

Wet weather and floods

The wet weather and flooding problems are not letting up yet, it seems. Do let me know if you have had problems with drainage on the roads or in your own property over the festive season. As usual we need to keep reporting these on the County Council website at [Report a flood - Norfolk County Council](#)

Other problems in winter

There's lots of information about staying safe during cold spells on the county council website page called Norfolk Winter, which is [here](#). Take care to avoid burst pipes by ensuring that outdoor pipes are lagged, and that improved insulation hasn't left the pipes out in the freezing cold of your loft. Make sure you take warm clothes, rug, shovel etc when out driving in winter. Don't rely on the car's heating system to keep warm, in case you break down or get stuck. It's a good idea to follow the County Council social media, which will use the hashtag #NorfolkWinter for updates and advice relating to winter weather.

Council "devolution deal" plans

The Cabinet at the County Council have been considering the options available if they accept one of the so-called "devolution" deals that the government is using as part of its so-called "levelling up" plans. Cabinet decided to recommend that Norfolk accepts a "level 3" deal, which adds a range of additional responsibilities to the council's work (things that were formerly done by central government) and provides a longer term guarantee of some funding to deliver them over the period of the funding agreement that comes with the deal, but they opted to postpone implementation of the new arrangements until 2025. The current situation where councils are looking at year on year cuts and no long term plan for how they can make ends meet make it seem attractive or even necessary to go for this promise of some investment in Norfolk and some replacement of the funds that have been lost since Brexit and with cuts to local authority funds and with rising inflation eating away at what we do have the right to raise in local taxation. But there are grave doubts as to whether the funds (which are not index linked) will actually be sufficient to deliver any significant improvements, and the deal comes with some unsatisfactory constraints on the democratic functioning of the Council, including a leader directly elected by the people of Norfolk, who won't be a council member and might be at odds with the majority view of the Council, despite having to appoint a cabinet from elected members of Council.

There are differing views on whether this is just a pointless gimmick by a government that has run out of ideas and run out of money, whether it is the first step on a slippery slope to something seriously problematic, and whether we have to say yes to it anyway (as many other councils are) because the bribe is money that we can't afford not to have. At Full Council on 12th December we discussed and voted on the proposals put to us by the Cabinet. In the event Council voted for the proposed deal, but there were divergent opinions in all parties. Further votes on the constitutional changes that are required will follow next summer, by which time we may have a different government in Westminster.

Road Safety Schemes:

My list of requests under the Road Safety Community Fund went in for consideration in November, after much consultation and calculations by Adam Mayo, our highways officer. There were lots of requests, but few will be funded, probably only one per councillor unless they are very cheap, or unless some councillors get nothing. I am hoping to hear the results soon.

My next task is to work with Adam to try to find other ways of delivering some of the schemes that won't win, or were too low down the list to stand a chance. I have not yet spent my highways allowance because I have been saving it for these urgent safety schemes. More on this anon.

Meanwhile I also put in a motion to Council for December 12th asking for a cross-party working group to be set up with a view to making it easier for villages to get safer speed limits where they wish to have them, and rewriting the Norfolk Speed Management Strategy to prioritise safe speeds in rural areas, and to proactively reduce accidents before they happen instead of after. Ten times as many people die on rural roads as on motorways. Cyclists are almost three times more likely to be killed on a rural road than on an urban one. My motion did not get debated in December because time ran out on discussing the devolution deal, so I shall put it in for Full Council at the end of January instead. I was on Radio Norfolk at breakfast time talking about it on Monday 11th December.

Cost of Living Payments - winter fuel help for pensioners

The Department of Work and Pensions has announced that pensioners across the country are to receive up to £600 to help with energy bills this winter.

Most Pensioner Cost of Living Payments were made in November or December. Everyone eligible should have received it by 26 January 2024. Further details [here](#).

The government advises that pensioners who do not receive a payment by 26 January 2024 should contact the [Winter Fuel Payment Centre](#).

Buses and active travel

I am pursuing some enquiries on behalf of some villages concerning the provision, or lack of it, of Flexibus and Borderhopper services, and the unsatisfactory timing of bus journeys (which are sometimes useless for the purposes one might travel for).

The Council has now extended free bus travel for those who hold a concessionary pass on grounds of disability, so that it covers travel before 9.30 a.m. This is good news and will allow those with disabilities to get to work and training opportunities for free, if there is a bus that works for that.

Bus travel stats

Latest figures show that passenger numbers increased throughout 2023, with the number of fare-paying passengers now exceeding pre-covid levels. Obviously, passenger numbers across Norfolk and the UK fell dramatically during Covid, so getting back to where we were before is important for making bus services viable again.

In Norfolk, overall bus passenger numbers have increased by 18% in the last year, with the number of fare-paying passengers now at 107% compared to pre-pandemic baseline figures. Norfolk is bucking the trend, as nationally, bus usage figures are at between 89% to 98% of pre-pandemic levels.

Approximately £12 million of our extra DfT funding was allocated to providing new or expanded bus routes and increased service frequencies on key routes, including more evening and weekend services. But I am aware that many small rural places are not seeing useful buses at useful times. See above on my efforts to get help with that. It's also worth thinking about ways to mix some cycling with a bus or train journey, for those who would normally commute to work by car. The Travel Norfolk journey planner website might be able to help you with planning that though disappointingly it doesn't yet seem to calculate the mixed mode journeys they have been promising (so Google maps might be better at that!).

Long Stratton Bypass

Various hurdles have been jumped towards actually beginning on this long-awaited road. Planning permission is now in place, and the Officers were in the process of deciding which contractor would get the job, just before Christmas (having received four bids). The department for transport has approved the side road orders, for diverting roads and footpaths to join up in new places, and there is a 6 week challenge period for that. There is still uncertainty over how much funding will be received from central government. It's part of the diversion of funding from rail to roads associated with the truncated HS2 rail scheme. If only we were getting a rail link from Fornsett and Great Moulton instead to shift traffic off the road... That would only be a matter of re-opening the old stations, at a fraction of the cost you'd think.

Contact me

You can contact me on Catherine.rowett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk for Council-related business, and I look forward to helping with a range of issues that people have already brought to my attention. I'm always delighted to attend award ceremonies, events, centenaries, lectures, exhibitions, conferences, debates, litter picking parties, campaign events and protests, so don't hesitate to add me to your mailing lists! I also have a facebook page which includes updates on what I am working on, posts about events and opportunities relevant to residents, and a place where you can comment and leave your views on things I want to ask you about. The link is [here](#).

County Council campaigns this month:

Look out for promotion of a campaign to get people taking steps towards becoming more healthy during 2024. More details here: [Ready to Change - Norfolk County Council](#)

It's worth advertising on the village noticeboard or parish magazine if there are local opportunities for people to volunteer to get out and become active, with litter picking, drain clearance, maintaining hedges and ditches and so on, since that kind of group activity can contribute to motivation to improve active lifestyles. In addition, I would welcome offers of help to distribute local leaflets for me as a councillor (a newsletter) or for the Green Party (for election campaigns) if anyone is so moved. Contact me on my party email address (not my councillor address) if that's your kind of thing. Catherine.rowett@greenparty.org.uk.

Catherine Rowett

2nd January 2024