

Progress report

Mayors and unitary councils

The latest bombshell on this saga was the announcement just before Christmas that the government was inviting councils to explain if they had “capacity issues” that would make it wise to postpone May elections for councillors. Effectively this put the decision on whether to cancel elections into the hands of the administration that stands to gain from clinging to power, and preventing the electorate from deciding whether they are doing a good job. The very idea is clearly unacceptable and when the leader of the council consulted me (as leader of an opposition group) I recommended that she should point out to the government how utterly inappropriate it was even to invite a sitting councillor to request such an extension. I made clear in no uncertain terms that the elections should not have been cancelled last year, when councillors could have been elected for a three-year term. The idea of delaying them to next year, only to elect new councillors to an authority that was merely winding itself down for a year is even more bizarre than electing them this year for a two-year term. I haven't seen what letter the leader sent, but it seems likely that she invited the officers to make the case that capacity is an issue for us in Norfolk. As far as I know we haven't yet heard whether the ministers will decide to cancel the elections. At the very least we can expect a lot of by-elections as councillors resign rather than take on another year (or rather probably two years) beyond their mandate.

Now older news is the announcement of a two year delay to the election of a Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk: an absurd change of schedule when election campaigns were already under way for elections expected this year and recruitment was under way for the CEO and other staff needed to set up the new authority. The priority programme that the government was so keen to get up and running has turned out to be chaos.

Reorganising the local councils is supposed to be going ahead to the old timetable with handover to the new councils in 2028. The consultation on how to divide Norfolk up into one, two or three unitary councils closed on 11th January. I rather doubt that our views will carry weight.

Pylons and panels

Some decisions have been made regarding grid connections for the energy schemes. Residents in the Fornsett and Ashwellthorpe area are breathing a temporary sigh of relief that the Tasway Energy Park has been parked for now, due to not achieving a slot in the first round of connections. New revisions have come in relating to the planning application for the (monstrous and inappropriately located) battery storage installation in Great Moulton (Field BESS) with an awkward short consultation interval over Christmas. So far I am not seeing any useful mitigations.

Community Fund

I'm pleased to report that some awards from my fund have now been made. I've funded an insect hotel in Burston, gardening tools in Gissing, catering equipment in Great Moulton, biodiversity projects in Tivetshall, improvements for the pre-school play area in Gissing, oak trees for the parish land in Winfarthing, and some other things are in the pipeline. Please do get any remaining applications in before I assign the money to other things.

You can see the schemes that are being supported across Norfolk here: [Crowdfund Norfolk | Crowdfunder.co.uk](https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk) It's a heartwarming site and reminds us that communities work together to do good things when they are filled with love and friendliness, not the hate and division that are currently being promoted across the world.

I'm also trying to get money for the bus shelter improvements in Carleton Rode, and campaign for some better bus services for Burston and Shimpling.

Updates from County Council and the Health Board

Norfolk Trails Public Survey

The council is seeking feedback to ensure that the future of Norfolk's Trails aligns with the values and preferences of residents. A public survey is being conducted to gather community input, which will inform the long-term planning and improvement of the trails, with the aim of enhancing accessibility for all. The survey is very confusing and there is no closing date given. There seem to be two surveys, one for stakeholders and organisations (I think this would include parish councils) and one for ordinary walkers and residents. Please encourage residents to do the individuals questionnaire which is here: [Norfolk Trails - Audience survey](#) (there's also a prize draw!) The survey for organisations is at <https://research.audiencesurveys.org/Interview/1b4334d0-3a8e-4445-8397-dd99353abf9b> .

Adult Services CQC inspection report

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) delivered their verdict on Norfolk's Adult Social Services Provision on 12th December, awarding an overall rating of "Requires Improvement".

This was based on a review of the local authority from 31 January to 3 July this year, including an onsite visit, speaking to staff, meeting service users and consulting with partners and care providers. The report highlights safeguarding, waiting times for Care Act assessments and inequity in outcomes as key areas for improvement. The overall score was 56%, which is 6% away from a Good rating. The authority has said that improvements are already in progress.

Which roads will be gritted on cold nights?

People can check which roads are on the council's gritting routes for this season using the map at www.norfolk.gov.uk/gritting. Use this to plan your safest route if you need to go somewhere.

National Information

National planning policy framework consultation

The Government has launched a major consultation on a revamped National Planning Policy Framework. It's part of their policy of plonking infrastructure and housing all over the countryside and removing protections from nature and human communities. Data centres are eating up our energy and our countryside: they are not the solution to our problems as the government seems to think! Have your say. The consultation (open till 10th March) is here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system>

UK gets onto the Erasmus+ scheme in 2027

The Government has finalised an agreement to let us into the Erasmus+ programme in 2027. It offers opportunities for participants of all ages: students can spend a year abroad without extra fees and there are also opportunities for teaching exchanges, apprentices and adult learners.

Contact me

Catherine.rowett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk. See also my Facebook page [here](#).

Catherine Rowett

12th January 2025