

County Councillor's Report to Waterbeach Annual Parish Meeting – 26th April 2017

Changes in Local Administration

Two big changes affecting the governance of this area are the Greater Cambridge City Deal and the introduction of a Combined Authority and Elected Mayor for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Although Peterborough was separated from the rest of the county twenty years ago we do seem to be becoming much closer again. Not only are we being put into the same combined authority with a single mayor, in an effort to save costs we also share both a combined Chief Executive and a combined Director of Services for Children, Families and Adults.

The purpose of the City Deal is to address some of the issues for this area related to economic growth – particularly around transport, skills and housing. It does have the great benefit of coming with a purse of money from Westminster. My biggest disappointment, and I have been a member of the City Deal Assembly that advises the City Deal Board, is that it does seem over-enthusiastic on big engineering schemes rather than addressing the chronic shortfall in public transport. With the best will in the world the capacity for more and more cars in Cambridge is limited.

The new post of Elected Mayor will be a very important and influential one. In addition to chairing the Combined Authority made up of the leaders of the seven principal authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough he really will be the ambassador for the area in negotiating with government and businesses. It is a big job, and it is important that we elect the right calibre of candidate on 4th May.

Money, Money, Money

It will not come as any surprise to hear that local government is hard up ! The amount that it can achieve is restricted by its budgets and these get tighter each year. This is partly due to the controls by central government of course, but in Cambridgeshire's case it is made worse because the council, by a narrow majority, has decided for the last two years not to use the flexibility it does have to raise its council tax. This results in poorer services, often affecting the more vulnerable members of the community, and in many cases resulting in poorer value for money as more-expensive measures are required in the end.

Caring for Young People and for Older People

The biggest proportion of the council's expenditure goes on caring for Children, Families and Adults. This takes many forms and occurs in a variety of settings ranging from children in care with foster carers or in specialist units, people of all ages with physical or mental disabilities, to older people needing help with care in their own homes or in a care-home setting. A particular focus is arranging care packages for people being discharged from hospital. It is clearly best for the patient to allow them home as soon as they are ready to be discharged, and it does free-up a hospital bed for someone else who needs it.

These are all services that are affected by the shortage of council funds and have faced budget cuts affecting, for example, the criteria for receiving care, the amount of time allowed for care visits, and the sessions available at children's centres.

Road Maintenance

The majority of issues that constituents raise with me concern road maintenance. I have lost count of the number of initiatives, projects, schemes and wheezes that I hear about at Shire Hall. Each one of these “big ideas”, we are told, is going to reduce the problem with potholes. We are told, quite reasonably, that by a doing a programme of cyclical maintenance – an ongoing programme to resurface all of the county roads – the resulting improvement in the condition of the roads will reduce the number of potholes that appear. I am sure that is right. But we still need the funds to repair the potholes that are continuing to grow on the roads that have not reached their turn on the cyclical maintenance schedule. Do come and look at my road if you need an example !

I am pleased to say that my colleagues on the county council were able to prevent a cut in highways maintenance or winter maintenance (gritting roads in freezing weather conditions) for this year.

The A10

We all know that something needs to be done about the A10. The queue, especially in the morning rush hour, seems to get longer and longer. This leads to more motorists coming through the village to join another queue at Horningsea. And that is without all the extra housing at Ely, Littleport and the barracks.

The council is working on an “A10 Corridor Study”. This is a thorough evaluation of the current and forecast traffic volumes on the route and in the area. It will also need to consider the A10/A14 junction which is a bottle-neck at present. The whispers I have heard so far suggest that the recommendation may not be for a dual-carriageway and may not be on the present line of the A10. The report is currently due to be published in the summer.

Waterbeach School

There is some concern about the capacity of Waterbeach Community Primary School. A few of the parents who want their child to start there this year have not been given a place. The county council does receive a contribution from developers (including those currently being built in Waterbeach) for providing school places. Consideration is being given into the possibility of increasing the size of Waterbeach school to allow for three classes for each year group. Clearly those extra places would not be available for a year or two but it would be an answer to the growing need for school places for the village.

This is my last report as your county councillor as I am not a candidate in next week’s election. May I take this opportunity to thank you for your support over the last four years and to wish you, and my successor, all the very best for the future.

Maurice Leeke

April 2017