

Councillor Liz Vickers Fakenham Lancaster South Ward – Report May 2024

Cabinet Decision to Spend Nearly £1million on Rocket House Cromer

I challenged a decision by the North Norfolk District Council (NNDC) Cabinet to invest nearly £1million of your money in Rocket House, Cromer, at a time when the Council is under severe financial pressure to balance the budget. Councillors Cushing, Fitch-Tillet and I, “called in” the Cabinet decision and asked for it to be scrutinised by Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Cllr Cushing and I are members of that Committee. **We did this because the Cabinet hasn’t revealed the key information that should have informed a decision to spend nearly £1m of taxpayers’ money.** It has not provided a developed options appraisal or outline business case to justify the decision. Instead, it claims there’s wide public support for Rocket House, (without producing any credible evidence) – perhaps there is in Cromer, but what about the rest of North Norfolk? NNDC already spends a huge amount of capital and revenue funding providing facilities and supporting the economy in Cromer and Sheringham. Just last month there was a Cabinet decision to spend a large sum on the compulsory purchase of the cleared Shannoeks site in Sheringham.

To give some background, in 2004/2005, NNDC decided to spend millions of mostly EU money building the Rocket House on Cromer Promenade. It paid little regard to the harsh shoreline environment, the risks of surge tide events and cliff slippage. After just 16 years, and two major tidal surges, there has already been expensive maintenance to combat flood damage and sea salt corrosion. The ground floor has become almost uninhabitable for the RNLI museum and the RNLI, as tenant, has given notice. The building has a café upstairs as well as a lift and public toilets. The present Cabinet can’t be blamed for decisions made in 2004 but they can be blamed for their decision to pour more of your money into a potential “money pit”. Investigation reveals that the maintenance and running costs of Rocket House, far exceed the rental income. As Leader Cllr Adams said in response to my questions, “the building doesn’t wash its own face”. There is a prospect of the losses worsening with the risk of higher and more frequent tidal surges, and these risks could make the building almost uninsurable. Where is the logic and transparency in spending public funds that could deliver so much better value for money on other projects throughout North Norfolk?

Update on 9 Norwich Street

On 20 May I accompanied two Fakenham residents to a meeting with leading NNDC officers to discuss the future of 9 Norwich Street. It is a very complex case. I had ongoing meetings with officers throughout 2023 and I asked them to seek independent legal advice to clarify some of the complexities. They have done so and are awaiting a response. In the meantime, they have agreed to enhance public safety by updating the scaffolding and making a walk-through tunnel so that pedestrians don’t have to step off the pavement. This should be in place by the end of June.