

County Council report to Buckden Parish Council, December 8th, 2020

The County Council has one more full Council meeting in this calendar year, on December 15th. The committees and working groups continue to meet by Zoom so the basic work of the council is continuing, albeit in rather diminished form.

The Council's forward budget planning is continuing. This is always a complex and detailed matter but will be even worse this year, given that costs have risen unexpectedly, demand for services is increasing and council income has dropped. We now know that the government, which has for several years been specifying the maximum increase local councils can make to local tax, has decreed that there can be a 3% increase for Adult Social Services and 2% for all other services. If the full allowed increase is made, it would cost most people in the County up to an extra £1.16 per week, more for people living in higher-banded houses. If the maximum increase is not made, it will mean even more cuts to services on top of several years of reductions. Every extra 1% on CCC Council tax yields £3 million for services. Difficult times, difficult decisions, made more complicated because 2021 is a County Council election year.

Council officers are continuing to work hard to provide the services people need. Meeting the effects of the pandemic has required officers to be re-deployed away from their normal activities. For example, some members of the Highways team have been helping with the Covid Hub, which partially explains why the highways work has been so erratic. For example, the repairs to the Mill Road bridge have been completed but the warning signs about the work are still there and are a month out of date.

More schools have experienced Covid cases and in some cases classes have been excluded for the quarantine period. This has increased over the last month since my last report. About 20% of Cambridgeshire pupils are currently off school because classes have been closed but that figure varies widely across the county. There are 53 schools (out of about 260) who have recorded cases. Some areas e.g. East Cambs and Fenland, have not been badly affected, whereas parts of Cambridge City and Huntingdonshire have had more cases. Even so, we are below the national average but have been in 'Tier 2' since December 2nd.

From my current experience as a primary school governor, I know that Heads and teachers are taking their 'health and well-being' responsibility very seriously and that, once again, there are substantial extra costs which will more than wipe out the recent improvement in school funding.

The recent offer of 'Dial-a-Bus' from the Mayor (i.e. dial and a bus will collect you within 5 minutes) seems an implausible idea. It has been apparently been tried in other parts of the country and abandoned as unworkable and too expensive. We shall see.

Local issues

- a. At the last meeting, more information was requested on the proposed changes to the Old Bridge between Huntingdon and Godmanchester. As far as I know at the time of writing, there will be a period of consultation before the experimental layout is introduced and then a further evaluation before it becomes permanent. The latest version seems to be that the bridge itself will be open to cyclists, emergency vehicles and buses. Pedestrians will use the existing footbridge. The new A1307 leading into the Huntingdon ring road is open and soon the link into the railway station will open so that might make the flow easier.

Local Godmanchester opinion is divided on all this. My personal opinion is that there is only pressure from cyclists for a short period in the morning and afternoon (school times) and that this could be managed if cyclists obeyed the notice to dismount. My worry about

the proposal is that cyclists using the old bridge could be at risk from fast-moving emergency vehicles.

The aim is to encourage more people to cycle and that is entirely laudable but I expect that many people will still need/want to travel into Huntingdon town centre and to the station by car.

- b. The current requirements in terms of social distancing etc make it very difficult for me to carry out my normal expectation in terms of local casework but I am always pleased to be copied in to correspondence and, if appropriate, I can give my support or guidance, albeit remotely!

Contact me on 01480 509471, peter.downes@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Peter Downes, December 3rd, 2020