

County Councillor's Annual Report to Parishes in the Thredling Division of Suffolk - 2012

Council Tax & Members' Allowances:

There will be no increase in council tax this year. This is the second year in a row that the county council has frozen its share of council tax. These two years of 0% increases follow on from two years which saw record-low increases. Members' Allowances have been similarly frozen for two years.

Front-line services protected in budget savings:

Alongside the freeze in council tax, the council voted through a budget for the next 12 months (2012/13) that will achieve savings of £26million – part of a plan to save over £50million over the next two years. This is a result of reductions to our grant from the government, together with on-going increases in the demands on our services, and the costs of providing them. The savings will be achieved by reducing management and back-office costs, cutting bureaucracy and working in new, innovative and more efficient ways. The budget proposals were developed alongside a budget consultation, where the people of Suffolk were asked for their views and their priorities. We listened, and delivered a budget that reflects those priorities – protecting our valued front-line services. . The £42.5million targeted for saving in the 2011/12 financial year has also been achieved.

Radical changes in Adult and Community Services (ACS):

Much of the additional savings will come from radical changes being delivered by ACS and will play a huge part in meeting our savings targets for the next two years, while improving the quality of the service. This will also see a significant number of staff leaving ACS over the next 12 months. In total, the number of staff within ACS will be reduced from 3,557 to 895 – a reduction of 2,662. However, this is not because of cuts to services or a reduction in our front-line provision. It is almost entirely because staff are moving to newly-created or other existing organisations which will continue to provide services for the council, such as library staff (nearly 500 staff) and learning disability services staff (again, nearly 500). Crucially, this year will also see the transfer of more than 1,000 staff working in SCC-run residential care homes to an existing company in the independent sector – again still providing the services. This leaves an actual total of just three staff who will be taking voluntary redundancy. These changes have mainly been developed from the bottom up - where staff in individual services have been encouraged to innovate and have initiated the change, as a way of providing a valued service for the benefit of Suffolk residents in a more effective and efficient way.

Preparing young people for work:

The county council is also focusing its attention on readiness for employment. Too many employers complain that their apprenticeship or employment offers are not taken up, and/or the quality of applications they receive is poor. Literacy, numeracy and attitude to work remain the focus of their concerns. Work is continuing to improve the interface between employers and schools, with offers of mentoring, taster days and development of both new and existing web-based initiatives. One of my non- Council roles is as Chairman of Suffolk Young Enterprise, where we work with mostly 17 year olds in Schools, where they form their own Company, manufacture products and market and sell them. On May 1st in the University Campus Suffolk Waterfront venue, I will run the annual competition & awards presentation between those participating Schools and Colleges to showcase the skills they have developed.

In the fast lane for High-Speed Broadband:

Following the council's commitment of £10million towards a bid for broadband funding, and a similar amount committed by the government, work towards delivering comprehensive high-speed broadband across Suffolk is developing apace. A procurement process will be taking place to select the company that will do the work. The first aim will be to get the areas with the poorest coverage up to the average. By the middle of 2013, the aim will be for all areas to be up to a minimum standard, with the scope to go much further. By being in the first wave of counties implementing high-speed broadband, Suffolk can gain a significant competitive edge which will help attract businesses and generate economic growth and new jobs.

The future of Suffolk's Libraries:

Suffolk's libraries have been set on a secure footing for the future, following the decision of the council to move the management of the library network to a new operating model. The Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) is now being established, and will enable us to retain our library network, working in partnership with local communities, while reducing the budget by around 30% over three years, from approximately £9m to £6m. These changes will mean that, while the council faces continuing pressure on its resources, the county's much-valued library service will have the scope to survive and potentially grow in the years ahead.

Committed to our Fire and Rescue Service:

Despite the current economic pressures, SCC is determined to maintain high standards of front line delivery in the County's Fire and Rescue Service. First and foremost, in October the new joint fire control centre with Cambridgeshire was set up – an operation which has been hugely successful while delivering significant savings. The last 12 months has also seen a new fire training centre at Wattisham, upgrades to personal uniforms, helmets and breathing apparatus. On top of this, we've had the completion of new or refurbished fire stations across Suffolk, as well as developing joint fire and police stations to maintain services in a partnership approach.

Helping people to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee:

SCC has decided to waive fees for road closures over the weekend of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, for anyone wishing to arrange a celebratory street party. It's just been confirmed that there will be no costs for permission to close roads or being supplied with road closure and diversion signs. It is part of the Council's efforts to help Suffolk join in the national celebrations. Last month, the County Council announced that it was to be the only Council responsible for all street party applications, making the process smoother for organisers of events taking place on Suffolk highways. Now, those considering organising a street party in Suffolk only have to follow a few simple steps to obtain a Special Events Order through the County Council's website or over the phone via Customer Service Direct. To ensure minimal impact on traffic flow, the County Council is urging party organisers to consider celebrating in community areas such as recreation grounds, cul-de-sacs and 'no through roads'. On top of this, Suffolk residents are being encouraged to get together and share their Jubilee Sunday lunch. This is part of 'The Big Jubilee Lunch' - a National campaign, set up by The Eden Project and backed by the County Council, to bring communities closer together. Celebrations will centre around an extended weekend on 2, 3, 4 and 5 June, and party organisers are urged to contact me to give me an idea of how many Parishes are planning a celebration of some sort, so that I can decide how much of my Locality Budget I can afford to allocate to such events. I am basing my initial thoughts on the possibility that perhaps 10 to 15 of my 24 Parishes might be arranging something and that I don't think it reasonable to spend more than about £3,000 total of my annual £10,000 on these events, recognising that the usual other Projects will need support also during the year. So, at this stage I am suggesting that I might provide 10% of the costs of any one Parish's events and that excludes the cost of Food & Drink – so includes such as marquee hire, hire of furniture, crockery etc and printing costs for example, with a ceiling of £300 for any one Parish. So the sooner I know how many are seeking funding and how much they plan to spend, the sooner I can go firm on my contribution. I have recently advised all Parish Clerks of the offer from the Eastern Region Co-operative Society to provide vouchers that will enable the free of charge supply of the food and non-alcoholic drink aspect of events.

Personal:

My entry into Council Membership was as a Parish Councillor sometime in the 70s at Debenham Parish Council, then in 1981 I became a Mid Suffolk District Councillor, then in 1985 a Suffolk County Councillor. Next year in May 2013, there will be Suffolk County Council elections and I do not intend to stand for re-election, as I will be 75 years old then and would like to have a few slightly more peaceful and less controversial years before I shuffle off my mortal coil. I will of course hope to still be with you to present my Annual Report to Parish Councils next April, but for those who aren't at the Annual Parish Meetings next year, let me say it's been nice knowing you and representing you during these many years. I wouldn't have missed it for the World, but I won't be sorry to relax just a little.

Cllr. Eddy Alcock, Elected Member for the Thredling Division of Suffolk County Council

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