

Annual Report from Cllr. Alistair Beales for 2023/24

Firstly, I was delighted to be elected as Independent Borough Councillor for Massingham with Castle Acre at the May 2023 local elections. I have met with and represented many residents in the last year and have attended the Parish Councils of Little and Great Massingham, Castle Acre, West Acre, Hillington, Flitcham and Harpley. I am a regular attendee at most PC's and my apologies to those that I get to less regularly due to clashes with Borough committees and other commitments. This will even out over the next three years and I would like to take the opportunity to say how much I enjoy working with all of you and your residents.

Following 2023 local elections, we Independents have worked with councillors from other groups including the Greens, Liberal Democrats and Labour to command a working majority and form the administration.

On a personal level, I was delighted to take on the role of Cabinet Member for Business. A big part of that is overseeing the construction and sale of private and affordable homes within the Council's Major Housing Scheme. Storm Babet delayed building, anticipated rent revenues and capital receipts but the Scheme which I initiated some years ago whilst Gayton ward member, has provided new homes for hundreds of families whilst contributing £ millions to the Council finances.

The Borough Council faces a challenging financial position with revenues not covering costs with nearly £2.5million required from reserves this year, to plug the gap. That situation is not sustainable and action and planned action is being taken to address it, but we did not withdraw any of our community help and set aside over £500k to help communities. Examples include West Norfolk Community Transport (Go to Town), the Kings Lynn Ferry and the many festivals across the Borough, including one of the largest free festivals in Europe, Festival Too. Smaller capital and revenue grants were available via the Norfolk Community Foundation, Councillor Community Support Grants, the Defibrillator programme, Prosperity Funds and Community Infrastructure Levy funding. (CIL).

In October legislation was passed to enable Councils to increase Council Tax on second homes and bring forward the surcharges on Long Term Empty Homes. This could bring in an extra £7million or so from West Norfolk alone, due to the plethora of second homes here. By law, 75% of this goes to Norfolk County Council and around 14% to the Police. Only circa 7% comes to the Borough (less 3% to Drainage Boards) so net 4%. In alliance with other Norfolk District Councils (except South Norfolk) we are currently negotiating a common base position to seek return monies as grants from the County.

In February we agreed the Council budget for 2024/25. The financial settlement from Govt. does not cover costs and we may still have to use some reserves but fingers crossed, we won't. We have instigated a cost reduction programme and increased fees and charges by 10% which will significantly increase income. Revenues from our services total around £20m, with big contributors being commercial & residential property rents, car parks, Mintlyn crematorium and various licences. An increase was essential as the previous administration, in an election year, had frozen fees at a time when inflation was running at 11% or so, meaning big cost increases against flat revenues. That had to be remedied.

The Council also faces increased costs from the Internal Drainage Boards which together levy over £3 million - around 43% of Council Tax income. Last year Govt. contributed £205K towards those costs and we await our share of £3 million set aside by Govt. for that purpose this year. Thirty one District Councils including us, have similar problems funding IDB budgets, and have formed a Special Interest Group (SIG) to lobby for increased Govt. help. No luck so far and we continue to press our two MPs.

A snapshot of my work in the Ward and my role within the Council. I look forward to working with you all over the coming year.

Cllr. Alistair Beales