

County Councillor's Notes – February 2006

Council Tax

About 65% of the County Council's income comes from a Government Grant. This year will see that grant rise by 1% less than the average of other counties. That increase is not enough for us to maintain our services at the present levels unless we raise our own council tax substantially. We are always looking for ways to save expenditure and make what we have go further. So far the Library Service is safe. We have asked the public whether they preferred a 4%, 5% or 6% increase in council tax. Each of these involves cuts in services. Like everyone else our gas bills have gone up by 36%, our electricity by 24% and our diesel by 10%. Then there is the rising wage costs of inflation as well. Each time we send out the gritting teams it costs £20,000. A rise of 5% will increase the Council Tax on a Band D house by 81p a week. The Government's "capping" policy stops an increase "much over 5%" (their words). I am very aware that any increase in tax for pensioners and others on a fixed income, is a drop in living standards. I am against large increases in tax.

We levy the third lowest tax of any Shire. Cambridgeshire is the fastest-growing county in England but the government has not listened to the facts. Instead there has been an "equalisation" of grant which means another transfer of money from us to the industrial towns of the north of England. This equalisation was supposed to be a one-off when it was first done 3 years ago when we lost £11 million. There are those who say council taxes are a lot higher in some parts of the north. Sure they are, partly as a result of wasteful spending over the years. But overall housing costs in Cambridgeshire are much higher than in the old industrial areas. You need an income of £50,000 a year to be a first time buyer of the cheapest house in South Cambridgeshire. Those of us who have been careful with our taxpayers money see resources, which properly belong to us, being diverted to those who already have more.

Papworth Hospital

It is now well known that the County Council gave its blessing for Papworth Hospital to move to the Addenbrookes site. I was Chairman of the cross-region Committee which examined the case. The building work will start in 2007 and will be fully occupied by 2011. This has not been an easy decision and much affection for Papworth was expressed by the public and fellow councillors from across East Anglia. We are concerned about the economic cost to Papworth Village and we are worried about how people will get to the new building on a very congested site. A new road will enter Addenbrookes from the south-west and there will be enhanced parking, bus access, affordable homes and commercial research buildings on a site extended by 70 acres. There will still be no railway station at Addenbrookes though.

Health Care

Prepare for a big shake-up in how medical care is provided. At the moment local Doctors refer patients to hospital and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) or the Mental Health Trust (MHT) pay the bill. This gives Doctors a blank cheque, ensures that everyone gets treatment, but also makes no connection between what the PCTs can

afford and the amount which they are billed-for. That is why the local PCT is up to £7 million in debt. Now local NHS provision will change: doctors' practices will be given a ceiling on what they can spend. We may ask what happens when there's no more money – in fact I did ask the Strategic Health Authority – “Given that April starts the financial year, is March a bad time to be ill?” I'm still waiting for the answer.

The Mental Health Trust is £3 million overspent. They are getting back into balance by closing residential homes, a ward at Addenbrookes and the Trumpington Day Centre. Mental ill-health is almost invisible and gets neglected but for carers and patients this is bad news. Mental health problems are heavily concentrated in the student population and also in those people who came to Fulbourn Hospital from distant places and have stayed. There are people with mental illness in every community – no-one is spared. I have urged the County Council and the Cabinet to refer this crisis to the Secretary of State for Health and they have agreed. This is a very poor way to treat the people of Cambridgeshire.

Income Support

There are between 17,000 and 27,000 residents of Cambridgeshire who can claim income support. In fact the number who do is less than 300. Do you know anyone who should be claiming but isn't? Have a look at these cases:

1. Philip from Huntingdon who needs constant care after an operation. He is now getting £60 a week Attendance Allowance and his wife, who is providing his care, is entitled to £45 a week.
2. Liz from Bar Hill is a single mother who cannot work due to a complicated medical condition. When she starts receiving Child Tax Credit, Disability Allowance, Income support and Council Tax Benefit, she and her young daughter will be better off by £215 a week.
3. John and Ruth from Cambridge didn't realise that on retirement they were entitled to new benefits. They are now claiming Pension Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit and are better off by £65 a week.

If any of you are in a similar position or you know people who are, I want to hear from you to put them in touch with extra help. Or you could contact the Citizens Advice Bureau on 0845 241 2555 or www.cambridgecab.org.uk

I look forward, as always, to seeing those of you who come to my monthly surgeries at the Sackville Centre (the new Library at Cambourne) on the first Thursday of each month.

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