

County Councillor's Notes – April 2006

As lead member for the County's committee which looks after health in Cambridgeshire, I have been working on the changes which will affect us all from now onwards.

The County Council spends £7.9 million on mental health services for working-age adults - £3 million of which is spent in Cambridge City and in South Cambridgeshire. We also pay £31.7 million towards the budgets of the Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) for social care services for older people. The fact that the Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire PCTs are overspent by £18.5 million means that there are real concerns about how much care can be provided in future. However, Adult Social Care is now the firm responsibility of the County Council. 14.5% of South Cambridgeshire's population is disabled – slightly higher than the County's average. There are smaller numbers who have severe learning difficulties and hearing or sight impairment.

Cambridgeshire is the fastest-growing county in the UK. In the 20 years up to 2003, the population grew by 24% whereas the average elsewhere in England was 6.5%. This steep increase is forecast to continue with, for example, a further 10% increase up to 2011. This increase has not been even, with marked growth in the area around Ely but only a tiny increase in Cambridge City. This trend has seen a marked increase in the number of older people with the greatest increase in those aged over 85 – this is the age group which makes most use of Social Services.

Cambridgeshire has a growing population and successful economy because it is an attractive place to live. It is the 15th. wealthiest area in England (out of 149). But we need to meet the demand for those with longer lives and that means spending 65% of our budget on older people and another 6% on mental health services.

There is a deliberate policy of encouraging people who receive Social Services from the County to opt for Direct Payments from us so that they can choose who they get their help from and how much of it they want. This is also Government policy. One person says:

“My life and that of my family has been so much better since I started to receive Direct Payments. Freedom! People coming in whom you know – continuity! I have no hesitation in recommending it to anyone.”

When someone's needs are being assessed by Social Services, they will be placed in one of three groups. This grouping is important because it determines what level of service they can expect, and indeed whether they can expect any services at all. The groups are: Critical, Substantial, Moderate, and Low. Cambridgeshire looks after people in the Critical and Substantial groups of eligibility. I can tell you that we have no plans to “raise the threshold of eligibility” to the Critical group only. Since the Conservatives have been the ruling group on the County Council, this has been our policy and it will remain unaltered whatever the budget implications. If any of you are concerned about this, please write to me or telephone. I will be pleased to hear from you.

You may well ask what is driving the latest restructuring of the Health Service. It is this: The Government has greatly increased spending on health care since 1997. Before that I had been pressing the Conservative Government to raise its health spending to German levels, phased-in over a 10 year period. Unfortunately, the fall in waiting lists and the number of patients treated has not changed in proportion. Indeed there is some evidence that costs per patient have gone up. Faced with a national deficit of around £800 million in health spending, the Government has gone for cuts in staff and amalgamations of the PCTs (see below). This will mean some patients don't get treated. The extra money has been heavily absorbed into much higher salaries for some staff without extra work to show for it. As I write this, it is clear that the new contracts for family doctors have seen the average salary rise to £120,000 with some earning £250,000 a year.

Ambulances

Currently there are four PCTs in Cambridgeshire (plus two in Peterborough). The latest Government-led reforms of the Health Service will see these merge into one. We are told that there will be savings of 15% in management costs and £13 million more put into front-line services.

It is now proposed to have just one Ambulance Trust for the East of England. This is the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Essex, as well as Cambridgeshire. It covers a population of 6.2 million. In the coming weeks, we will be looking at this regionalisation of a life-saving service. We need to be assured that it will still respond to emergency calls at least as quickly as now and that their new computer technology will make up for closure of local call centres. I will report to you again on what we find.

Please note that the term “regional” is increasingly used by the Government. It is brainwashing us into thinking ourselves as part of the eastern region and not as Bourn, Cambourne and Caxton as part of Cambridgeshire. There is even a Regional Assembly of councillors sent by properly-elected councils to give it credibility. We believe that the Government has every intention of dismembering England into a number of separate sub-regions of Europe. The so-called Eastern Region is bigger than the Netherlands – if you want a model of what the Government is up to. Some of us oppose this because we believe that it is against the interest of local democracy and it will cost more to run. If you want more evidence of stage-managing the electoral process, look at the referendums which gave birth to the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. The minimum “yes” votes in Wales were set lower than those in Scotland otherwise the Government knew they would lose. And that's another thing – referendums are the reverse of what they seem. They are dishonest because those who set the questions, the minimum turn-out and the minimum “yes” votes, control the outcome to get what they want. Very rarely does it not go their way.

And in the next County Councillor's Notes:

- The impact on the County Council of South Cambridgeshire District Council's budget reduction of £2.6 million.
- Cuts in bus services due to a cut in Government grant to the County Council.
- How we are making-good on services where we used to be under-performing.

Councillor Lister John Wilson
County Councillor, Bourn Division
Cambridgeshire County Council
Wheatfield House
Royston Road
Litlington
South Cambridgeshire SG8 0RL
Tel: 01763 853339
Mobile: 077185 88220