Annual Report to Gipping Valley Parishes: April 2015

# Overview

The local government environment is still dominated by the aftermath of the global economic crash, the need to reduce Government and personal borrowing and the austerity measures aimed at achieving that. With a cross party intention to protect the NHS and education spends local government is a main target for reductions, some necessary and some that hit vital services.

The reductions have forced up efficiency with significant reductions in senior management at Mid Suffolk and at the County. The two authorities take different views on council tax with MSDC raising tax by some 1.7% while putting some £7.5M into a “transformation” reserve. The county has kept tax rises to zero again while putting the government grant for that behaviour into reserves that now total some £121.6 M.

# Transformation

I would like to see effort put into further lean systems reviews aimed at providing what people want and need as efficiently as possible but it is unclear what much of the “transformations” are expected to yield. At Mid Suffolk the process of defining where we want to go has occupied most of the last four years, an extraordinary time. The County is getting on with change in Adult and Community Services and in Children and Young People, the two big spenders.

The outsourcing programme, turning the council into a body that collects your money and commissions services has moved ahead. The library change to Industrial Provident Society structure part funded by the County is successful and has won national recognition. The outsourcing of our care homes is delivering new buildings but care standards problems have forced temporary closure of some.

The initiatives involved in the “team about the child”, “family focused care” and “make every intervention count” appear to be delivering needed improvements with a more preventative emphasis. Early interventions increase up front spend but improves overall quality of life and reduces overall costs, or so we hope and believe. In child protection, an area that concerns us all the “signs of safety” approach is sound.

In these areas where substantial “savings” have been made it is easy to measure spend, much harder to measure the quantity and quality of service delivered or the level of service needed. We hear a lot about demand management but it is difficult to discover how much is produced by people not getting services they want but don’t need and how much is essential service not delivered which has knock on costs.

# Education

We have progressed in Gipping Valley with all our schools now rated at least good and one “outstanding”. This is a tribute to the hard work of teachers, leadership teams, governors and of course of children and their parents. We must keep it up, improve further and as governors try to ensure that cuts do not leave schools without the resources to provide booster work for pupils who are struggling.

Across the county the picture is less good and schools, particularly those in deprived areas pull overall performance scores down. That leaves pupils without the skills to compete in the modern world, a poor quality of life and industry without the local people it needs. “Raising the Bar” is not praised by school staff and its effect appears limited. I believe the County needs to put in more resource from its reserves over a short period to get the improvement needed. The administration sees it as a problem for teachers and governors to be solved by academies. I tend to see that as a change from one problem set to another.

# IT, Finance and HR

The move of IT, Finance and HR services in house has been accomplished with a cost saving but no significant disruption. A success!

# Gipping Valley

This year has been dominated by large controversial planning applications of one form or another. The news leaked recently that Mid Suffolk has less than five year development land availability is not good. At this threshold developers can propose what they think meets need rather than take note of local planning policies. We may have a significant application at Bramford and Claydon has areas that have been proposed in the long delayed land bid process.

# Solar Farms

Solar Farms are not acceptable on high quality agricultural land but panels on almost all forms of buildings are essential to provide renewable energy. The Mid Suffolk programme to fit panels to council houses and benefit from the feed in tariff while the residents get an amount of free power is a good example. Panels on schools, village halls, factories and farm buildings are also to be encouraged.

# The Incinerator

The Incinerator or Energy from Waste plant, much larger than people realised, is now fully functional, despite some surprising early failures not helped by a hurried commissioning phase. The plant is saving landfill tax to the tune of £8M per year and making a profit for the county by burning some 40,000 tonnes of Norfolk’s waste. What is the cost to us? Pollution is controlled to the European Directive standards, in fact it is well below them and so is not a problem. Odours have been reported on many occasions, some after outage events, some when the doors were damaged but also those difficult to track down. Is this just the new plant being blamed for the sins of others, or the Gipping Valley inversion layer pushing pollutants down to ground level? I will continue to press for a definitive answer.

The associated greenhouse project aimed at using waste heat from the project is progressing but timescales are proving a challenge. Archaeological evaluations have delayed the project and are putting the plan to get the heat in use under the ROC (renewable obligation certificate) regime at risk.

# Blakenham Fields

At Blakenham Fields the District Council has accepted a significant increase in housing numbers to get payment of something approaching the original 106 agreement monies despite viability issues. As this occurred the Minister, Brendan Lewis, appears to have backtracked on his decisions to allow developers to escape from commitments using the viability argument under pressure from London authorities.

The local residents are incensed that they have gained little to mitigate their problems. They believe they face crowded doctors’ surgeries, oversubscribed pre-school provision, lack of primary school capacity, no village centre shop, daytime only public transport, congested roads and lack of local community facilities.”

As local councillors we must get these problems addressed or evidence produced that they are less than people fear. I have started by getting the County officers to make face to face contact with the school heads to ensure both parties understand the issues and use the available finance to good purpose. They have also promised to carry the lack of early years provision forward with vigour.

# Fisons or Scott’s on Papermill Lane

The Papermill Lane application was approved this year with little opposition as people recognised the need to save the iconic but decaying buildings. Developer contributions to local infrastructure are limited due to the cost of site clearance and restoration works. There are concerns about traffic on Papermill Lane at the Bramford end where parking by Victorian housing is a major difficulty but highways believe the proposals will cope. Bramford Primary is the obvious school for residents’ children but is currently full and our education plan needs to address that fact.

# Highways

The combination of the new highways contract, county reorganisation and austerity has made it difficult to deliver highways or transport improvements. However at last we have additional yellow lines in Claydon and a new bus shelter. Bus services are still during the working day only but we managed to replace some that operators wished to terminate, with acceptable alternatives.