

## COUNTY COUNCIL REPORT FOR FARTHINGHOE AND STEANE

### ANNUAL PARISH MEETING

I am going to start by clarifying the position relating to the reform of local government, and I shall follow this with some information about this year's budget and the services provided by the County Council.

The nation's indebtedness has resulted in a squeeze on all council finances over the last few years and this has particularly had an adverse effect on county councils. The amount received from the government by both Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire County Council by way of the Revenue Support Grant has been reducing every year. Both counties have been faced with a situation where income has been decreasing at a time when costs have been rising due to three main factors, the growing elderly population, the increase in the numbers of children in care, and an increasing general population.

The County Council has had to find innovative ways of improving efficiency and reducing costs by linking with other councils to share back room services like finance, legal, and human resources. This strategy has been very successful but has its limits and to achieve further cost reductions there is now an urgent need for a major reform of local government. We just can't afford to continue to have the County Council, the District Councils, and Parish Councils. This is a structure which is confusing to the public and also extremely uneconomic. The removal of one tier of local government would result in savings by reducing bureaucracy and the costs of democratic decision making. A single council would be better able to meet the major challenges of a growing and ageing population, and also be better equipped to plan for the continuing growth in population by combining responsibility for housing, schools, planning, and transport. Such a council would reduce the number of CEOs and senior managers who are duplicated across the current arrangements, it would greatly reduce the number of councillors all receiving allowances, and it would also lead to a better utilisation of the building stock.

We need to reform the system before the situation worsens. The government is scheduled to completely remove the present Revenue Support Grant by 2020 which will mean that if we do nothing there will be no money for anything other than care for the elderly, disabled, people with learning difficulties, and children in County Council care. These are the demand led services. Local government needs to be reformed in a way which will have a substantial and sustainable impact on costs while maintaining, or preferably improving, the services provided for the electorate.

Residents of both counties will have seen the proposal put forward by the District Councils in Oxfordshire to form four unitary authorities, the most northerly one comprising Cherwell District and South Northamptonshire. I would add here that this proposal was done in secret without reference to Northamptonshire County Council or Oxfordshire County Council. This would mean that the whole of south Northamptonshire, from Kings Sutton in the south to the border of Northampton Borough, would effectively become part of Oxfordshire. I doubt very much if this would receive much support from the residents of Northamptonshire as it could lead to a massive house building programme which would jeopardise the rural character of this part of Banburyshire. Also, I personally believe the creation of four unitary authorities would not solve the financial

problem as each will require a Chief Executive Officer leading a team of directors and senior management, with considerable duplication of effort and costs across the county. What is required to solve the present crisis is the formation of unitary authorities large enough to result in a substantial and sustainable reduction in costs.

The seven Northamptonshire MPs have written to the leader of Northamptonshire County Council asking him, and I quote *“to start the process of considering options for unitary authorities in our county and a re-organisation of local Government in Northamptonshire. We want local councils that can meet the simultaneous challenges of increased demand for services and reduced funding, and we believe that simplified local government in the form of unitary authorities provides the opportunity to achieve that”*. As a result Northamptonshire County Council has commissioned independent research into the options for the reform of local government. In doing this it is very important that the process involves participation by the County Council, the Borough of Northampton, the six District Councils, and all the Parish Councils. The report on this research will be available in the summer and this will then lead to consultation with the residents of Northamptonshire. I don't want to pre-empt the issue of the report but it is significant that the Department for Communities & Local Government has given advice that new unitary councils should ideally serve populations of between 300,000 and 700,000. This population size range is not absolute but ministers would 'ask searching questions' relating to proposals outside this band. None of the four unitaries included in the Oxfordshire District Councils proposal, the most northerly of which includes south Northamptonshire, meet this population criteria.

Finally, on this issue, I am not seeking re-election in 2017 so I can't be accused of trying to safeguard my position as a councillor. I do however want to see local government reformed in way that will ensure sustainable financial security while maintaining a satisfactory level of services for the public, and I am convinced that this will only be achieved by creating a unitary or unitaries which are large enough to bring about substantial cost savings.

Turning now to the budget for the financial year just started, the County Council is responsible for the services which are covered by over 70% of the council tax paid by residents. Two of the main services are Adult Social Care, and Services for Children and Families, with a combined budgeted net cost of £275m. All the other services have a combined net cost of £140m and include the Fire and Rescue Service, Highways, Trading Standards, Parks, the Libraries and the Record Office, Waste Management, and the cost of running the Local Government Shared Services (LGSS). To cover the increased cost of running these services the County Council part of your council tax has increased by 3.95%. This includes a special allowance of 2% to be spent specifically to help meet the rising cost of providing social care for the elderly and disabled.

Finally, I have to report on how I allocated my £7,000 Empowering Councillors' Allowance in 2015/16. This was as follows: £2,500 towards the cost of a footway at Upper Astrop Road, Kings Sutton; £2,000 towards the cost of a new Children's Play Park at Farthinghoe; £1,500 towards the cost of a Vehicle Activated Sign at Aynho; £1,000 to cover the distribution cost of 'Cheney Chatter' to residents in Middleton Cheney.

Ron Sawbridge MBE  
County Councillor for Middleton Cheney Division.

8<sup>th</sup> April 2016