

Suffolk Coastal District Council

Cllr Bob Snell's report to Kettleburgh Annual Parish Meeting, 6 May 2015

1. SCDC accommodation review - update

The new location of SCDC's HQ was revealed at the end of February as part of the former Girdlestons site in Melton (opposite the station), where purpose-built offices of the 21st century should be ready for occupation late in 2016. The land has been purchased by the council from Riduna Holdings in a deal that will save £200K running costs per year, rising to £500K a year in the longer term. The existing site is on the market (informal tenders by 4 June) and might accommodate up to 69 houses and apartments.

2. Council Tax 2015/16

SCDC's share of Council Tax has been frozen for the fifth consecutive year, as the council continues to drive down costs without any cut in front-line services and without borrowing any money (even for its impending office move). The year's cost budget at £12m has been further reduced by 1.3%, despite a drop in government grant of more than £3m since 2010. We have achieved this by cutting costs by more than £10m since 2010, without increasing Council tax, through such programmes as our joint services programme with Waveney (reducing our combined manpower by 40% since 2008) and £1.7m savings from our contract with Norse SCS Services. Your district council remains the strongest Local Authority economy in the county, with unemployment having reduced over the past three years from 2.1% to 0.7%, although this belies an underlying problem of a shortage of technically skilled workers which companies like BT are trying to alleviate by taking on and training 1,000 new technical staff at Martlesham.

There remains a budget gap of £2.7 over the next four years, which is expected to be filled by even more operating efficiencies, £500,000 a year from a new contract for our Leisure Services partner and £8 million savings over 20 years from the office relocation, including a reduction in the number of councillors from 54 to 44.

Notwithstanding the need for such economies, the council has adopted from 1 April 2015 the living wage for its direct employees, in recognition of their hard work and dedication. Although only expected to cost about £10K a year, it could have a big impact on the lives of some of our lower paid employees.

3. Recycling.

At 56.7% for the year, SCDC continues to almost meet its recycling target of 58% of household recycled, leaving only 365kg residual water per household – one of the top performers both in both Suffolk and nationally.

4. Planning Matters

(a) Site specific allocations consultation update. The Site Allocations and Area Specific Policies eleven weeks' consultation and drop in sessions ended recently. Officers are now busy examining the responses for a report in June/July 2016 on those preferred sites that will be subject to further public consultation at the end of this year. There will follow an examination by a planning inspector, with the target of putting the final recommended version to full council in July 2016 (recently brought forward from November).

(b) Neighbourhood Plans. Having been approved by a Planning Inspector, the Rendlesham Plan was endorsed by 97% of a turnout of 47% of the electorate. It came before the full District Council in March to be "made" and will now be used to help decide planning applications in its area. Six other areas are in various stages of developing their own plans – Framlingham, Great Bealings, Leiston, Melton, Martlesham & Woodbridge, and Wenhaston with Mells.

(c) C.I.L. Our plans for the new levy, which will replace negotiated sums of money embraced in Section 106 agreements, were presented to a Planning Inspector on 5 December and one day public hearing by an Examiner took place on 19 March. His report is awaited so that the agreed charging schedule can be put before full council for adoption.

(d) Affordable homes. Despite government rules that allow developers to avoid affordable homes on applications for less than 10 dwellings (even retrospectively), we expect to deliver 256 affordables in the district over three years (77 delivered in 2014/15 and a further 179 expected by 2017).

5. NANT legal action

On 17 February 2015 The Court of Appeal finally dismissed the latest appeal by NANT, which was holding up progress on our Local Plan, and awarded costs to SCDC (though, unfortunately, they are capped by European legislation to £10,000 in cases of challenge on environmental grounds). NANT has now appealed to the Supreme Court, which will impose yet another delay in the Local Plan process (timing of the court's response to the application unknown).

6. Yet more benefit fraud

In our continuing "zero tolerance" drive against benefit fraud, a man from Leiston pleaded guilty in Feb to claiming housing benefit, council tax benefit and council tax reduction to which he was not entitled amounting to £18,000. Apart from having to repay it, he earned a 12-months suspended sentence and a criminal record.

7. Spa Theatre

A deal is in place on 15 May for the re-opening of the theatre and restaurant, following completion of the regeneration of the sea front gardens in Felixstowe. Plans for the traditional Christmas pantomime from 19 Dec to 3 Jan have already been announced. Press Release on council's web site.

8. Car parking grace period

SCDC already grants a 10-minute grace period in its council operated car parks, which it has recently been announced will become a legal norm nationwide. (This only applies to simple time related offences.)

9. Grants to Kettleburgh

I was pleased to help with a Community Enabling grant for the proposed pétanque pitch. The new 2015/16 grants programme launched this month, with a workshop for prospective applicants at Melton Hill on 15 May (1 to 3.30 pm) – see web site for details and application processes.

10. New ward boundaries

These are in place for the elections tomorrow, 7 May 2015. Brandeston will be part of the enlarged Framlingham ward and the total number of SCDC councillors will reduce from 54 to 44.

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