

County Councillor's Report to Annual Parish Meeting

Over the past 12 months the County Council has had to spend £30 million less on top of a reduction in each of the previous three years of the same magnitude due directly to cuts in Government grants to the council. This coming year we must find another £46 million from a total budget of £771.5m. This includes grants for education and other specific purposes so the saving has to be found from just over half that budget figure. As you can appreciate we have got to the point where you will see council services deteriorate particularly those for the young and elderly. The situation has been made worse by Conservative councillors refusing to increase council tax to the limit set by their Government. An additional 44 p per week would have protected front line services.

Most frustrating has been the Street Lighting Private Finance Initiative. Designed by the previous Conservative council it has proved impossible to amend to make it flexible to meet the needs of local communities. Initially designed as a one for one replacement the Conservative cabinet changed it to include a reduction in lights in residential streets. This has resulted in some cases five lights being replaced by just three. The contract has been impossible to renegotiate and it has fallen to Parish Councils to pick up the pieces with varying degrees of success.

Another contentious issue has been the Guided Busway which we were told would cost council tax payers nothing. Now having spent around £30 million the County Council is again in dispute with the constructor this time over serious faults which have appeared in the track.

And another PFI set up by the previous Conservative cabinet to deal with waste removal is hundreds of thousands of pounds over budget. But again we are finding it difficult to renegotiate the contract to get costs back under control.

And finally we have another problem scheme yet again arising from the previous Conservative administration namely Connecting Cambridgeshire and the introduction of superfast broadband. The system chosen was the cheapest and relied on existing copper BT telephone wiring to deliver the service from the exchange box to the premises. This may have been OK in urban areas but given the distances involved in rural areas it has proved to be inadequate. The decision by the Conservative cabinet to tackle the easiest connections first and put off the difficult work to last (and by only generally specifying that 95% of premises should be connected by 2016) we now have many in rural communities let down while Connecting Cambridgeshire can claim to have met its 95% target on time. We are also now facing a legal challenge from Virgin Media under EU competition rules.

On to highways and footpaths, the County Council is continuing with its capital programme of resurfacing roads and footpaths but again financial restraints mean we cannot progress this as fast as it should be done and we are limited to resurfacing not replacing. This has meant the worst roads and footpaths which need more attention than resurfacing are not being dealt with. The Government cuts have also affected the Local Highway Initiative scheme whereby Parish Councils can bid for funding for their highway schemes. Last year the amount of money available for schemes in South Cambridgeshire had to be cut by a quarter to £94,000. The road maintenance budget has also been shrinking and we have only managed to keep on top of it so far by driving down costs and by not doing non-urgent things straightaway. But there is a limit to this and the Government has reduced yet again its pothole repair funding for the coming year. We have no choice but to expect Parish Councils and others to take on more responsibility and pay for non-statutory things which until now have been left to the County Council to deal with and fund.

I am pleased to have got the 18 and 196 bus services funded for a further year and helped in overturning the Conservative plan to privatise the Central Library and their plan for a Mayor for the East of England. But the poor performance of the majority of the county's secondary schools (which all but one are academies) is giving cause for concern to both the county and Ofsted but because of Conservative education policy the county is powerless to step in and put this right.

I make no apology for this being a political report but we are not all in this together and Conservative policies at both national and local levels are making things much worse.

John Williams
17 April 2016