

North Yorkshire Councillor's Report November 2024.

A66 UPGRADE

I'm sure that most residents have read that the legal challenge which was received against the A66 upgrade on the 18th April this year was heard by the Courts on 23rd October and failed. This challenge by TAN ie. Transport Action Network was not against the principal of the upgrade but against the legal process which the DfT had gone through to arrive at the present position.

This delay caused by TAN, an action group who raised £35K to fund their appeal and has some members who I understand have spent time in prison, will hopefully not have cost us the upgrade we have campaigned for years for. The consent order was signed off on the 7th March but the delay caused by TAN has meant that work which would have now commenced may be delayed for further years unless the new Government can be persuaded to give it the go ahead.

The only glimmer of hope is a statement issued by the DfT stating, 'The internal review by the Transport Secretary Louise Haigh is still ongoing'.

A possible knock-on effect of the uncertainty regarding the A66 is possibly the reason for further delays in recommencement of work on the Designer Outlet. The planning permission granted way back in 2014 for the Designer Outlet contained a clause saying that the outlet could not open for business until the upgrade of Scotch Corner roundabout was completed. This was because of the 30% projected increase in traffic which would be generated.

Another possible knock-on effect of this delay in the Designer Outlet completion is that National Power Grid need to install a new substation at Scotch Corner to give the required electricity to power the complex. At present, the electricity supply comes down from Spennymoor, through Newton Aycliffe and then down to Scotch Corner from where it loops back to Barton, on to Stapleton, Cleasby and ending in Manfield.

Last winter, we residents had countless power cuts in Stapleton, Cleasby and Manfield because, I am told, we are at the end of the line. This situation can be resolved by the installation of the new Scotch Corner substation. I would presume that unfortunately the said substation is unlikely to materialise without a large financial input from the Designer Outlet which won't be forthcoming for the reasons above.

FINANCES

Earlier this year I advised in one of my bulletins that we have a forecast budget deficit in the present year of £26 million and that will increase to £44 million in 25/26. This is despite efficiency savings introduced by our administration of £230 million over the last 12 years. And the Unitary Council is now showing an ongoing saving of £40 million per annum, thank goodness.

We have useable reserves of £90 million. This figure is alarmingly low. Whilst we have assets that we are looking to sell, as a general rule capital disposals can only be deployed on capital or debt reduction. But given that we have added to the Capital plan from Revenue reserves, we would be able to say that what we are doing is in fact an internal movement of monies. But of course, this cannot go on indefinitely.

However, if the figures above are not of great concern, the effect of the recent budget is to increase the Council's employer's NI contributions coupled with the effect of the increase in the National

Minimum Wage, by some £12 million. We have 13,400 employees and given that the Chancellor has so far refused to give assistance to doctors' surgeries or care home providers, it is to be expected that no assistance will be given to Local Authorities.

This then takes the projected deficit for 25/26 to £56 million. This is an eye-watering figure which is causing great concern. Savings are going to have to be found in all departments. Home to School Transport is one of the savings which we have been criticized for but it could save around £4 million pounds. The budget for Home to School Transport was £19 million in 2019 and this year it has now escalated to an incredible figure of £42 million. The alternative is to start looking at closing school classrooms.

As an Authority we have a statutory duty to fund transport for children up to the age of 16 who live more than 3 miles from their nearest school, but only to the nearest suitable school. This is what many other Authorities are doing, rather than to the school of choice.

To find out which is your child's nearest school, go onto:

Find your nearest school – Before you start – NYC (northyorks.gov.uk)

The calculation will be from the child's house in a straight line to the school. If for any reason the nearest school is full then it will be to the second nearest. Of course parents can choose to apply through the admissions process to any school of their choice. The nearest school for some children may be in County Durham but in one case, Teesdale in Barnard Castle, is rated Ofsted Outstanding.

On a more positive note, the budget awarded an extra £1 billion for SEND, ie. Special Education Needs children. This is most welcome but how much of the share will we get? We have always been regarded by Labour Governments as a 'leafy shire county' which does not warrant funding in the same way as inner-city authorities. Another plus in the budget was £500K to be spent on potholes. But our best estimate is £16 million for North Yorkshire potholes, but it is more likely to be £4 million. Given that we have 5,800 miles of roads (excluding very small by roads) in the County, this extra grant isn't unfortunately going to go very far. To put it in perspective, 5,800 miles of roads would stretch from London to Tokyo.

Throughout my life I have been an optimist, but I am finding it extremely difficult to be, optimistic about NYC finances going forwards, given what I have outlined above.

PLANNING

There have been many criticisms of the Mercury House Planning Dept. both in the days of RDC and in the last 18 months. These have undoubtedly been justified given the lack of service, lack of responses to emails, the list is endless. However, we must understand that the problem is not because of the lack of financial resources, but because of the great shortage of qualified Planning Officers nationally. This has been, and still is, a national problem.

One of the problems we have faced since vesting day is that the computer systems of the 7 former District Councils were not compatible. We are I understand within 3 weeks of a system where 2 former district council depts. can at least talk to each other which will enable for example, cases to be passed over to Northallerton, the former Hambleton dept., from Richmond the former RDC dept. In terms of the latter which of course is the one which concerns us, numerous new staff have been recruited and the process is ongoing.

We are now optimistic that we will be back to good service standards from Mercury House Planning Dept. which we haven't seen for at least 5 years.

COMPLAINTS

One interesting statistic is that NYC have received since vesting day ie. 1st April last year, 260 complaints against councillors, 225 of which have been in respect of parish/town councillors. Given that there are 731 parishes in the county, 27 of which are within my division, this means that if we in Richmondshire North have 3.7% of the number of PCs in the County, then if we mirror the averages, we should have had 8 or so complaints against PC and PM members.

I am pleased to say that I am not aware of any complaints against Parish Councillors or indeed myself, in my division.

THE BOUNDARY COMMISSION.

You may be aware that NYC have the Boundary Commission in at the moment. The reason for this is that prior to the new council coming into being NYCC had 72 councillors. This was increased to 90 in the new council partly to compensate for the fact that 300 district councillors had ceased to be.

It was made clear from day one that a complete review of the number of councillors and boundaries would take place within this Council ie. 5 year period. A plan has been put forwards to the Commission which would reduce the number of councillors to 89 and would have the electorate within the upper and lower limits which they require. That is a maximum of 6,200 and a minimum of 5,400 in each division. I currently have 6,700 electors which is way over the limit. I also have the second biggest division geographically covering 221 square miles from just this side of Barningham to Croft Bridge, skirting Richmond town.

The proposal is to take Gilling and Aske out of the division and put them with Richmond Town. Middleton Tyas, Moulton and Skeeby would be joined with villages like Scorton, Brompton on Swale and the east end of Richmond to form a new division. However, my division would gain East Cowton. This would give an electorate of just short of 6,200 in North Richmondshire which will fit the bill.

I stress that the above suggestions put together by councillors and are still under consideration before being submitted to the Boundary Commission. They will then consider these together with their own ideas and put a final plan together. There will be ongoing consultations with PCs and the public, but once they announce their final plan, that is it. The only body which can overturn their decision is the House of Commons.

SUMMARY.

The financial situation for NYC is going to be very difficult indeed unless there is more assistance from the Government. We repeatedly asked for more assistance from the previous government and achieved savings of £230 million over the last 12 years. One thing the previous government never did however, was dramatically increase our running costs by £12 million.

I suspect that the Government will increase Council Tax bandings, or have a review totally of how Council Tax is charged. In other words a tax rise but that is pure conjecture.

Our Home to School Transport policy has met with much criticism in some areas which I fully understand, but what everyone should know that had we not taken this step which could save up to £4 million per annum, we would have had to start selecting school classrooms and possibly more for closure.

I also think it is worth pointing out that the same Home to School Transport policy is already in force in Co. Durham and Darlington Borough Council and many more up and down the country.

If anyone who is not on my circulation list for these reports wishes to receive them, please send me your email address to cll.angus.thompson@northyorks.gov.uk.

Kind regards,

Angus Thompson.

15th November 2024.