

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

The over-riding priority for all local councils over the last few weeks has obviously been to maintain basic services and limit the spread of Covid-19.

Cambridgeshire as a county is below the national average for cases but within Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire has had the highest %. This may well be related to the number of care homes and the socio-economic factors which make Huntingdonshire different from its immediate neighbours.

As previously reported, I have been impressed by the dedication and flexibility of the County employees in facing this unprecedented challenge.

The routine work of CCC has been continuing as far as possible though the use of Zoom meetings. We do not yet know when face-to-face meetings will resume. There may well be some discussion about whether certain meetings should continue to take place by Zoom as it saves travel time, petrol costs and reduces pollution.

The next big issue for the County Council is likely to be a White Paper on Local Government which is expected any day now. This is going to initiate the process of converting two tier areas (District and County) into a 'unitary authority'. There has already been much discussion in specialist circles about the cost savings, but also the risks of making such a change. My expectation is that we will be required to convert Peterborough and Cambridgeshire into two unitary authorities though the time-scale for that is not yet published.

The other major concern is how to pay for the expenditure in tackling the Covid crisis. We do not yet know what measures the Chancellor will take but it is clear that changes to the tax system and to local taxation are inevitable. Millions extra have been spent and money will need to be found from somewhere. For example, just to take schools, it is reckoned that the extra cost incurred by a large secondary school will have been about £700k and for a primary school £250k.

On a more day-to-day level, the main issue as I write is the re-opening of schools with the expectation that all pupils will return but that schools will be organised to minimise the danger to pupils and staff. The pros and cons have been thoroughly examined in the national press and I don't need to go through them all again here. I know from my contacts with Heads and teachers that they are taking their responsibility very seriously and that, once again, there are substantial extra costs which will more than wipe out the recent promised improvement in school funding.

Buckden specific issues

1. I have been asked to try to achieve improvements to drainage and flooding problems in Manor Gardens. I have passed on the request to the relevant officer but I have to say that the recent pattern of storms has revealed similar problems across a number of villages and towns. I had previously been informed that street gulley cleaning would be suspended as a cost-cutting exercise.
2. I continue the dialogue with CCC Highways department over the proposed extension to the cycle path along Buckden Road into Brampton and should be able to give the latest news at the meeting.

Now that the lockdown is easing slightly, I might be able to help personally with specific issues raised by residents so please let me know if you think I can be of any use!

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

Peter Downes, September 1st, 2020