

December 2013 report for the Thredling Division from Cllr Matthew Hicks

Plans for an A14 toll have been dropped

The Government has dropped proposals to introduce a toll on the A14 as part of its plans to fund improvements to the vital trunk road. The good news follows months of campaigning and lobbying by Suffolk businesses, residents, media, councillors and MPs, who have been united in opposition to the toll. The improvements planned for the A14 are much-needed, and will be a shot in the arm to the Suffolk economy, particularly with regard to the ports and the through-put of freight. It was on that basis that SCC agreed to invest £1million towards the scheme, an investment that gave us a strong voice at the table, when it came to negotiations. SCC has been at the forefront of the campaign, passing a motion in October calling for the toll to be dropped; a view that was echoed by the county's MPs, who held a debate on the issue in Westminster, and personally met with the Prime Minister to persuade him against this proposal. The funding of the scheme will now be met by other means. We're fully behind plans to improve the A14 as a key route for our county and strategic link between this country and the continent. This change of heart is a cause for celebration, and a key sign of what can be achieved when we unite behind a cause. The voice of Suffolk is clearly being heard.

County Councils sign up to cross-border partnership

SCC Leader, Mark Bee, last month met up with his counterpart in Norfolk, George Nobbs, on the border of Norfolk and Suffolk, to sign an agreement committing the two counties to working more closely together. In signing the 'Memorandum of Understanding', the two leaders announced an immediate pledge to simplify and improve health and social care for people living near the county boundary. While both county councils will remain as independent sovereign bodies, they will now work together to strengthen existing joint-working arrangements and explore areas where the county councils can join forces, cut duplication and so save money for the tax payers of East Anglia whilst protecting front-line services. Areas where closer co-operation will be explored include: Collaborative working to maximise the benefits of the Norwich and Ipswich City Deal proposals; sharing the benefits of the latest information technology, drawing upon initiatives under development in Norfolk; joining up the commissioning of Mental Health services. Norfolk and Suffolk have one Mental Health Trust and so it makes sense for the councils to commission services in collaboration. We are determined to do all we can, in the current financial climate, to protect our vital front-line services for the people of Suffolk. Part of that is to explore every way in which we can work with other organisations to cut duplication, share resources and do things more effectively. This historic agreement is an exciting step along that road.

SCC Budget proposals for next year scrutinised

Plans to save nearly £39million next year were put under the microscope by the county council's scrutiny committee. In order to cope with a reduction in our grant from the government, and expected cost pressures and additional demand next year, a series of cost-cutting proposals have been put forward. The aim, across the board, is to maximise the effectiveness of the money the council spends. By working closely with other organisations, reducing bureaucracy, cutting duplication and finding smarter ways of working, the intention is to meet the savings target whilst avoiding, as far as possible, cuts to front-line services. The proposals include savings of: £8.2 million in landfill taxes next year thanks to the new Energy from Waste site; £9 million from administrative costs following the end of the Customer Services Direct contract; £10million from the Adult and Community Services budget – including a greater focus on early prevention and closer working with the NHS; and £6.7 million from the children and young people's budget – including a review of children's centre services, to ensure they can best meet the needs of young families. Budget scrutiny is a cross-party process, introduced by the Conservative administration in 2005, and the recommendations emanating from the scrutiny committee will then be fed back into the budget process prior to the final budget proposals being debated by the Full Council in February next year.

And finally:

SCC prepared for cold winter – we've got the grit

SCC's gritting teams are getting ready for what could be a challenging few months. While long-range forecasts don't suggest anything too severe in the run-up to Christmas, County Council staff at the highways depots are ready for whatever demands may occur. This year will be the first year that the roads in Ipswich will be cleared by the county's teams after Suffolk's contract with the borough council came to an end in April. It will also be the first year that road maintenance has been in the hands of an outside operator – Kier MG - who won the contract to manage Suffolk's highways and started its contract last month. There are now 25,000 tonnes of grit in eight depots across the county – with 6,000 tonnes at the largest depot at Phoenix House on the Whitehouse industrial estate in Ipswich. In a normal year 25,000 tonnes is enough to keep Suffolk's roads clear, but last year's bad weather saw 32,000 tonnes used – the stocks can quickly be topped up if the winter turns out to be particularly icy. The safety of motorists on Suffolk's roads is paramount. We are committed to maintaining the quality of our roads, and keeping traffic moving during cold weather is vitally important. We are determined to be prepared for whatever may come along. Whatever happens, we've got the grit to see us through.

Matthew Hicks - County Councillor for the Thredling Division

Tel : 01728 628176 Mob : 07824474741 E-mail : matthew.hicks@suffolk.gov.uk