

Councillor report, December 2023, from Catherine Rowett

December 2nd 2023

Icy roads and gritting

Norfolk's fleet of 58 winter vehicles treat 2,200 miles of roads on each full 3-hour gritting run. All A and B-class roads and some C-class roads are treated with a focus on commuter and major bus routes and as far as is possible one route into all villages. The A11 and A47 are gritted by National Highways. In addition some pedestrian areas and main pavements are treated in the centre of Norwich, Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn.

There are more than 2000 grit bins available around the county. These are for people to use as and when you need it, on roads, pavements and cycle paths. Do contact the Council if the bin has not been filled or there is some other problem.

Other problems in winter

There's lots of information about staying safe during cold spells on the county council website page called Norfolk Winter, which is [here](#). Take care to avoid burst pipes by ensuring that outdoor pipes are lagged, and that improved insulation hasn't left the pipes out in the freezing cold of your loft. Make sure you take warm clothes, rug, shovel etc when out driving in winter. Don't rely on the car's heating system to keep warm, in case you break down or get stuck. It's a good idea to follow the County Council social media, which will use the hashtag #NorfolkWinter for updates and advice relating to winter weather.

Council "devolution deal" plans

The Cabinet at the County Council have been considering the options available if they accept one of the so-called "devolution" deals that the government is using as part of its so-called "levelling up" plans. It seems likely that the cabinet will recommend that Norfolk accepts a "level 3" deal, which adds a range of additional responsibilities to the council's work (things that were formerly done by central government) and provides a longer term guarantee of some funding to deliver them over the period of the funding agreement that comes with the deal. The current situation where councils are looking at year on year cuts and no long term plan for how they can make ends meet make it seem attractive or even necessary to go for this promise of some investment in Norfolk and some replacement of the funds that have been lost since Brexit and with cuts to local authority funds and with rising inflation eating away at what we do have the right to raise in local taxation. But there are doubts as to whether the funds (which are not index linked) will actually be sufficient to deliver any significant improvements, and the deal comes with some unsatisfactory constraints on the democratic functioning of the Council, including a leader directly elected by the people of Norfolk, who won't be a council member and might be at odds with the majority view of the Council, despite having to appoint a cabinet from elected members of Council. At Full Council on 12th December we will vote on the proposals put to us by the Cabinet. There are differing views on whether this is just a pointless gimmick by a government that has run out of ideas and run out of money, whether it is the first step on a slippery slope to something seriously problematic, and whether we have to say yes to it anyway (as many other councils are) because the bribe is money that we can't afford not to have. Let me know if you have a strong view on this.

Road Safety Schemes:

My list of requests under the Road Safety Community Fund has now gone in for consideration, after much consultation and calculations by Adam Mayo, our highways officer. There were lots of requests, but few will be funded, probably only one per councillor unless they are very cheap, or unless some councillors get nothing.

My next task is to work with Adam to try to find other ways of delivering some of the schemes that won't win, or were too low down the list to stand a chance. I have not yet spent my highways allowance because I have been saving it for these urgent safety schemes. More on this anon.

Meanwhile I have also put in a motion to Council for December asking for a cross-party working group to be set up with a view to making it easier for villages to get safer speed limits where they wish to have them, and rewriting the Norfolk Speed Management Strategy to prioritise safe speeds in rural areas, and to proactively reduce accidents before they happen instead of after. Ten times as many people die on rural roads as on motorways. Cyclists are almost three times more likely to be killed on a rural road than on an urban one. My motion may not get debated in December if time runs out, in which case I shall put it in for January instead. I expect the motion to get full support from the Independent, Labour, Lib Dem and Green Councillors, but I am not sure how the Conservatives will respond.

Cost of Living Payments - winter fuel help for pensioners

The Department of Work and Pensions has announced that pensioners across the country have started to receive up to £600 to help with energy bills this winter.

Most Pensioner Cost of Living Payments are made automatically in November or December and should be received by 26 January 2024. Further details [here](#).

The government advises that pensioners who do not receive a payment by 26 January 2024 should contact the [Winter Fuel Payment Centre](#).

Give a child a present

The scheme to give a book to one of over 800 Norfolk children in care has now finished (the last date was 3rd December) but it is still possible to take part in a scheme to buy a present from a local Norfolk business for a 16 to 18 year old child in care. There are several local businesses you can buy a voucher from. More information here: [Christmas appeal - Norfolk County Council](#).

Buses and active travel

I am pursuing some enquiries on behalf of some villages concerning the provision, or lack of it, of Flexibus and Borderhopper services, and the unsatisfactory timing of bus journeys (which are sometimes useless for the purposes one might travel for). Please let me know if these issues apply to you.

Contact me

You can contact me on Catherine.rowett.cllr@norfolk.gov.uk for Council-related business, and I look forward to helping with a range of issues that people have already brought to my attention. I'm always delighted to attend award ceremonies, events, centenaries, lectures, exhibitions, conferences, debates, litter picking parties, campaign events and protests, so don't hesitate to add me to your mailing lists! I also have a facebook page which includes updates on what I am working on, posts about events and opportunities relevant to residents, and a place where you can comment and leave your views on things I want to ask you about. The link is [here](#).

County Council campaigns this month:

Christmas travel plans

The Travel Norfolk website and journey planner can help plan your journeys this Christmas. With local, accurate and real-time public transport information, the site offers a one-stop shop for people wanting travel information for Norfolk and finding a travel mode to suit them.

For those needing to head to Norwich by car, there is now also the option to show live parking information for the main multistorey car parks, helping Christmas shoppers to see where spaces are available during peak times. Simply click on the key on the site's journey planner map and select from a range of useful information – as well as parking spaces, you can quickly and easily locate the nearest Beryl docking station, vehicle charging point, taxi rank or toilet facilities.

The journey planner continues to develop with even more capability coming soon, including park & ride journeys and multi-modal options.

To find out more about more about the journey planner and to plan your festive journeys, visit travelnorfolk.co.uk/festivetravel.

Bus travel stats

Latest figures show that passenger numbers have increased throughout the year with the number of fare-paying passengers now exceeding pre-covid levels, during which passenger numbers across Norfolk and the UK fell dramatically. Approximately £12 million of our extra DfT funding was allocated to providing new or expanded bus routes and increased service frequencies on key routes, including more evening and weekend services.

In Norfolk, overall bus passenger numbers have increased by 18% in the last year, with the number of fare-paying passengers now at 107% compared to pre-pandemic baseline figures. Norfolk is bucking the trend, as nationally, bus usage figures are at between 89% to 98% of pre-pandemic levels.

Catherine Rowett

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