

County Councillor's Report

December 2024

Norwich Western Link

I thought it was worth sharing the County Council's press release on this in full:

The Leader of Norfolk County Council Cllr Kay Mason Billig has written to government Ministers to tell them their assistance is needed to positively resolve an "impossible position" the council finds itself in on its priority Norwich Western Link project.

In March this year, days before the planning application for the Norwich Western Link was due to be submitted, Natural England published updated guidance on barbastelle bats, which are present in the area around the proposed route of the new 3.9 mile dual carriageway road to the west of Norwich. As a result, the council now has a significant impediment to being able to deliver the project.

A report that is due to be considered by Norfolk County Council's cabinet on Monday 2 December provides an update on the project, including the ongoing liaison between the council and Natural England, which has not resolved the matter.

In light of this, and as it would not have been possible for the council to take the updated barbastelle bat guidance into account before it was published, the council has urged the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to urgently review the issue. The letter also asks them to intervene in order to resolve this issue positively for the people and businesses of Norfolk.

Cllr Graham Plant, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Infrastructure at Norfolk County Council, said: "We want to deliver important infrastructure improvements like the Norwich Western Link but, despite our best efforts, we find ourselves in an impossible position.

"The Norwich Western Link was made a priority infrastructure project for the council in 2016, and advice from Natural England has informed our proposals from its early stages. Last year, we were in a good position, having secured Outline Business Case approval from the Department for Transport, and they have backed the project with significant development funding. But we are now caught between government policies and systems, and need them to intervene to find a good solution.

"The Government has suggested that it is committed to enabling growth and to removing barriers in our planning system. We are therefore hopeful that they will help us to reach a positive outcome."

In the letter to Ministers, Cllr Mason Billig writes: "The ability for a statutory environmental agency to shift the goal posts so significantly and immediately is a

potential barrier to any and all future development, and therefore our experience with the Norwich Western Link should not be seen as an isolated case.”

While responses to letters to both Natural England and government Ministers, and the outcome of the Government’s spending review of transport schemes, are awaited, the report recommends reducing spending, by reducing or pausing activity on the project, including closing out Stage 1 of the design and build contract with Ferrovial Construction and descoping future stages from the current contract. The report also recommends that a further update report is received by cabinet once there is more clarity on Natural England’s and the Government’s consideration of the issue.

The report will be considered by Norfolk County Council’s cabinet on Monday 2 December. The letters from the council to government Ministers and Natural England are appended to the report. You can watch the meeting, live or afterwards, and read the reports online.

About the Norwich Western Link

The Norwich Western Link is a 3.9 mile dual carriageway road that would connect the A47 to Broadland Northway to the west of Norwich. Together with the upgraded A47 between North Tuddenham and Easton the new road would complete a fully dualled orbital route around the city.

The Norwich Western Link would take traffic off unsuitable local roads and out of communities. As a result, benefits the new road is expected to realise include:

- A boost to economic growth in Norfolk, for the ambitions and profitability of our existing businesses but also our attractiveness to investors and entrepreneurs as a place to do business.
- Shorter and more reliable journey times to key sites around Norwich, including the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital, the University of East Anglia, Norwich Airport and the Food Enterprise Park.
- Taking traffic off local roads and communities would lead to improved air quality near where people live and would support people to walk and cycle.
- Improvements to road safety and a reduction in collisions as traffic transfers onto a higher-standard, dual carriageway route.

Norfolk County Council secured Outline Business Case approval for the Norwich Western Link from the Department for Transport (DfT) in October 2023 and with it a £213 million funding commitment, subject to gaining relevant statutory approvals. To date, we have received £33 million of development funding from DfT.

Gritting

Highways have been out for the first time gritting roads. It's usually a job they do pretty well but, as every year, if there are any problems with roads being missed etc in your Parish, do let me know.

Scrutiny: SEND Support; Flooding and Economic Development

At the most recent meeting of the County Council's Scrutiny Committee we examined three important issues.

There was a good deal of scepticism that the Council's new strategy for 'SEND Support' would be able to deliver on its targets. This is support for children of families with disabilities and additional needs. It is based on the approach of increasing early support for families to reduce the need for expensive support later on. That's a good idea but the council's plans are trying to save too much money too quickly. We will be monitoring them again in March to see if they are really making the progress they say they can.

I also asked about school transport because I have had comments about the increased number of taxi movements up to Sidestrand Hall Special School. I should get an answer on that in March.

Officers dealing with flooding gave a very good report which they have promised to re-work so it can be shared with Parish Councils. I asked them to take the lessons from the Coastwise project (around diversion of water into rivers) which they say they are doing. I also asked them to comment on the role of the Environment Agency is stopping landowners clearing ditches etc but they were too diplomatic to do that. I think we will be coming back to that as an issue...

The Council has published a new draft economic strategy. It's a big document and North Norfolk doesn't get much of a look in. I'm glad to see Paston College and Bacton Terminal are identified as places to support for the development of skills. Tom Fitzpatrick (Councillor for Fakenham) and I both asked about how the plan is relevant to towns and villages in North Norfolk. I am concerned that rural areas will be neglected with the focus on high profile projects. I will keep an eye on this!

Local Member Highways Fund

The allowance I have to support small highways projects is pretty much spent up for this (financial) year. If you have a local project that you think needs support do please give me the details, though, because I will pass the requests on to whoever is elected as your new councillor in May next year.

Ed Maxfield