

County Councillor's Report for Lavenham Annual Parish Meeting Thursday 19th April 2018

When elected, one of my key goals was to hold the Conservative administration to account. My ability to do this was helped by forming part of a larger group of 12 councillors – Greens, Liberal Democrats and Independents.

School bus cuts

This plan first emerged in August and a decision has not yet been made. By delaying consultation, our group gave time for parents and school heads to voice their concerns. Cabinet are due to make a decision in June and I hope they will have listened to the many representations from parents, teachers and councillors like myself.

Highways reshuffle, potholes, Water Street

Shortly after I was elected, Highways was completely restructured. The idea was to integrate staff at Kier, the company with the contract to repair our roads, with county staff. Under the new structure, rather than contacting individual officers for an area, parish councils and individuals and councillors must contact a central service centre. Though this is in some ways frustrating it does mean that they have a proper record of reports and jobs and can monitor them better. The reshuffle however, cannot disguise the fact that highways do not have enough money to do all the work that they have done in the past. For example Highways are only repairing holes above a certain size that they know could result in damage to a vehicle and hence a claim. Smaller ones, even if nearby, are being left. This would not seem to be a cost effective use of tax payers money. It is important to report potholes on the website. If someone's vehicle is damaged from a smaller pothole then a claim can still be made if the pothole has not been repaired. If you do not get a response to online reports, please do take them up with me to escalate. I am fully aware of the misery suffered by residents of Water Street by heavy lorries and I can only regret that dates for the start of the long planned trial weight restriction have constantly slipped indicating management problems within highways.

Addressing a culture of secrecy

Four cabinet committees were set up in September. These committees are "advisory" to cabinet only. At the meeting at which they were set up I pushed hard for them to be held in public rather than in secret as was the plan. Although this was resisted by the administration, the cabinet has promised to review this after 12 months. Later in the new year, it emerged that there is a Public Sector Leaders group which also meets in private and makes spending decisions over millions of pounds. I'm pleased to say that after public pressure from me, they invited the media to their last meeting this month and the districts and Suffolk are now reviewing the way it is governed.

Budget

Sadly the removal of revenue support grant for the county council has left a hole in its budget for the 2018/19 year, even after it has raised its precept by the 5% maximum it is

allowed. This is being met by a host of cuts across various services and a small amount from reserves.

Unitary

The issue of creating unitaries has again raised its head. My belief is that unitaries in general are a good idea to increase accountability. But I would be concerned about the remoteness of a single authority based in Ipswich compared to say 2, 3, or 4 more local unitaries across Suffolk, that would be closer to the people they are making the decisions about.

Lavenham

I will be pleased to contribute to the refurbishment of the **cemetery chapel** and was moved by the words of a fellow donor and resident at the last parish council. I am concerned about the likely closure of the **Tourist Information Centre** and I wish the parish council well in a) getting it listed as a community asset and b) providing a long-awaited home for a post office. I hope it might also be used as a public access point for Babergh council services. I have monitored developments at the **pre-school** which are very regrettable. As I write the staff crisis is on-going. As I understand it, there is a demand in this area, particularly from lower income families, for places at a pre-school that opens in the school holidays, to allow parents to continue working.

May I wish the parish council and Lavenham residents well for the remainder of 2018 and I look forward to continue working with you.

R LINDSAY
APRIL 2018