, there is pressure to ensure the "right" decision is made. Members of the Planning Committee on scrutiny panels also have a difficult decision to make which damages effective scrutiny. More will be heard of this. There is a Standards case under consideration.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

Whether it's been the effect of the pandemic or a deliberate ploy by the Administration, it has been a difficult year for exercising the necessary checks and balances of proposals as they go through their various committee stages. I have always tried to put the interests of the residents and businesses first in any overview and assessment.

However, there is a change of leadership at the Council with Stuart Dark being appointed the new leader. I hope there will be a more open dialogue in the future for the net benefit of the Borough and its people.

Finally, there is a raft of issues which I have not mentioned specifically, but I am sure we will pick up through the year, such as

- Flooding in the Creakes and helping to ensure actions from the Flood Alliance are not lost in bureaucracy;
- CITB and its future;
- Pop-Up camp sites and their impact;
- Processes to harvest and cope with tourism;
- Housing for local people;
- New planning proposals and their effect;
- And many more.

This is my perspective; others, of course, may see things differently. I haven't mentioned the County election. My congratulations to Michael; the important thing is to vote and exercise democracy. The regular turnout of 30 odd % in local elections needs addressing, probably through school years. The efforts of all men, and, in particular, women to achieve, voluntarily, universal suffrage should not be lost.

Lastly, the QEH Building is in dire straits. Although there is high level lobbying, all of us should get behind the various initiatives for a replacement hospital building.

Chris Morley

Independent Councillor, Bircham with Rudhams

May 15, 2021