

Farthinghoe Annual Parish Meeting.
2016
Report from District Council

This year, once again SNC are able to deliver a balanced budget, indeed we have ever so slightly underspent against last year's budget ensuring a small underspend can be transferred to reserves. The government has accelerated its plans to remove central government grants from local government funding, reducing this year by £600k. We anticipate all central government funding ending by 2020 after which time we will be relying on funding related to the development of new homes, some retained business rates from existing business and enhanced business rate retention from new economic activity in the district.

SNC felt it was prudent to raise council tax for the first time since 2010 by 2.95% - which equates to a £5 increase for a band D property up from £179.37 to £175.37 – this will help to ensure we have a sound economic base going forward.

South Northamptonshire Council is one of the very few councils in the country that has used a substantial percentage of the New Homes Bonus (NHB) for the purposes it was originally intended – returning 50% of the funds to the parishes that have taken housing growth. Most councils, because of the reduction in the revenue support grant, have subsumed the entire amount into the core budget. It has now become apparent that central government sees NHB as part of a councils' core funding, and government is now consulting on the future operation of the scheme. The government may well reduce the period of time NHB is payable. In addition they are looking at various ways of encouraging housebuilding throughout the countryside and one proposal is to deny NHB to any dwellings built as the result of an appeal. For a large development such as we have seen in Brackley and Towcester as well as some of the larger villages, this would mean the loss of hundreds of thousands of pounds to the district.

Earlier in the year, we were able to announce that a new leisure contract has been awarded in the district and as part of that contract a new swimming pool is being developed on the Springfield site in Brackley. Originally we were hoping to have a single six lane pool in a new addition to the leisure centre, but this has now transformed into a six lane pool, a smaller learners pool, a new suite of fitness rooms and equipment and overhaul of the other facilities in Brackley as well as some updating of Towcester Pool. SNC are investing £4.8 million in these new facilities, which will provide a return to the council of £400k pa. The present leisure centre contracts are costing us £125k per annum.

60 % of all waste collected in the district is recycled – 11th highest in the country – as a matter of interest all black bin waste will go to an energy from waste facility from the end of this month instead of ending up in landfill. The cost for disposal is the same, just the outcome differs.

Real progress is now being made on the Local Plan part 2a. Why is it called that? Local plan part 1 is the Joint Core Strategy which was adopted in Dec 2014 and covers large strategic housing and employment sites in Daventry, South Northants and Northampton Borough. Part 2a is our local plan covering all the smaller sites in our district alone and Part 2b is a Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Show persons' site. We have to plan for these pitches but are doing it under a separate plan as experience around the country shows that it can be rather distracting to the main planning document. Last night I hosted the first information event for parishes at SNC, explaining how consultation works and what it covers and there is another next week. Over the next year there will be other opportunities to attend events at SNC to understand the Local Plan process

The Community Infrastructure Levy was introduced by our council on the 1st April. This is in its simplest form a roof tax on all new residential and retail developments. There are some exemptions for developments like self build, or residential extensions under a certain size but it is vital to note that an exemption form has to be applied for (even if Planning Permission is not required) before development starts otherwise CIL immediately becomes due, in full.

CIL does not disappear into local government coffers but is spent on infrastructure in the district, and 15% is given to the Parish.

The new long stay car park opened in Towcester on Monday. With a further extension of spaces due later in the year. The existing car park opposite the forum becomes 3 hour restricted parking which will be enforced but this should start easing the situation in Towcester. Brackley parking continues to be a problem, a recent parking study has indicated a need for a further 68 long term parking spaces in Brackley – it didn't identify where that space might be!

Finally joint working with Cherwell and reform of local government. We continue to work well with Cherwell, delivering £1m in annual savings across the 2 authorities. We each remain sovereign councils with our own policies and make our own decisions for the benefit of our residents. We share a chief executive, directors and senior managers, while front line staff generally work within their own council areas, however joint working means that if, for example there is a problem with waste collection, staff can work across the district borders without delay. Central Government has recognised the achievement and transformation of our services by awarding substantial sums to promote transformation within our districts and we are used as an exemplar to other authorities. There has been much talk of unitary authorities and removing a layer of local government. A unitary authority in the 21st century no longer means just a city or a shire authority. Many different models are proposed, generally based on a minimum population size. A proposal put forward to create a new unitary model in Oxfordshire is proposed because Cherwell and West Oxfordshire, who have a joint working initiative with Cotswold refused to countenance anything that would undermine our working relationships. Approaches made in the past to Northampton County Council have failed to achieve effective change, and even now, Northampton's commissioned independent research is reactionary. How the unitary would work, whether it would work – we don't know yet. Residents in Cherwell are undoubtedly being told that they will effectively become part of Northamptonshire, which I am sure they are delighted about! Upon hearing about the proposals the County Council's response was that the loss of income from South Northamptonshire would lead to a decline in services in Corby and Kettering.

As yet there are no firm proposals, and SNC certainly has not ruled out a unitary authority of some sort with other districts in Northamptonshire. When proposals have been worked up, I believe they will be presented to our residents for consultation.