

Report from your County Councillor, Cllr Steffan Aquarone

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Happy New Year to everyone in Melton Constable division! I hope you had a peaceful break and are returning to parish council business refreshed and refueled.

Full Council - Norfolk Devolution Deal

There have been attempts to secure a 'devolution deal' for Norfolk for a while. After some deliberation, I voted in favour of the deal that was proposed to Full Council by the Conservative administration just before Christmas. The core features are: a directly elected leader of the County Council, around £20m a year in additional investment, delegated decision making on Adult Education spending, and fast track access to government funding schemes.

On the one hand, I welcome moves to transfer power down from central government into our communities. On the other hand, a cynical reading of the latest enthusiasm for this version of devolution is that it provides government with one point of contact for the purposes of enacting government legislation.

There could be some interesting side effects too, in the event that the directly elected leader ends up being from a political party that is different to the majority of elected members - but in the end I felt the deal was better than none, in particular given that failing to pass it would put Norfolk even further back in the queue for future funding opportunities.

Liberal Democrats now main opposition on the County Council

The above-mentioned Full Council meeting was the first to have the Liberal Democrat group as the main opposition following our three byelection gains since the last elections, and the collapse of the Labour group in November. Our group leader Brian Watkins, who has over 30 years' experience of local government, is now the leader of the opposition on Norfolk County Council - and there is much to be done in order to hold the administration to account!

In particular, the County Council's perilous financial situation: there is still a budget gap of £20m to close before the budget meeting in February, and the council is regularly coming close to its billion-pound borrowing limit - costing over £80k a day in interest payments.

This is ultimately the result of central government totally removing the core funding it provides councils - a loss of £100m a year to Norfolk from a budget of £1.8bn.

However: in the course of reaching this position through annual reductions, some controversial decisions made by the administration have come back to bite. For instance, after time, failure to invest in things like workforce development and healthy living leads to higher acute demand down the line. In Norfolk County Council's case, much of this acute provision is statutory - it's required to be delivered by law. So the pressure on budgets gets even higher.

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Dedicated minister for the coast

The only motion to be debated at December's meeting was a motion from the administration, which I again supported, calling for the government to create a dedicated position of Minister for the Coast.

Half of our country's population lives in rural and coastal communities - not to mention here in Norfolk where the vast majority do.

The recent damage to cliffs and properties, and the disruption caused by flooding around the Broads, shows the Government must do more to protect our coasts and the people who live and work there.

I have seen this first hand in the properties I have visited personally during the recent flooding.

I have also learned of the huge gap between the measures this council can afford to invest in, and the size of the job that needs to be done.

Indeed one of the aims of the Norfolk Strategic Flood Alliance, inaugurally chaired by Lord Dannatt but latterly by Henry Cator, was to secure finances and commitment for sites and schemes to prevent flooding and protect our coastline.

It has done important and admirable work bringing together stakeholders, which I made a point of supporting at a previous meeting of the council. But this doesn't change the fact that the £80m or so worth of funding for schemes is well beyond the budget of local authorities, and calls to Government for it have fallen on deaf ears.

We clearly need a more effective voice in Westminster. A dedicated Minister for Coasts would be an important addition to a future government and something I am glad to support.

My two campaign priorities for the New Year

Finally, as your County Councillor I will be working on the following two priorities this year, in addition to the many issues that arise through casework, correspondence, and from Parish Councils:

1. Supporting the reestablishment of the orbital railway from Sheringham through Melton Constable and round to Dereham. This is a long term project that I believe has serious potential, and which I will be working within Norfolk County Council to seek support for.
2. Developing and launching my 'footpaths toolkit' to help communities establish and promote more local circular routes. I believe I now have enough support to take a motion successfully to Full Council this spring.