

CLlr Christopher Cushing – February 2025

Fakenham Lancaster North Ward – District Council Report

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Lancaster North ward covers all dwellings in the parish of Fakenham that are east of Wells Road, and north of Highfield Road, Greenway Lane, Pensthorpe Road and the A1067.

1. FLASH Project - Swimming Pool & 3G Artificial Pitch

- The next Steering Group is not scheduled until 4th March, so I have no more to add since my last update. As I have heard nothing to the contrary, I assume work is progressing on schedule.

2. NNDC Annual Budget

- On 19th February there was a NNDC Full Council meeting to set the council's annual budget. This has been a key focus of mine over the last month as being the Leader of the main opposition group, I play formal role in proceedings as I have to reply to the budget and organise my group's overall response.
- The council must set a balanced budget by law. The Government has slashed funding to District Councils across England and instead diverted funds to large Metropolitan areas. North Norfolk effectively received no increase.
- As with last year, the budget was only balanced by finding a multitude of small savings from across the board. I am not convinced that is a sustainable policy going forward as deficits are predicted in the years to come.
- A key point I made in the debate is the disproportionate funding that the administration allocates to Cromer Capital projects. In the last six years the Council has spent over £6m on Cromer projects, which includes over £5m for the Cromer pier. Some of this is statutory as it's a listed structure, but plenty has also been spent on the Pavillion Theatre which is not. Over this timeframe there have been 14 Capital projects in Cromer, which is the same number as Fakenham, North Walsham and Sheringham combined. Indeed, Sheringham has had 8 projects which include The Reef swimming pool, which was fully funded by NNDC, unlike the Fakenham pool which is being funded mostly by central government.
- I raised the need to address 9 Norwich Street. I said there is over £380k in the Capital Programme for buying empty properties. I said this ought to be used for a Compulsory Purchase Order for 9 Norwich if the landlords keep refusing to fix the structure. This is in the Fakenham South District ward, and my colleague Liz Vickers has been extremely vocal about this issue. Liz has not received any commitment to do so though we keep persisting with this.

3. Devolution and Local Government Reform

- The Government have approved the request from both the Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils to be placed on the fast-track devolution to create Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) for both counties and Norfolk and Suffolk. In parallel both counties will undertake Local Government Reform (LGR) to abolish County and District Councils and replace them with Unitary Councils. The driver for both doing this is that the Government have promised to allocate additional funding to both counties when this is implemented.
- The MCA is likely to come into being in May 2026, and the new unitary authorities from March 2028.
- The Government has asked the County Council and all seven District level authorities to submit their views on LGR by 21st March. This should assess the unitary options.
- The Government said in the White Paper they published just before Christmas that authorities should have a minimum population of 500,000, though there can be exceptions. Norfolk's population is 930,000. This means that the maximum number that Norfolk could be divided into is three if the exception rule is allowed. We are probably more likely to end up being divided into one or two. I suspect the latter would a greater Norwich authority with the rest of the county a 'doughnut' around it.
- I estimate that the total number of elected local representatives will be more than halved from the current level as the size of Unitary wards tends to be twice that of District wards.
- One by-product of this is that Town and Parish Councils are likely to factor more prominently in local decision making.
- I understand from Steve Blatch, the NNDC Chief Executive, that he is delivering a briefing to Town and Parish Councillors at the Thursford Pavillion on the evening of 25th February.