

County Council report to Buckden Parish Council, June 9th, 2020

In these times of unprecedented difficulty, the County Council has been doing its best to 'keep the show on the road', as they say. Council and committee meetings have continued to take place virtually so the basic business of the Council has continued. Staff have been seconded from some areas of work to support those under greater pressure.

The cost of the extra arrangements that have been put in place to protect vulnerable adults and young people is very high. There has been some supplementary grant from central government but this is not expected to be sufficient.

CCC has been hit by a triple whammy:

- a. It had already planned a very tight budget for 20-21, with a low council tax increase and a number of 'service improvements' which, it was alleged, would provide the same or a better service at a lower cost. It has proved very difficult to make these savings.
- b. CCC had high hopes of improved income from its investments in the property market and elsewhere and this has more or less stalled for the last few months, so the income will be lower than planned.
- c. The pandemic has increased the demand for services, particularly in relation to adult social care where the care homes have been under great pressure.

We are still only in the third month of the financial year and the local and national situation is evolving rapidly so we cannot forecast what the full financial implications are. 2021 will be a County Council election year so the ruling group will obviously be hoping to keep the council tax increase as low as possible in order to get re-elected but it is very difficult to say what the impact on services will be.

On the positive side, we have noted a great willingness in the general public to help out in a voluntary capacity and, in some areas, there have been more volunteers than people needing to be helped. At the time of writing, the arrangements for lockdown and shielding are changing and it is therefore impossible to predict how this will work out.

We also note that meetings held 'virtually' can generally work quite well especially as participants become more familiar with the technology and some discussion is taking place about making this the norm in future as it greatly reduces travelling time, fuel costs and reduces pollution. It also saves CCC some money as councillors are normally entitled to travelling expenses for attendance at approved CCC-related meetings.

The other controversial area of activity which directly affects CCC is schools. There has been and still is a lively debate about whether it is a good idea for children to return to school and you will have seen the arguments about this in the press and on television. I have obviously not been able to check this out with Buckden primary school and cannot find any information about opening arrangements on their web-site. I know from my connection with the school in my home village that the teaching and support staff are going to great lengths to enable children to return safely to some form of schooling. The CCC education officers have been providing guidance to the best of their ability but this has again highlighted the complicating effect of having quasi-autonomous 'academies' as well as Local Authority maintained schools. In relation to academies, the Trust or governors make the final decision on school management but the Local Authority retains the ultimate responsibility for the 'health and well-being' of pupils in all schools in Cambridgeshire.

Although on-site contact will be difficult for some time, I remain available by e-mail to do whatever I can on issues relating to CCC responsibility. peter.downes@cambridgeshire.gov.uk. 01490 509471

Peter Downes, June 6th 2020