

County Councillor's Report 2012 -2013

The Council has continued to review services and make savings and has achieved its target of £330 million cut from the budget as the financial year ends. For the third year running, the Council Tax has been frozen, with no increase in the County portion of your bill. Further efficiency savings are planned to deliver £55 million this coming year in addition to the £200 million planned in the second phase of the Transformation Project to be completed by 2017.

Highways remains a major challenge for the Council, just keeping on top of pothole repairs has required an additional £11 million to be allocated to fund this exceptional workload. Since last summer some 60,000 potholes have been repaired, but the weather has been relentless, with more appearing as others are filled. The Council is to spend £180 million over the next four years on maintaining and enhancing the 8,500 miles of roads and footpaths. However with an estimated national road repair deficit of over £10 billion, there is a long way to go!

The winter that won't go away has meant the gritters have been very active, and some nights out several times. They have a twitter account and can be tracked on the internet, so the public can find out if they are out and about. The winter salt bag scheme for parishes was again available, but some problems found when supplies ran out, so a learning process too.

The wet weather has caused a lot of problems on local byways, especially if used by four-wheel drive enthusiasts. This wrecks the surface for other users, and after significant lobbying, there is a proposal to pilot seasonal closures on selected tracks in Uttlesford and Braintree Districts.

The new Local Highways Panel was launched last April, and has proved very successful in bringing local highway decisions back to local members. Inevitably, there are always more schemes than funds, but the process ensures that the most deserving cases go forward.

Last year I talked about the review of recycling centres, and further work is to be done to see if these can be even more effective. In addition the disposal of household waste has moved a step closer to having a processing plant in Basildon, and this will greatly reduce the need for landfill, which is costing £19 million a year in Landfill Tax. Linked to this will be a network of transfer and bulking up stations, and this will reduce truck movements overall. Kerbside recycling continues to improve across the county, and this too is reducing the landfill tax bill.

The Council will invest £18 million to provide 1000 additional school places. This reflects the changing demography of the county, with more school aged children requiring places. A Lifelong Learning Strategy will provide a strategic oversight, to ensure that Essex is providing the best education possible, and that it continues beyond school, to ensure the work force is properly skilled to meet the demands of economic growth in the future.

The Minerals Plan was published for consultation at the end of last year. Fortunately no new sites have been identified in the Thaxted Division, however there are some just outside, and I have been busy making relevant parishes aware, not least because of the potential traffic implications.

The Olympics were a great triumph for Essex, and its venue at Hadleigh Farm for the Mountain Biking event attracted 40,000 spectators over two days in August. To ensure this legacy continues the County Council is to invest £6.7 million over the next few years to create a new visitor centre, 18 km of trails, adapt the Olympic course for wider use and increase visitor numbers from 150,000 to 400,000 per year. Other Country Parks have been or will be subject to review, as they need to be at best cost neutral. At Marsh Farm, the visitor attraction has been leased to a private operator, but other models are being explored for the remaining parks.

This is an example of the way the Council is going, very much towards being a Commissioning Authority, where certain services have been made stand-alone entities, at arm's length but still part of the council family. Examples are the Essex Legal Services, Essex Cares social enterprise, and more recently the County's specialist advisory service, which includes Heritage and Conservation expertise.

Economic development is another key part of the Council's work, including supporting apprenticeships, encouraging inward investment, and getting superfast broadband to as much of Essex as possible.

As your local Councillor, much case work has been highway based, blocked gulleys, potholes and speeding schemes top the list. I continue as Chairman of the Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy and Scrutiny Committee. We have dealt with a number of key topics, ranging from Financial Inclusion through to the Emergency Planning arrangements for Control of Major Accident Hazards Sites in Essex. Amongst other things, we have reviewed arrangements for some Country Parks, responded to the Dartford Crossing charges consultation, looked at Corporate Carbon Reduction and the Local Transport Plan.

My role on the Police Authority ceased last November with the election of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The run up to this was very time consuming as not only was the Police Authority managing significant savings regarding the cost of policing, (£45 million per year) but in addition needed to have an organisation ready to be handed over to the new arrangements. This was no mean feat, but was achieved on time, and in budget.

Finally, my thanks go to your Parish Councillors, and their Clerk, who have kept me informed of matters that require my attention, and have been very understanding of my recent injury, which has meant not being able to attend many meetings recently.

Simon Walsh

County Councillor for Thaxted