

Swanton Morley - Annual Parish Meeting 20th May 2024

Dear Resident,

It is my great privilege to serve as your Breckland District Councillor here in the Lincoln Ward. Here is a brief summary of my work on your behalf during the last year:-

Budget & Council Tax

For the financial year 2024-2025 Breckland Council has increased its share of your council tax bill to £113.58 for a Band D property. This is an increase of £4.95 above last year. It has not been immune to cost of living pressures caused by inflation and this year it has had to utilise some of its financial reserves and implement a programme of efficiency savings. The 2025-2026 financial year is also projected to be difficult. Having spent a lot of time with senior council officers reviewing the budget as well as meeting with the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition, I was content to support this year's budget. I continue to challenge the Council where I have concerns about financial matters. Having lobbied very hard on this matter, I was pleased to note that they finally scrapped the planned expenditure of £35,000 on painting murals in Dereham Town Centre. I also continue to ask searching questions about the future of Barnham Broom Golf & Country Club which the Council still owns. It is my long-held belief that the Council should never have bought this in the first place.

Local Development Plan Review

Breckland Council continues to carry out this review at pace and the draft plan will be discussed at the next Cabinet meeting to be held on 13th May 2024. Subject to approval at this meeting there will be a further public consultation anticipated to start on 3rd June 2024. I have been pleased to have the opportunity to work some with some Parish Councils on this very important piece of work.

The Future of Robertson Barracks

I was approached by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in early January of this year to have an initial meeting with them to discuss their tentative plans for the site. This meeting was very constructive and I was pleased to hear their desire to communicate closely with the local community. This was followed on 30th April with a presentation and extensive inspection of the site with DIO and representatives from Breckland Council, Norfolk County Council, Swanton Morley Parish Council and Hoe & Worthing Meeting. The Breckland Council Draft Local Plan going before its Cabinet on 13th May, in my view, takes a very pragmatic approach to this site. It recognises that a lot of detailed work around transport links, utilities, green infrastructure and good quality design will need to be produced before a realistic assessment of housing and employment use can be determined. I will continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders to try and get the best possible outcome for the current local community and future generations. It must be remembered that any development of this site will likely take many years to complete after the base closes at the end of this decade.

2023 Power Cuts in Beetley & Gressenhall

I am grateful to a number of residents who contacted me following last year's power cuts to voice their frustration at the frequency and duration of these. I wrote to the UK Power Networks Public Affairs Manager in October seeking answers and a resolution to what was obviously an ongoing deficiency with their overhead cable network. I am pleased that they subsequently carried out a programme of tree cutting and replaced some cabling. I later requested that they send management representatives to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Commission meeting which was held in March. At that meeting they acknowledged that their maintenance regime had not been satisfactory but that they now have a larger budget for maintenance work. Furthermore, I was pleased to receive an undertaking from them that additional engineering work will be carried out in 2024 to make the local electricity network more resilient.

Community Car Schemes

At a recent Beetley Parish Council meeting I was made aware of some complaints made by volunteer drivers and the co-ordinator about what they perceive is the onerous demands placed upon them by Breckland Council. These relate to the frequency of enhanced DBS and medical checks. It is felt that these can be off-putting for prospective new drivers and place an increased administrative burden on the Co-ordinator. I wrote to the relevant manager at Breckland Council (new in post) and having investigated the matter further, he confirmed that the Breckland Council scheme was last reviewed in 2010. He has advised me that his team will now undertake a thorough review taking account of the most up to date guidance. It is my hope that this will result in less administrative work and a sensible level of checks for drivers.

Beetley Pre-school

This long established Pre-school serves Beetley and surrounding villages. It is currently located within the school grounds. The age of the existing building and the need for the school to re-purpose the land it sits on, means that the Pre-school is trying to find land for a new home in the village. Despite obtaining planning permission to build new premises on land owned by Beetley Parish Council adjacent to the school, legal wrangling with some neighbouring properties has meant that this has had to be abandoned as the legal costs are prohibitive. I approached the Trustees of the Village Hall to see if they could help, but they did not respond to any of my correspondence. I was later advised by a third party that they declined to help. I continue to work with representatives of the Pre-school, Breckland Council planning department and a developer with a view to seeing if new premises can be built on land within the village. These discussions are at an early stage and I will continue to do what I can to secure the long term future of this facility for local children and their parents/carers.

Supporting our Military Families

I was troubled to find out in recent months that some of our service personnel and their families based at Robertson Barracks are living in substandard accommodation on the base. Some of these homes are very poorly insulated, have mouldy bathrooms and electric storage heaters which are decades old and very inefficient to run. This makes the cost of energy very expensive and impacts on other aspects of their household budgets such as everyday shopping. Working in conjunction with Breckland Council officers and Swanton Morley Parish Council, I have managed to help struggling families receive some emergency funding and specific help with food. I am grateful to the Leader of the Council, Sam Chapman-Allen for his support with this and to this end we, along with senior managers from the housing team will soon be meeting with representatives from the 1st Queens Dragoon Guards welfare team to develop more targeted support utilising funding from the Council and Armed Forces Covenant.

Casework

In the grip of the cost of living crisis Breckland Council has, with Government support, provided hardship and family support funding for those most in need. As part of my casework I have managed to help a number of local families receive additional financial support and I have signposted them to other professional bodies where they can receive additional help and guidance. I can and often do help with concerns relating to antisocial behaviour, housing, street sweeping, environmental health matters, business support and backing community grant funding applications.

Your Councillor

As well as my day to day duties as your councillor, I am also the leader of the Independent & Green Group at Breckland Council. I am now starting my sixth year as a member of the planning committee and I am also a substitute member of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission and Governance & Audit Committee.

Yours Sincerely

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