

County Councillor's Report: August 2024

Looking to the future

Maybe it's the General Election, or the weather, or just my age, but I've been thinking a lot about having just eight months left as your County Councillor. When you re-elected me three years ago, I really hoped that as an Independent councillor I would be able to make progress on some important issues affecting local communities. Sadly, the party in charge after the elections pulled the shutters down and have not been open to working with others for the wider benefit. That's a real shame for places like ours that have missed out on opportunities and investment over the years as the politicians have prioritised 'Greater Norwich'.

We have taken some small steps, though, and hopefully we can make some more together before I finish next May. To that end, I'd really welcome thoughts along the lines of 'if you only do one thing for our village, make it this...' Please just get in touch and I will do my best!

Also, if you want to find out where your Parish goes in the boundary changes coming into force for next year's elections, take a look here: [contractMapping \(lgbce.org.uk\)](https://contractMapping.lgbce.org.uk). I've spoken to representatives of the Conservatives and Lib Dems (the only ones who seem to take elections seriously in North Norfolk) and encouraged them to get their candidates to attend Parish Council meetings before May so they can learn about the issues affecting the area.

Devolution, elections, cables and roads

It looks certain that the 'Devolution Deal' that would have brought more money and powers to the county is dead because of the change of government. Although the deal was limited in scope, I think it is a shame that it won't now go ahead. Giving you the power to directly elect a leader for the County Council was an opportunity to break free of time-serving party politicians and do different. And the deal could have led in time to something bigger and better. Now, I suspect, it will go the same way as every other plan to reform local government in Norfolk over the last 30-odd years and be debated for months on end before being thrown in the bin.

Enough moaning, though. The new government has brought other changes. I suspect that the pylons opposed by County Councillors recently will be built to take electricity generated in the North Sea to London and beyond. I suspect, too, that the 'Western Link' and the dualling of the A47 will be dropped. I'm writing this a couple of days before the Chancellor's statement on the economy though – I might be proved wrong!

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The government has made a dramatic and exciting move in announcing that it will change the 'accountability framework' for schools as part of a plan to improve SEND provision. That means changing the things that OFSTED measures so that schools are less likely to 'off-roll' children with SEND and have behaviour policies that fail to take account of a wide range of needs. It's exactly what I argued for in a debate about SEND at County Hall just before the election (although I'm not claiming credit for the change!) It could lead to the biggest shake-up in schools for years. Fingers crossed! If you are interested in SEND (or knows someone who is), there's also an interesting set of proposals from the Local Government Association

too: [Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com) It has a similar starting-point to the government's changes but, being the LGA, also calls for more money for councils.

Keeping paths clear

Lots of complaints in the last few weeks about the failure to keep footpaths and similar clear. One question that has come up is whether Parish Councils could take on the work. I checked with the Rights of Way team and this is the reply I received:

As public rights of way are highways the agreement between the parish and highways for amenity cutting could include PROW, if the area engineer was amenable to paying the additional cost.

Where parishes have not engaged with highways for devolved amenity and verge cutting responsibilities, a small number have engaged with PROW/Trails in a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to cut their own PROW. The parish council would receive the same amount of money that NCC pays to the contractor for those routes that are included on the scheduled contract in the particular parish concerned. The parish would have to fulfil the same number of cuts as are currently undertaken annually i.e. two per year on PROW and 3 per year on Trails. Dependant on who is engaged to undertake the work (especially if using volunteers etc) the parish may be able to cut more times than the current NCC contract.

Preparing for flooding

The Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance is urging people to think how they can protect their homes from flooding after a wet spring and cool summer is set to bring the threat of rising waters to Norfolk earlier than normal this year.

High groundwater levels mean there is less capacity for water to be soaked into the ground, making alternative means of moving water away from your home even more important. Guttering, ditches and drains need to be free of blockages to avoid water building up around your home, while installing water butts can give your property additional storage to avoid water pooling on the ground.

Bus passenger figures continue to rise across Norfolk

Latest figures from bus operators across Norfolk show that the number of passengers has increased by 12% for the first quarter of this financial year.

There were more than 6.9 million journeys taken by bus during April, May and June 2024 compared to 6.1 million for the same period in 2023. This follows the figures released in April which confirmed an annual rise of 16% for April 2023 to March 2024.

It's now two years since Norfolk County Council received £49.55m of funding from the Department for Transport (DfT) to improve bus services across the county and increase the number of journeys made by bus.

Sheringham Shoal and Dudgeon Offshore Wind Farm Extension Projects

I recently received a note from the owners of the Sheringham Shoal Extension Project (SEP) and the Dudgeon Extension Project (DEP). The Parish Council might have received the same note but, just in case, the nub of it is this. In April, the government granted consent for the development of the projects as extensions to the operational Sheringham Shoal and Dudgeon Offshore Wind Farms, which currently power around 710,000 UK homes.

This enables SEP and DEP to double the capacity of the existing wind farms, providing enough renewable energy to power an additional 785,000 UK homes. This will be achieved through the deployment of up to 53 new turbines. Together, Equinor's wind farms in Norfolk will power the equivalent of nearly 1.5 million households and make a significant contribution to the UK's decarbonisation goals.

If anyone has any questions or concerns about this, please contact me and I will pass them on and try to get answers for you.

Cabinet to consider changes to adult social care charging policy and other cuts

Norfolk County Council's Cabinet will meet on 5 August 2024 to consider proposals to change the way that people are charged for adult social care services while living in their own home. Which certainly means they will be approved despite some Conservative councillors speaking out against the cut.

The MIG is the minimum amount of income that someone is left with after paying for their care. The council consulted on two options to bring the MIG in line with the government's rates (in other words, increasing charges for services to disabled people) which, if adopted, would save the council over £1million each year.

We examined this at Scrutiny Committee and concerns were raised about the consultation. My complaint was that it all seemed to be about saving money. When the Council closed most of the Children's Centres a few years back, they did at least claim that it would make the service better targeted to those in need of help.

The same Cabinet meeting will consider plans to:

- Reduce opening hours at recycling centres. This would mean that all recycling centres in Norfolk would be closed on Wednesdays.
- Switch off 2% of streetlights across Norfolk in areas where it is considered safe and appropriate to do so.
- Introduce pre-booking for visits to the Norfolk Record Office and a new paid services to increase income generation.

The cuts are expected to save the council just under half a million pounds each year.

Ed Maxfield

County Councillor for Mundesley Division

www.edmaxfield.org.uk