

Report on County Council Matters to North Nibley Annual Parish Assembly 26th April 2021 John Cordwell

County Council

Conservatives retained their overall majority with Liberal Democrats the largest opposition party. The Covid-19 lockdown means that the by-election to fill a vacancy has not taken place and will now be part of May's all-out election.

Coronavirus, Covid-19

In mid-March 2020, all County Council meetings were cancelled until further notice, which turned out to be the entire year. From June onwards they resumed virtually using Webex. The council has been putting out daily briefings and advice on the situation and has been helping in many other ways.

My roles on the County Council

My committee memberships remained unchanged. During the year I have been Vice-Chairman of the Environment Scrutiny Committee, of the Planning Committee, and of the Commons & Rights of Way Committee. I am my group's lead member on the Traffic Regulations Orders committee having stood down last year as vice-chairman. I have continued as a member of Gloucestershire's Local Access Forum.

I have been my group's representative on a Road Safety Cabinet Panel. There had been concern from councillors on the level of involvement of the council in local road safety matters. This reported back to the Cabinet last month and I questioned how the recommendations would allow the county's own road safety liaison groups to continue. It seems to depend on who is in charge after the elections.

I am one of the county's two representatives on the Berkeley (Nuclear) Site Stakeholder Group. This recently received a report on a bid being made to develop nuclear fusion based on Berkeley and Oldbury. More widely I have continued as a representative on South West Councils and its Resources and Management Committee, and on the Severn Estuary Partnership.

County Council budget 2021/22

The approved County Council revenue budget totals £483.008 million. The County precept entails an overall increase of 4.75% on Council Tax. This consists of a 1.99% Council Tax increase plus a 2.76% Adult Social Care Levy. The latter will raise an additional £8.753 million for Adult Social Care services. This equates to a Band D Council Tax precept of £1,409.22 in 2021/22 compared to £1,345.32 in 2020/21 – an increase of £63.90 per annum.

The budget debate saw successful amendments tabled by the Liberal Democrats totalling £1.3 million mostly from contingency reserves held by the council and not affecting the precept.

These changes included:

- an increase of the originally proposed £10k per county division in the Highways Local funding to £20k, giving communities a greater say over how their highways money is spent, including on road safety schemes*;
- a £100k fund to create 20mph speed zones in neighbourhoods across the county;
- £100k to expand school streets schemes to the Cotswolds, Stroud and Forest of Dean which have not benefitted from the pilot schemes. These prohibit vehicles using roads outside schools at the beginning and end of the school day and
- almost £70k on removing barriers to mobility, helping to find solutions to transport issues faced by people with a wide range of disabilities, such as more wheelchair space on buses, more provision of dropped kerbs, removing barriers to cycling and assisting use of mobility scooters.

- £100k to support children's development in their first 1000 days so they are ready for school;
- £100k to support children at risk of exclusion and help them reintegrate into school;
- £265k consisting of £5k allocated to each county councillor for a Covid Community Recovery Fund and
- £33k to cancel a proposed 3% increase in residents parking permits.

* The original Lib Dem amendment was to increase the Highways Local budget to £30k per councillor. Whilst only £20k was achieved at the February budget meeting, at the March meeting of the council's Cabinet they announced that they had found the money to increase this to £30k per councillor!

Motions at County Council meetings during the year This is necessarily a very brief description but indicates the range of subjects covered.

The motions debated during the year and the outcomes were:

Fast tracked introduction of "school streets" schemes, (Lib Dem). Such schemes are included in statutory guidance issued by the Government Transport Secretary. Clearly there are many schools where that is not be possible, but a requirement not to allow engines to idle outside schools could be introduced. Conservative members took some persuading on this, but later in the year three trial schools were selected. As you will note from earlier in my report, this year's budget meeting includes funding has been agreed to extend this to a scheme in each of the remaining three districts.

Celebrating Gloucestershire Volunteers (Lib Dem/Labour) It was unanimously agreed that as the lead authority in the county, the County Council will establish a series of events to recognise and celebrate the exceptional efforts of residents and public servants, and to establish permanent memorials to acknowledge both the volunteers and the tragic loss of so many members of our community.

Climate Change (Labour/Green) After amendments, it was agreed unanimously that a report to Council should be made after its consideration by the Environment Scrutiny Committee on what lessons the Council has learnt during Covid-19 that it can apply to its policies and practices to meet our climate change targets and produce a cleaner, greener post-Covid County.

Establishment of a local contact tracing system to stop Covid-19 (Green)

This was lost through concern at the number of council staff and financial support that would be needed.

Promoting Cycleways (Labour)

It was pointed out that the Council did not have the power to carry out the motion as originally worded. It was amended to call for the Cabinet member to provide the resources for this and agreed unanimously,

Restoring our Rivers (Lib Dem)

There was concern over the amount of pollution in the county's rivers. After some debate, the Conservatives moved the referral of this motion to the Environment Scrutiny Committee and that was the outcome. On a previous occasion, this delayed a motion from being considered for around two years. As vice-chair of the Environment Scrutiny Committee I called for it to be on the agenda soon. As a result, an extra meeting of the committee was held resulting in agreement for a short duration task group is to start work soon, taking evidence from a wide range of organisations.

Public Health England (Lib Dem)

This motion asked the County Council to note with dismay the Government's intention to dismantle Public Health England at a time when the ONS estimates that around 3000 people are still being infected with Covid-19 every day and to write to the Secretary of State for Health to express this grave concern and to reiterate the need for a thorough and transparent enquiry into why the UK has one of the highest Covid-19 mortality rates in the world. It also asked for the 25% cut in the public health budget in England compared to 2015 to be reinstated. The Conservatives voted against the motion, so it was lost.

Rainbow flag crossing (Labour)

Again, the Conservatives used their majority to refer the motion, this time to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Whilst several such crossings now exist in other parts of the country, they are not formal road crossings such as zebra crossings, which would give rise to safety issues. It has been suggested they could be put in pedestrian areas.

Highways trees maintenance (Lib Dem)

The motion said that the workforce to ensure such trees receive proper maintenance is inadequate to keep them healthy and safe and a positive addition to their neighbourhoods. It called for the cabinet member to prepare a report on how the County can significantly increase the total number of highway network trees. The Conservatives used their majority to vote it down.

'Planning for the Future' White Paper (Lib Dem)

The motion noted that the proposals in this White Paper would radically alter the existing planning system for all seven of Gloucestershire's principal councils. It had been opposed by the all-party Local Government Association, currently Conservative-led, along with many other interest groups. It called on the council to ask the Chief Executive and County Council leader to write to the county's six MPs to raise strong opposition to the proposed changes in the White Paper when it comes before parliament.

The Conservatives amended the proposal, to say there were areas where the White Paper "might be improved" and claiming that the White Paper would address the housing waiting lists. This was won by the Conservatives with all other councillors opposing.

Child food poverty (Lib Dem)

The motion said it believed that it is shameful that children still go hungry in the UK. It commended the initiative of Marcus Rashford whose successful campaign on school holiday hunger has led to a taskforce being formed with some of the UK's leading food retailers and charities to help reduce child food poverty.

The motion noted that this taskforce has called upon the government to fund three policy recommendations from the National Food Strategy to end child food poverty for good:

The wording that followed, calling on the Government to immediately fund these recommendations and to chastise the county's MPs for the way they voted on this was deleted by a Conservative amendment whose majority ensured it won.

Equalities (Labour)

Called on the council to undertaking an equalities audit when services are designed and commissioned to remove access barriers for all groups. Also, to ensure that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people* are always short listed and interviewed when middle and senior management vacancies occur.

*In speaking to this the proposer added in "who have appropriate qualifications". A supportive Conservative procedural motion referred this to the council's Equalities Working Group to ensure the legality of the proposal.

Special Schools (Conservative)

To note the valuable role these schools play and the capital investment being made into them.

Electioneering, it went on to refer to “the misguided actions of previous councils in seeking their closure”. This refers to a situation 20 years’ ago when it was felt that more children in special schools would be better placed in mainstream schools and the numbers in special schools were decreasing. The vote was won, with many abstentions.

Response to Covid-19 pandemic (Conservative)

This thanked the NHS teams leading on vaccination in the county, and the firefighters, other council staff and volunteers who support them, for their exceptional work in delivering the vaccine across our county.

Words were added by a Lib Dem amendment and agreed by the Conservatives to support the campaign to increase the proposed one per cent pay rise for frontline workers and calling on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to follow the recommendations given by the NHS pay review body instead. The amended motion was passed unanimously.

Social care funding (Lib Dem)

This noted that next year, at £157 million, adult social care is the single largest item of county council expenditure and represents nearly one third of all spend and will increase. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these problems.

The Conservative Government pledged that it would act on adult social care funding and committed to publishing a Green Paper on this in the 2017 Spring Budget. This has still not been published despite many subsequent promises that it was about to appear.

It asked the Council to write to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, expressing the Council’s extreme frustration that the Government has failed to produce any long-term plan for a system creaking under unsustainable pressure and asking them to urgently publish the social care green paper, and to include a proper consultation on funding options.

This motion fell with most Conservatives voting against.

Household Recycling Centres (HRCs)

These have remained open through much of the pandemic with a booking system. The Pyke Quarry HRC has been subject to longer waiting times for an appointment than the other four in the county. One reason for this has been a large number of no-shows. The booking system is to be improved to allow residents to change their booking time rather than simply not using it.

Rail Services

A rail scheme from Bristol northwards, MetroWest Phase 2 was initially to turn back at Yate to free up passenger capacity on the Bristol - Gloucester line. The intention is now for trains to continue to Gloucester. This service is expected to start in May 2022. In addition, Charfield station now seems likely to reopen in a few years’ time.

Growing Our Communities Fund

This started in the 2018/19 financial year and amounted to £30k allocated to each county councillor over the three years then remaining for this council’s term of office. The whole of my £30k has been awarded. Recent items have been:

£1500 towards North Nibley shop refurbishment

£4986 towards Stinchcombe Village Hall car park extension

£836 for community play at the Blue Coat School

£3000 for lighting at Conygres for the Wotton Scout Group
£1335 towards the Berkeley Green Parkrun
£2200 towards a Wotton Junior Parkrun
£5000 for preparatory work for Wotton Town Hall repairs
£5000 to Stone with Woodford School for playground enhancements

Highways Local

The £25k available to me during the year included spending on:
carriageway patching on the A4135 at Bowcott;
footway resurfacing on the A38 near All Saints Church in Stone;
carriageway patching in Church Street and School Road, Wotton;
siding work at Taits Hill, Stinchcombe;
and signing and lining in North Nibley and in Potters Pond, Wotton.

Finally

As you will be aware, after a record continuous 40 years as a Gloucestershire county councillor, I am stepping down this May. It has been an immense privilege to serve the residents both of Gloucestershire and far beyond, but particularly all those in this county division. The opportunities I have had, the experiences I have gained and the people I have met have made it an outstanding journey.

John Cordwell