

BPCRW Annual Parish Meeting Report May 2024

South Norfolk is proud to be an entrepreneurial District Council that is run in a business-like manner and reflects a vibrant and dynamic local economy. We are proud of everything we do and strive to be the most efficient, highest performing and technologically advanced Council in Norfolk.

Thanks to the last 17 years of prudent Conservative leadership, financial management and innovation, South Norfolk Council has been able to continue enhancing the services provided, while maintaining some of the lowest levels of Council tax in Norfolk, frozen at £165 for a band D property in 2023/24. With inflation running at close to 10% for much of last year this was a particularly welcome bonus for residents.

The Council's 2024/25 budget was set in February and recognising the continuing inflationary pressures on the Council a modest £5 annual increase was agreed for a band D property. This means all the 87 services delivered by your local District Council will be delivered to each household for just £170. Yet again the Council has set a balanced, affordable budget that does not draw from reserves. There have been efficiencies year on year without the need for cuts, instead the Council is doing more each year to address real problems, like a further £100k investment to support the Council's role in flood prevention and doubling the investment for struggling families through the Household Support Fund.

At a time when nearly all local authorities are facing financial crisis, South Norfolk has, through good management, been able to find additional income and efficiencies. We continue to set out bold plans for much needed improvements to local infrastructure. This includes a five-year capital programme totalling £97 million all funded without the need for new borrowing. The capital programme will provide a range of critical improvements to the social and environmental infrastructure through our district including new medical centres in Hethersett and Diss, a new leisure centre, a refurbished swimming pool, provision for weekly food waste collections from 2025, the long-awaited Long Stratton bypass and continued investment in building new local affordable housing through our Council owned property development and management companies and much more besides!

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the Council in the last twelve months has been the need to invest in additional temporary accommodation to avoid rising homelessness and to reduce the rising costs of bed and breakfast accommodation. This has led to further investment in the Council's housing stock for temporary accommodation, supported by much welcome funding from Government. Through its 'Help Hub' the Council continues to help 500 households a month address the cost of living and the challenges life sends.

Shortly after the May 2023 elections the Council's staff moved to new office accommodation at the Horizon Centre on Broadland Business Park. This is a joint venture with Broadland Council as the one team of staff service both councils. The new accommodation is 84% more energy efficient than the old South Norfolk and Broadland offices which were both due for major structural maintenance work in coming years. The new accommodation has not only led to huge environmental improvements and substantial cost savings but has also increased staff efficiency as the 'one team' now operate from a single building.

We have continued to invest in our world-leading science base at the Norwich Research Park to provide new employment premises and create job opportunities for businesses to expand in Wymondham, Long Stratton, the Waveney Valley and along the Cambridge Norwich Tech Corridor. As a Council, we are committed to supporting our local business economy and attracting more visitors to our local towns and high streets, whilst ensuring we protect and preserve the special character of our market towns and villages. As an example, we are currently working with the Town Council in Wymondham to enhance the town centre creating a safer, greener and cleaner place to shop, set up a business or simply relax - a £1m investment in our most local town.

But it's not just about big projects, the Council continues to invest in smaller local projects. Here in these local rural communities small grants from my Member's ward grant have funded some much needed facilities at Runhall Allotments and the Refurbished Runhall Playground has received Pride in Place Grant of £25k and Community Action Fund Grant of £15k significantly helping meet the total costs of the project. In the current year the Community Action Fund has been increased to £150k, which means local community groups can apply for grants up to £20k to improve facilities in the community. As the Runhall Playground demonstrates, these kinds of local projects make a real difference to community wellbeing.

The Council continues to set out sensible and deliverable environmental policies designed to protect our precious environment and improve the quality of life of residents. We continue to address fly tipping and will always take legal action against offenders where we have good evidence. Our new office is equipped with 2500 solar panels and is heated using air source heat pumps. Every decision we take is aimed at moving towards a greener world in a sustainable way. Our job is to help everyone to go green and as part of that we committed in the last year to providing EV Charging points for every village or parish council that wanted them. We have our in house refuse collection and recycling teams and have made steady progress in improving recycling rates throughout the district. South Norfolk remains fully committed to reducing its carbon footprint and is amongst the greenest councils in Norfolk.

Helping residents to stay fit and active is a key policy objective for the council. We provide leisure services throughout the district and locally in Wymondham we are so fortunate to be able to provide the full range of gyms, pool and pitches to help people stay fit and active. Unlike many other Councils in South Norfolk, we run our leisure services in house. We have committed to year-on-year investment and have seen a steady growth in membership and leisure centre use since the Covid closures of 2020. We offer a premium service at a highly competitive rate, ensuring everyone who wishes to stay active can access our leisure services at an affordable rate.

Finally, our continued collaboration with Broadland District Council has allowed us to gain the benefits of working over a much bigger scale and responding to challenges at pace for the benefit of our residents. We will continue to invest in the infrastructure that supports our economy to prosper and protects local quality of life, while striking the right balance between the need for growth and delivering the services that our residents value the most. Despite the challenging financial climate, we continue to have high ambitions for the area and its significant opportunities and potential. Our top priority is working with you, and our partners, to deliver services right first time.

Cllr Richard Elliott
South Norfolk District Council Member for Wicklewood Ward