

County Councillor's report, Summer 2020

Back to business at County Hall

Last week the County Council held its first full council meeting since February. I can't pretend I have missed them.

We met 'virtually' and chose a new chair for the council and the allocation of committee places (as it was the delayed AGM). My committee load this year will be light but I can still raise issues about any of the County Council's services. I'm really pleased to have been asked to chair a group looking at housing for young people in care too.

We are all waiting to see what impact the Pandemic will have on council finances: it will depend on the size of the bailout the government decides to provide. It does seem likely there will be some sort of restructuring of local government with plans being published in September. It's likely that the County Council and District Councils will disappear in their current form to be replaced by a single 'unitary' authority. It's possible that the elections planned for next year will be postponed too.

Responding to the pandemic

You can divide the County Council's role into four parts:

1. Emergency co-ordination and public health. They seemed to be a bit slow off the mark but they do at least have a lot of people who have experience of doing this and they got into gear eventually. Norfolk has had one of the lowest reported infection rates in the country.
2. Adult social care. Care homes have been at the centre of a bit of a storm. It's been pretty awful for residents and their families. I have passed on concerns reported to me about a couple of homes over the last few months and also raised the concerns of parents of disabled people who are living in care re. the heavy restrictions on visits (which thankfully now seem to be easing.) There is a desperate need to sort out how our care system is funded and run – hopefully the government will get on with that soon.
3. Services for Children. Policy on school lockdowns has been made by government but the County Council still has an important role to play in supporting schools and in making sure pupils get the support they need. Hard earned rights for children with additional needs were paused during the pandemic and I have criticised the way many councils have welcomed this. It must not become a permanent situation. At last week's meeting of the Police and Crime Panel I asked the Chief Constable why reported cases of child abuse had fallen and he said he thought there was a 'hidden bubble' that we would only find out about when schools return in September. He said his team is working with County Council officers to be ready.
4. Everything else. Anyone trying to cross the bridge at Swafield will know that Highways work slowed down at the start of the pandemic. And many local libraries and County-run museums remain closed. Hopefully these will continue to get back to normal soon. I have raised concerns about the upkeep of local footpaths including the Coastal Path with the Trails Team.

Greater Anglia update

This is part of the most recent update from Greater Anglia for info which I thought you might find useful:

Let's Travel Safely this Summer

As you may have heard, the government has today lifted the guidance on only using public transport if necessary. That means anyone can take the train and other public transport for any purpose - commuting, business and leisure - from now on, which is good news. We're fully focused on providing a convenient and safe service, as we start to see more passengers travelling with us again.

We are running a full service on most routes, with almost 93% of the normal service now operating again, including more Norwich to London intercity services. Only the Stansted Express (currently operating with a half hourly frequency) and the Norwich to London intercity services are not yet back to a full service, reflecting current travel patterns. We'll continue to monitor demand on a daily basis and plan for the phased re-introduction of the remaining intercity and Stansted Express services when appropriate.

As a reminder, it is mandatory for customers to wear a face covering when using public transport, to help reduce the spread of coronavirus. Children under the age of 11 and people with a disability or medical condition which means they cannot wear a face covering are exempt from wearing them.

It's also still important to observe social distancing. We've introduced a wide range of measures to make it easier for customers to do so at stations and on trains - including floor markings, one-way systems, new signs and queuing systems. We have also now installed hand gel dispensers at 20 of our busiest stations.

Sale of counterfeit goods

I recently had an enquiry about the sale of counterfeit goods at car boot sales and I thought you would be interested to see the response I got from Trading Standards:

Norfolk Trading Standards enforcement policy is that we will prioritise investigating counterfeit items with any potential safety risks such as counterfeit toys and electricals.

In many circumstances, the large clothes/ accessories manufacturers will have their own brand protection companies and are able to take legal action in the courts themselves.

If there were indications of large-scale manufacturing in Norfolk, this too would be a priority for Norfolk Trading Standards along with any suspected counterfeit tobacco.

If a resident wishes to report suspected counterfeit goods, they can contact the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 223 1133. Citizens Advice receive consumer complaints on behalf of Trading Standards authorities and then provide the information to the relevant Trading Standards Authority.

Finally a note from me to say thank you for all the work you have been doing to support your communities over the last few months. If the Pandemic has taught us anything it is the power of people to help their neighbours. I hope everyone's efforts will get the recognition they deserve. I will do my best to attend the online Parish Council meetings that are in the diary (subject to me remembering what day of the week it is as I am going back on furlough from the day job in August). So hopefully I will see you (really or virtually) again soon.

County Councillor Ed Maxfield

27 July 2020