

East Goscote Annual Report

2019

It's been another busy year at the County Council, discussions around the financial state of the authority and the debate around local government re-organisation dominated. These haven't gone away and will be important issues over the next 12 months as well, but beyond that I think the biggest 'known unknown' will be the effect the 'B' word has on local government – Brexit. Depending on what (if any) deal is struck for when we leave the EU, Leicestershire could well be faced with new challenges – and new opportunities – that at present it's simply impossible to predict with any certainty.

County Council finances

On Wednesday 20th February the County Council passed a budget balancing surging demand for services and tough financial challenges in a very difficult financial and political environment. The four-year plan sees £94m spent more on services - mainly due to growing demand for social care and special educational needs and disability support - and savings of £75m.

Savings totaling £35m are set out in detail, as well as a plan to reduce special educational needs and disability (SEND) costs by £20m a year, leaving a £20m budget gap. The County Council's share of council tax will rise by 3.99 per cent from April. This equates to £1 a week for band D property and generates an extra £12m to invest in supporting vulnerable people. Most of this will be used to support the growth in the number of adult social care service users and children in care.

These are challenging times. Rising demand for services - especially special educational needs and disability support - is ramping up pressure on the County's budgets. Add uncertainty about local government funding into the picture, and we could see more trouble ahead. But, taking tough decisions and saving £200m since 2010 has put Leicestershire in a strong position, especially compared to other councils and with savings, the books balance for two years before we see a shortfall. As the lowest funded county, Leicestershire County Council is using its finite resources to invest in supporting vulnerable people, set out a significant capital programme without borrowing a penny and have been named the most productive council for the second year.

Securing funding reform remains key. That's why the County Council continues to work with Government ministers to do everything it can to bring about a long-term, sustainable, costed funding plan for local government.

Local Government re-organisation

Since last summer a debate has been ongoing about the way local government works in Leicestershire. At present we have what's known as a two tier structure of local government – the Borough Council (which covers things like collecting rubbish & recycling, street cleaning and planning), and the County Council (which is responsible for highways, adult social care and strategic planning amongst many other areas). The County Council has put forward proposals to change this to a unitary structure; this is where one Council covers all aspects of local government. The Parish Council would still exist under either form of local government and is therefore in that sense unaffected by this.

Those in favor of these changes point to the savings a unitary authority can make – at present there are eight local authorities in Leicestershire, seven borough/districts and the County Council. This

means there are eight Chief Executives, eight Directors of Finance etc. One Council would only have one senior management team and therefore savings would be made there. Another advantage proponents of unitary status make is the ability to join up services better. If we take waste collection as an example, in East Goscote Charnwood Borough Council collect rubbish, recycling and garden waste but then Leicestershire County Council is responsible for disposing of it. As each borough/district can decide for itself what it recycles this leads to inconsistency across the county. A unitary authority would both collect and dispose of waste itself.

Those who oppose Leicestershire having one unitary authority argue that if Leicestershire became a unitary it would become too remote from residents and wouldn't be as responsive to local needs. Leicestershire (not including Leicester City which is separate and unaffected by this debate) would be, by population, the second largest unitary council in the country (after Birmingham). This would then raise questions about how the unitary would set its priorities – an example of this would be areas such as the very rural vale of Belvoir and Hinckley (which has a close affinity with the west midlands towns) would be covered by one local council but would have potentially have quite different priorities and needs.

Any change in the structure of local government would need an Act of Parliament to come into effect and there is a significant difference of opinion locally about how desirable a change would be – but the debate has now started and will likely continue in the coming year. Ultimately Councils exist to provide the best services possible to local residents whilst ensuring local accountability. This is what is always at the forefront of my mind regardless of what structure we have in Leicestershire.

Around the village

Arguably the most important aspect of a Councillors role is helping residents who need my assistance. The range of matters people contact me about is vast (everything from children's services to street lighting and roads), and my role is very much about ensuring residents are listened to and have their issues addressed. To that end I would encourage anyone who has a problem they think I can help with to get in touch, working closely with the Parish Council, your Borough Councillor and Edward Argar MP I can either help you directly or put you in touch with the right colleague who can. My contact details are below.

I'd like to finish this years report by thanking the Parish Council, Village Clerk Liz Pizer and Assistant Clerk Caroline Taylor for all the work they do for the village. As I said above I work very closely with them and see the commitment they show to making East Goscote a great place to live. This year I've worked especially closely with Cllr Kevin Preston who runs the village's Neighborhood Watch. When thinking of what makes an area desirable to live in, security and personal safety always feature very highly. Having such an active Neighborhood Watch is therefore a great thing for East Goscote and I'd like to thank Kevin and the team for the work they do with this. Thank you to Edward Argar MP, with whom I worked on a number of East Goscote matters in the past year and finally thanks to Cllr Sue Gerrard, who is stepping down as East Goscote's Borough Councillor after four years' service to the village. I wish sue all the best for the future and look forward to working just as closely with her successor after the Borough elections in May.

James Poland CC
James.poland@leics.gov.uk