

County Councillor Claire Bowes'
Annual Report to Town and Parish Councils 2017-18

Infrastructure

Broadband – our Better Broadband for Norfolk programme has already transformed broadband speeds for many people in the county, including in some of our most rural areas. We're on course to increase superfast broadband access in Norfolk to 95 per cent by March 2020 but we need to do more to reach the final five per cent. So we're looking to invest an additional £13m into the programme to extend superfast broadband coverage and get us much closer to our goal of eliminating broadband inequality in the county.

Mobile coverage – our new Digital Innovation and Efficiency Committee is leaving no stone unturned in the drive to improve the county's mobile coverage (with a target of 98%) – working with the big four mobile providers and identifying opportunities to work together to improve the quality and reach of mobile data and voice coverage in Norfolk. In February we kicked off a campaign to improve coverage, with our survey van scouring the county to identify areas of greatest need. We are also using our county council-owned buildings to help overcome 'not spots', by putting mast on top of them to improve phone signals.

A47 – we continue to actively work with the A47 Alliance, bringing together key stakeholders from Lowestoft to Peterborough to lobby for improvements to this important trunk road. Throughout 2017 we worked with Highways England to develop proposals for sections of dualling and junction improvements to deliver the already funded projects (over £300m) as soon as possible. In Norfolk, this has seen the preferred scheme solutions announced by HE for dual carriageways between Easton and North Tuddenham, and from Blofield to Burlingham. It has also resulted in proposed junction improvement details being published for the A47/A11 Thickthorn junction, as well as the Vauxhall junction in Great Yarmouth. The County Council is currently delivering improvements to the rail station junction in Great Yarmouth, using funding provided by HE, which has also confirmed its commitment to complete the construction of all these projects between 2020 and 2023.

We are also actively engaging – with the A47 Alliance – in securing the next round of funding for further trunk road improvements due to be delivered between 2020 and 2025. Our two priorities in Norfolk remain unchanged: to see dualling of the Acle Straight and the Tilney to East Winch sections. This all builds towards the ultimate aim of seeing the A47 being a dual carriageway from Great Yarmouth through to Peterborough and the A1.

Market towns – our Environment, Development and Transport Committee agreed in September 2017 to carry out a series of studies looking at short, medium and long-term transport impacts of growth in market towns – to help us identify and plan interventions ahead of growth. The first year's studies, in Dereham, Thetford, North Walsham, Swaffham and Diss, are already under way, in close cooperation with local stakeholders, including town and district councils.

And finally... recycling Norfolk's disused railways

As part of our vision for a cycling and walking network for the county, a feasibility study is looking at bringing disused railways and other underused parts of the transport network back into use as cycling and walking routes which would help make the county a top walking and cycling destination for leisure and tourism. The initial feasibility study focusses on three disused railways, Weaver's Way – which is owned in part by Norfolk County Council - King's Lynn to Fakenham and King's Lynn to Hunstanton.

Economy

Repton Property Developments – Norfolk is growing and we need enough houses for people to live in. Gathering information about the types of housing required will help us support economic regeneration and has the potential for us to make money from our own properties. With this in mind, we have set up our own company, Repton Property Developments Ltd, to do this work. We're scrutinising our own property estate as, if we offer several services from fewer buildings, we can sell surplus

property and reduce running costs. And having several services in one place also offers a better service to the public.

Launch of Local Investment in Future Talent programme – our successful bid for funding on behalf of five Local Action Groups (LAGs) resulted in the launch of a new skills and employability programme, Local Investment in Future Talent (LIFT). Funded by the European Social Fund, LIFT seeks applications from community-based organisations in Norfolk and north Suffolk that can deliver targeted employment and skills support in rural areas. The first project was approved in January and will see Moore Networking use the grant to set up TrAC Apprenticeships Norfolk, a pilot for an Apprenticeship Training Agency (ATA). This will support and enable rural businesses to host apprenticeships for care leavers and other vulnerable young people who are not in education, employment or training. Also approved is a project to support ex-offenders to help grow salad crops for local restaurants. The Horticultural Industry Scheme, based in Thetford, offers training and help finding work to ex-offenders, and their £26,415.29 grant from the LIFT funding programme will enable them to support 15 individuals over the next 12 months.

Launch of new rural strategy – the county's rural economy was boosted in November with the launch of Strong Roots: New Growth - Norfolk Rural Strategy 2017-2020. Since the original Norfolk Rural Development Strategy was published in 2013 there have been significant changes, which will have major impacts on Norfolk's rural economy - these include the UK voting to leave the EU, the introduction of the National Living Wage and rapid advances in technology. To respond to the changes, the Norfolk Rural Strategy Steering Group commissioned a refresh of the 2013 strategy to identify the priority areas on which the Norfolk rural community needs to focus between now and 2020. Effective delivery of the strategy will require close cooperation and action from all partners with a stake in Norfolk's rural economy.

LEADER project reaches funding milestone – funding allocated to rural businesses in Norfolk and north Suffolk through the LEADER programme, an initiative managed by the county council, passed the £3m mark in December. Since Norfolk and north Suffolk's LEADER programme started, the five Local Action Groups (LAGs) have awarded millions to 69 rural projects.

Four Norfolk County Council farms made available for tenancy – more than 1,000 acres of Norfolk County Council's 16,738-acre County Farms portfolio was launched for tender in January. The four farms available are located at Marshland St James and Welney in the west of the county, North Burlingham to the east, and Binham to the north. We've also expanded our portfolio, with County Farms acquiring Bank House Farm in Marshland St James back in September. The farms present opportunities for people at all stages of their farming career, whether it's a new entrant looking for their first farm, someone looking for the next rung on the ladder or those ready to go to the next level with a commercial-sized farm holding. Offering these tenancies underlines our support for sustaining and creating rural employment throughout the county.

Children and Families

Education

A good education – our role is to champion the very best education for Norfolk's children and in July for the first time, Norfolk reached or exceeded the national average for the proportion of good and outstanding schools, with 90% of Norfolk's school now judged as good or better by Ofsted.

Children in care deserve the same chances as everyone else and, as their corporate parent, the County Council needs to do all it can to support them. Early indications suggest that there were significant improvements in last year's exam and assessment results for looked after children. Although the Department for Education has not yet published official statistics, our provisional data for all the children in our care suggests that:

- The proportion achieving the expected level in English and maths GCSE has increased from 15% to 26% - up 11 percentage points

- The proportion reaching the expected level at Key Stage 2 has increased from 19% to 30% – up 11 percentage points;
- The proportion achieving a good level of development at the age of five has increased by eight percentage points – from 23% to 31%.
- No looked after children were permanently excluded from school last year, compared with six the previous year.

Investing in special educational needs places – because we want children to be taught in their local communities wherever possible, we are developing a new strategy to create more school places for children with special educational needs – and are set to receive an additional £2.7m from the Department for Education to ensure there is enough specialist provision for them, subject to Government approval of our plans. But we believe a more ambitious plan, beyond the £2.7m, is needed to ensure children can go to school closer to home, and reducing the high transport and placement costs for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

School buildings – good quality places for school children in growing communities – since May 2017, we have approved £169m of capital investment in school building, to develop new and extended schools, making sure that there are enough school places across the county, responding to both population growth and housing development. The new schools are being developed as the education landscape across the county continues to change, with 43% of Norfolk’s schools now academies.

Children’s Social Care

Ofsted turnaround – outstanding adoption service and improved support for vulnerable children sees council removed from intervention. Our Ofsted report was published in January, lifting us out of intervention, praising our outstanding adoption service and highlighting significant improvements in support to children in our care and care leavers. Overall, we require improvement but the good judgement we all want to see is now in sight. Inspectors highlighted some strong social work practice, innovation in recruiting staff and ‘steady progress’ in support for care leavers. And it’s clear from the report that children in Norfolk now have a much better experience than they did when we were first judged inadequate back in 2013. The report also acknowledges the strong leadership of the council’s new permanent Director of Children’s Services and the determination of councillors to provide good quality services.

Investing in children and families – we are investing £12m over the next four years to transform how we work with children and families to help support children to live safely at home. For those who do come into care, we want to ensure they can live with foster families wherever possible, rather than in residential homes. This means investing in intensive support for families whose children are at risk of coming into care. It also means we need to recruit more foster carers and develop more early help services to work with families before they come into contact with social care. Without this level of investment, we estimate that demand for our services will continue to rise, costing an extra £5m each year by 2021-22. By reducing demand and investing now, we avoid costs going up in the future.

Our assisted boarding scheme, which places children at risk of coming into care in boarding school places, has received national recognition this year. Norfolk has been described as ‘leading the way’ in this work and we’re now assisting the Department for Education to try to get more local authorities to provide these opportunities for children in need. Investing in these children’s education helps to reduce the high costs that we would pay if they came into our care.

Thirty new social workers through grow your own – this year we’ve welcomed 62 newly qualified social workers to Children’s Services, as part of our work to grow our own talented staff. Our Norfolk Institute of Practice Excellence (NIPE), created in 2014, provides dedicated support and training to our new social work staff. Our scheme has high retention rates and was praised as national best practice in our recent Ofsted report.

Adult Social Care

Key highlights include:

In Good Company – our award-winning campaign to tackle loneliness in Norfolk continues to go from strength to strength. The health impact of being lonely can equate to smoking 30 cigarettes a day, so the risks can be substantial. With an estimated 43,700 lonely people in the county, the campaign is vital to ensure no one in Norfolk spends a lonely day if they don't want to. Thirty businesses and groups have now got one of our In Good Company quality marks, which were launched in July 2016 – and which highlight their strong commitment to combating loneliness.

£35m boost for adult social care – this welcome one-off funding from the Government helped address pressures in the health and social care system and followed extensive national lobbying by local authorities, including Norfolk. The money has helped us recruit 50 social workers, as well as contributing to new preventative activities to reduce and delay the need for formal care and support the safe discharge of people from hospital.

Norfolk, Living Well – our campaign to recruit 50 social workers coincided with the introduction of this new approach to social work, promoting people's strengths and independence. Also known as the three conversations model, it is already operating successfully elsewhere and is about looking at what is going well in somebody's life and building on that to make things better for them.

Recruiting for reablement – in November we recruited around 80 new care workers countywide, including posts for our new accommodation-based reablement initiative which sees reablement care workers provide a 'wrap around' service to follow people from hospital and support them back to their home. These are people who are medically fit but unable to return to their home safely. We're also planning a facility for west Norfolk.

Caring for carers – with the five Clinical Commissioning Groups, we've commissioned a new carer-led service, Carers Matter Norfolk, to support the county's 100,000 unpaid carers.

Tackling winter pressures, managing the strain on health and social care – to support timely and safe discharges from hospital, we agreed a package of financial measures to help home care and care home providers respond swiftly to requests to take on care packages related to hospital discharges. Facilitating a speedy discharge for people from hospital, either to their own home or to residential care, is essential to help people stay independent and also to keep our emergency care system running. Our Enhanced Home Support Service, a targeted initiative launched in February, is aimed at reducing delayed discharges from the three acute hospitals, as well as preventing unnecessary admissions. We're piloting it for three years and are delivering it in partnership with three home support framework providers.

Investing in home support – in the next financial year, we will be investing an extra £2.1m to help home support providers. We've developed a new model to improve the coverage and quality of home support countywide. The key to making this work will be a collaborative approach from providers – communicating and working as a collective whole to deliver a stronger and more robust service. The ambition is that providers can respond to the majority of requests quickly and is reliable, providing continuity of well-trained personnel working to agreed professional standards, for people using these services to be able to remain in their own homes for as long as they wish.

Communities

Norfolk Community Learning Services – Our Community Learning Services for adults have gone from strength to strength this year. In April, Norfolk Community Learning Services (NCLS) was shortlisted for a national award in recognition of its performance turnaround. NCLS was one of six national finalists in the Most Improved Council category of the Municipal Journal's Local Government Achievement Awards.

Adult learners celebrate excellent GCSE results – August saw students from NCLS celebrating their GCSE results, with 75% of those who sat an English GCSE achieving a grade 9-4 (A*-C) and 63% achieving the same result in maths. As well as being great results for the learners, the pass rates were

well above the national pass rates for learners aged 17 and over taking English (40% above) and maths (21% above) GCSE. This was a testament to a combination of the students' hard work and the high standard of teaching at NCLS.

Open Library – we are continuing to extend Open Library to more branches, giving customers access to libraries beyond staffed opening hours, by using their membership cards to access library buildings. This initiative ran successfully as a pilot project and the aim is to offer this service at all libraries.

Norfolk Reading Pathway – following a grant of £98,000 from Arts Council England, we have supported almost 600 Norfolk residents aged 8 and above to learn to read. Using a phonics-based reading programme, learners are supported by library volunteer coaches, who are given full training. A large part of this project has involved supporting schools with children who struggle to read. Reading sessions take place at libraries across Norfolk and we are continuing to recruit new learners and volunteers.

Digital libraries – as well as launching of the Libby app, enabling customers to access books from anywhere, the Library Service has been running a range of digital clubs. This includes everything from helping people learn to log on to the internet or use a tablet computer, through to a number of successful coding clubs. In the Autumn of 2017, Norfolk libraries were given 500 BBC micro:bits which can be borrowed for free. They are tiny codeable computers that help people get to grips with digital devices and learn about coding.

Libraries as community hubs are helping break down social isolation and bringing services to the people – whether it's baby-weighing scales, Knit and Natter or Just a Cuppa drop-in sessions. There are some amazing volunteers doing amazing work at our libraries, making a huge difference to people's lives by fundraising, knitting, cooking, helping people with IT, running craft sessions, literacy sessions and activities for people with dementia.

Outstanding exhibitions at our museums – two home-grown exhibitions at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery pulled in the crowds in the summer and autumn of 2017. *Nelson & Norfolk* and *Rembrandt: Lightening the Darkness* shone a spotlight on extraordinary objects in the Castle collections. The exhibition, which also featured major loans from Royal Museums Greenwich and the Royal Collections, attracted 57,527 visitors and received regional, national and international coverage.

Domestic abuse – we continue to tackle domestic abuse in Norfolk head-on, with our programme to train 'champions' – people in professions who deal with the public and who are taught to spot signs of abuse and offer support. Domestic abuse is not always physical and can take many forms, including coercion and control, and our aim is to raise awareness about this and focus on the safety of people at risk. Our domestic abuse change coordinators have exceeded all expectations by training 925 champions so far since 2015, keeping an estimated 1,500 people in the county safer.

Mental health – 2017 saw the launch of our suicide prevention and men's mental health campaign targeting males, and in particular older men. There are around 77 suicides a year in Norfolk - higher than the national average. "I am really (not) okay" is our multi-agency strategy for suicide prevention in Norfolk, and talks about it being everyone's responsibility, with all of us having a part to play in helping friends or family members who may be at risk. In December, we partnered with Norwich Theatre Royal to launch a month-long series of events focusing on men's mental health to help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health.

Fire and Rescue – councillors from our Communities Committee voted unanimously in January that the Fire and Rescue Service should continue to be governed by the county council. In 2016/17 (latest stats available), our Fire and Rescue Service attended 7,340 incidents and rescued over 700 people. Following the devastating Grenfell Tower blaze in London, our Fire and Rescue Service did a great deal of public reassurance work and inspected all domestic Norfolk high-rise flats, mid-rise blocks and many commercial premises to check safety compliance. We've expanded our collaboration with the East of England Ambulance Service Trust - to have ambulances based at Great Yarmouth fire station for ease of accessing incidents. We're already doing this at Carrow, Sandringham and Sheringham. Our prevention work continues and included the IMPACT roadshow, seeking to reduce road casualties among young people and run in collaboration with Norfolk Constabulary.

Our drive to fill vacancies for on-call firefighters across Norfolk continues. The number of vacancies has decreased over recent months but there is still work to do to fill the remaining gaps in cover. Many of the recruitment difficulties are caused by the rural locations of fire stations and the need for on-call staff to live or work within five minutes of them.

The Prince's Trust and Crucial Crew projects saw continued success again and show the great efforts being made by the service with young people in our county.

Norse Group

The Norse Group brings together facilities management specialists Norse Commercial Services, property consultancy NPS Group and care provider Norse Care. The Group has a combined turnover of more than £281m and provides employment for over 10,000 staff.

Norfolk remains central to Norse Group's thinking, returning millions of pounds in profits to the County Council every year, providing thousands of local jobs and underpinning the local community.

NorseCare is the largest care provider in East Anglia, supporting over 1,400 of Norfolk's most vulnerable people. Which? magazine recently found that for care providers who have more than 12 care homes, NorseCare was ranked in the top 10 in the country for having homes with good or outstanding CQC ratings.

The Group was awarded Norfolk County Council's In Good Company Quality Mark Plus in February 2018, in recognition of the positive work being done by staff to tackle loneliness in Norfolk.

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