

FINANCES

The financial situation is dire with the new government having little understanding of the costs and pressures faced by rural councils in general, and North Yorkshire in particular. The £14.3m rural services grant was removed at a stroke and is adding hugely to our financial challenges. We face the largest hit of all rural councils.

We have mounted a legal challenge to this as the decisions behind it are not sound. The government has said there is no evidence that rural services cost more, rural areas are affluent, and we have put this grant into unnecessary reserves. We reject all of these assertions. Fortunately, we have made savings of £40m because of combining the eight councils in North Yorkshire. We have dramatically reduced the number of senior managers and will continue to dispose of unnecessary buildings.

However, we still have to raise Council Tax by the maximum 5% allowed and quite honestly, this is what the government expect us to do. In addition, all departments in the council are being required to find savings across the board.

We have as I have said before, found savings as an administration through efficiency measures of £230m over the last 13 years. Despite this and the savings through becoming a Unitary Council we are facing a position of being out of money in 2 years. This is a frightening prospect. There are however many councils in a worse position. Somerset for example has no reserves so it looks sadly as if they will have to file for section 114 bankruptcy, as have fourteen councils already. I am sad to say that it looks like the 'domino effect' of councils filing for bankruptcy may be on the horizon.

HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

Regrettably, we have had to make unpopular decisions because of the government's refusal to consider our financial predicament and are now limiting home to school transport to the legal minimum. I voted reluctantly in favour of this policy last July. If the vote was today, I have to admit that would vote against it because I am not convinced that the savings, now projected to be £3m a year will be achieved. To reverse it now would be virtually impossible. The vote was 48 in favour and 26 against last July. Those in favour included all Labour members as well as Conservatives.

It is worth pointing out that the cost to the County of Home to School Transport was £19m in 2019. It has now escalated to £50m this year. Given what I have said above about our finances, we can't go on like this.

However, we are where we are. There is to be a full review of the policy in August 2026. In the meantime, if any parent can take the matter to appeal. Simply write into the Home to School Appeals Committee at County Hall giving full reasons why you wish to appeal. The committee meets every 3 weeks on average.

In my division it will undoubtedly be Richmond School which will lose out if parents who don't qualify for funded transport and elect to send their children to the nearest suitable school. However, Richmond School have been 'poaching children' from Bedale, Catterick and even Northallerton by providing buses to transport pupils from areas outside their catchment area at subsidised rates. I have asked via an FOI request for details of numbers, cost to parents and cost to school. I have also asked if, this being the case, they will consider doing the same for children of villages in my division like Newsham, Eppleby, Dalton-on-Tees etc.

The government pays £7,000 per pupil to schools so there will be much at stake financially to Richmond School and much to be gained by other schools particularly in Co. Durham. It was not possible to exclude schools over the border in other counties from the assessment of nearest school. It is also a fact that under the old catchment system 2,500 pupils go to schools outside the county now and 5,000 pupils come into the county daily.

Most of us I suspect will have been the target at some point of in recent years of a scam phone call, text, email or even letter. Below is set out some contact details if you suspect you are a victim or target of a scam.

Dialling 159 will connect you to a contact centre which will then put you through to the fraud dept. of any major bank.

Receiving telephone calls – Call blockers can stop this.

Action Fraud – tel. 0300 123 2040

Citizens Advice Darlington – 01325 266 888

It often pays to speak to Citizens Advice to find out the best course of action. They will for example, direct you through to Trading Standards if applicable.

The Code of Conduct is there for banks in the event of a customer being scammed into making an electronic payment from their bank account to a fraudster. But please note, it is a code of conduct, and the banks are not legally bound by it. Huge amounts are however being paid out by the banks to their customers in the situation above.

If all else fails with your bank, then you do have recourse to the Ombudsman.

A66 AND SCOTCH CORNER

The legal actions taken by TAN i.e. Transport Action Network have finally failed in the courts. It is a great shame that their initial legal challenge which was brought in March last year ever happened. Without this, work was due to commence in the spring of last year on the upgrade. There was a very good chance that had work started, the new government would have allowed it to go to completion.

The upgrade is now to remain in abeyance until the government's Strategic Review in June when I understand a decision will be made on whether it goes ahead or not. If it does, the upgrade to Scotch Corner roundabout still remains according to National Highways as the last item on the planned work. The prospects of seeing any further progress with the Designer Outlet in the short term, look bleak. And as I said in November's letter, this means that the proposed new power sub substation at Scotch Corner required to power the Designer Outlet won't go ahead either. Villages in the loop from Middleton Tyas to Stapleton and then on to Manfield will have to endure power cuts on a regular basis if the upgrade to the Power Grid is delayed further.

PLANNING

I have said before on numerous occasions that the 5-year lapse in standards of service from Richmond Planning Dept., should be nearing an end through recruitment of more staff and a harmonisation of computer software across the county. The service from Richmond Planning was promised to be back to normal by Easter Services like the invaluable pre-app service should be reinstated at a cost which was well worth paying. I have to say however, that I have not seen any evidence to date of an improvement to service. It is a problem in nearly every planning office in the land because of a national shortage of qualified staff, but we do appear to have suffered more than most.

If you have an outstanding planning application where you appear to be getting no response within a reasonable time from the Richmond Planning Dept., please don't hesitate to email me with brief details including the application number and date of submission. I will then chase it up.

Whilst writing on the subject of Planning, I am often asked if any notice is taken by Planners and the Planning Committee of submissions by Parish Councils. The answer to this question is yes. However, the most important criteria in determining a Planning Application are, 'How it sits with the Local Plan.' The present Richmondshire Plan was written and agreed in 2014 and runs until 2028. It is a Government requirement that every local authority has a Plan in force. It contains a number of 'Core Policies.' If an application complies with all core policies, it will be difficult for an officer to recommend refusal even if the PC and residents of a village are against

it. This is because if refused the applicant has the right to take their application to appeal. A government inspector will then look closely at the case to see among other matters, how it fits with the local plan. Many decisions to refuse an application are overturned on appeal simply because they tick all of the boxes when assessed alongside the local plan.

CP4 is a classic example of this. It states, 'Development should be consistent with the requirements of Core Policies, and should not impact adversely on the character of the settlement or its setting, important open spaces and views, designated and undesignated heritage assets and the character of the landscape etc.

The real problem in the future is the position where the government is going to take, in all probability, planning decisions away from local authorities and put the determination of applications in the hands of inspectors sat behind desks in a city.

NYC has been targeted to build 4170 houses per annum over the next 5 years. Historically we have built 1,100 per annum. Remember that what we are being told is 4170 applications must go through the planning process and built within 12 months. And we haven't yet found sufficient land especially in Richmondshire to even consider building on.

We are told that if we fail in this target we will be fined. There would be little point in this as we couldn't pay the fine. The real worrying threat is that they will take Planning out of our control entirely and put it with boffins in London.

FLOODING

Finally, I am hopeful that a solution may be in sight to the two worst flooding issues in my division. The worst one is just outside Aldbrough on the Melsonby road. This becomes impassable when flooding occurs. Highways Officers tell me that stone has been discovered in the pipe on the left side of the road as you head north. This stone has been identified and the owner of the wall causing the problem is to be brought to account.

The second major issue is the road from Middleton Tyas to Barton near Middleton Lodge. A meeting is scheduled to take place with the landowner who is responsible for the drainage ditch to take the water from his fields to find a solution.

Highways always try to work with the landowner in cases like the above to find a solution without taking a heavy-handed attitude. However, if all else fails then the latter method will be deployed.

If you wish to be added to my circulation list, please email me at: cllr.angus.thompson@northyorks.gov.uk.

I send these reports out usually every second month.

Best wishes,

Angus Thompson.

11th February 2025.