

Report for Cockfield Annual Parish Meeting 12/4/18

When I was elected 11 months ago 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 later this month and I hope they will have listened to the many representations from parents, teachers and councillors like myself.

Highways reshuffle

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 the lack of repair of many signs and overgrown pavements. I am pleased that after much urging the pavement on Lavenham Road by the Horse Shoes has finally been cleared. Much of my time has been spent urging highways to do jobs that appear to have slipped for whatever reason.

Ending 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. After public pressure from me, they invited the media to their last meeting this month and they are reviewing the way it is governed.

Budget

It is not pleasant to have to report that 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. At least my "locality" budget still exists and I was please to contribute to the purchase of a new Cockfield village minibus.

Unitary

In the past few weeks the county council leader Colin Noble has decided to employ a think-tank to look at potentially creating one unitary authority in Suffolk. This has not gone down well with the heads of district and borough authorities, including Babergh, who have all written to him to complain. My belief is 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.

May I wish the parish council, Cockfield residents and your new clerk well for the remainder of 2018 and I look forward to continue working with you in the future.