

Lighthorne Annual Parish Council 12th May 2020 County Councillor's Report

Coronavirus

As I write this report in lockdown and self-isolation, I reflect on how different the work of a County Councillor has changed. Shire Hall is effectively closed and most of the staff at Shire Hall are working from home although we do have regular briefings on Microsoft Teams. The scale of the economic, environmental and community challenges that we now face should not be underestimated. The implications of the measures taken to minimise the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic are now being realised. To be effective local democratic Government relies on debate and majority consensus on decisions. As meetings are postponed so decisions are deferred. The long-term way ahead has yet to be determined and will depend on the speed that the virus spreads and its effect. The County Council, as Public Health Authority, is regularly updating its guidance in line with Government Public Health Authority advice. This latter advice is subject to change as more is learnt about the virus. I note that you have set up a system to contact vulnerable people in the village and I am sure that this is appreciated by the residents. In the event of any problem, your first port of call is the WCC website or telephone number 0800 408 1447 for support and advice.

In the budget the Chancellor hardly mentioned local government finances. However, the implications of the lockdown have caused significant changes and it was a sound decision that WCC took to build up their reserves. Even with the additional funds from central government we will be losing some £6 million of revenue and this will result in a new budget being agreed as soon as we are over the current national problems.

The County Council

The County Council has weathered the effects of austerity and this year's budget was based on an optimistic but achievable 4 year plan and an easing of the purse strings particularly with respect to Adult Social Care, Public Health and Children's Welfare (including early years' provision) was proposed. Climate change was the driver in all departmental Budgets as was the intention to strengthen communities and maintain Warwickshire's reputation as being a good area in which to live.

At the same time the top management of the County Council had a significant reorganisation. Monica Fogarty became the new Chief Executive and three new directors were appointed into a revised management structure. A new Chief Fire Officer together with a new Director of Public Health was also appointed. As each new director reorganised their "new" departments many Senior Officers in the Council were allocated a change in their responsibilities. A few took early retirement and redundancies were minimal. Further reorganisation at a lower level is still being implemented.

All local elections have been postponed for this year and all being well will take place in May next year. Locally as far as we are concerned it only affects the Police and Crime Commissioner election.

Highways

Warwickshire roads are rated by the Highways Authority as being in the top quartile in the UK. From day to day maintenance to longer term planning the Highways Team performs above its weight. All highway maintenance is currently suspended although requests made electronically will be acted upon as soon as the lockdown is history.

HS2

The County Council has a team of Officers who work directly with HS2 and liaise with the sub-contractors, in particular over traffic management. Most of the activities associated with the building of the railway are covered by a Hybrid Act of Parliament. Deviations are dealt with by the WCC team except for some planning decisions when deviation is required from the Act. At present the works being carried out are the early preparatory works in preparation for the construction of the line for which permission to proceed has now been given. This early work involves clearing forestry, Archaeological exploration, test pits and cable laying. The A423 is being used as a main access route to some of the sites.

Fire Service

Earlier this year I visited local Fire Stations with members of the WCC cabinet. We had a good meaningful discussion and concerns have been fed back. The County, who are the Fire Authority fire authority has a new Fire Chief who is reviewing the organisation of the management structure and re-visiting methods of improving cross- fire authority working.

Education

Over the year the move towards each school becoming an academy has continued especially with our Secondary Schools. Kineton have joined the Stowe Valley MAT joining Bilton and Southam in this expanding Trust. Non-one has yet explained how, with the present lockdown, home to school transport will cope with the provision that each bus should have a maximum of 12, whereas they are built to accommodate 30-40 pupils.

Climate change

Fire, Floods and Famine all featured in the world's headlines during the past year and were accredited to climate change. A young Swedish girl captured the world's imagination, especially school children, with her campaign to reduce carbon emissions. Local governments in England (including Warwickshire County Council) declared a Climate Change Emergency. The County Council have established a working group to monitor all the Council's activities with respect to their possible effect on the climate and have produced a set of proposals as to how the County Council can reduce the County's carbon footprint. All residents can play their part in improving our atmosphere and saving the planet.

The year ahead

Over the last two months everything has changed and the future is uncertain. The coronavirus has disrupted the lives and ambitions of the whole nation and here in Warwickshire the County Council has reduced activities on all fronts unless they are connected to fighting the pandemic. The majority of staff is working from home and some have been reassigned to help with the increased social care requirements. Shire Hall is closed for usual business. Information sharing and joint working between all levels of Local Government (County, District and Parish Councils) as well as the tremendous efforts in all our communities to help the most vulnerable has demonstrated that community spirit is alive and well for which we all deserve credit. Web conferences and home working is becoming the norm and may well continue as we return to normality. However, the next few months are unpredictable as the lockdown regulations are modified to meet the ever-changing situation and the nation returns to a work ethos, trying to catch up on a lost year.

I will be happy to answer any questions to may have.

Cllr Chris Williams

Member for Kineton and Red Horse Division

11.05.2020