

Swanton Morley Annual Parish Meeting 25th April 2022

Dear Resident,

I am the Leader of the Independent Group of Councillors and along with Labour and Green Councillors we form the opposition at Breckland Council. On behalf of residents, I do try to work collaboratively with much work done behind the scenes particularly with the Leader, Cabinet members, Chief Executive and Directors. I do not oppose for the sake of it. If I believe a proposal is a good idea and will benefit residents, it will have my support. Being an independent member means that I do not have to vote along any party lines. I see my role as that of a critical friend trying to suggest improvements to policies, procedures, spending priorities and improving transparency in all areas of the Council's work.

The last year has been a busy one for Breckland Council. In addition to its normal work it has helped communities get through the Covid 19 pandemic with additional staff resources and the distribution of Government grant funding to assist businesses and community groups. I believe that its communication and support for ward members and communities throughout this period has been very effective and I commend the Leader and senior management team for this. The council has achieved some notable work such as:

- The opening of the £1.8M Elm house project in Thetford to provide temporary accommodation to help people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. I fully support this scheme and it is my hope that we can soon identify a development opportunity for a similar project here in the north of the district.
- Provide £100K through its Community Green Grants Scheme to community projects aimed at promoting environmental sustainability. I know this funding has been well received by those communities applying for grants of which £500 was provided for our CASM group here in Swanton Morley. Another notable local recipient of a grant was Northgate High School for its outstanding work on recycling.
- Providing mental health training for 100 community mental health champions. Here in Swanton Morley myself and the Parish Clerk have undergone extensive mental health first aid training provided free of charge by this scheme to help us assist any residents in need.
- Work with partners such as the Daisy project to provide support for survivors of domestic abuse. This work is vitally important especially as incidents of domestic abuse increased during the period of the pandemic restrictions.
- Develop its 'Future Breckland' initiative to identify significant projects that can be delivered for our five market towns to help them thrive. I have actively engaged in the work relating to Dereham and made representations about the need for better and more public toilets and a new bus terminal to help devise a better public transport strategy for the town.
- Development of the Ellenor Fenn Garden in Dereham to transform old waste ground for public use. This is clearly a considerable improvement in this location which I welcome.
- Development of a new Food Bus service which will be visiting certain communities throughout the district. This service will commence in early May and will be a membership service offering discounted food products to help those people in most need. This will I feel be especially important as the cost of living crisis bites harder as we head into next winter.
- Introduction of a social prescribing service which has been commissioned by the Mid-Norfolk Primary Care Network to work with vulnerable residents providing holistic support to improve their health and wellbeing. I have worked with the Parish Clerk, Assistant Clerk and Breckland officers to provide this service here in Swanton Morley. This has been done in conjunction with the opening of the new Tuesday community cafe in the village hall and trained officers will be in attendance once a month but also available to residents for additional remote support as required.
- New household waste, street cleaning and grasscutting contract with Serco. Despite getting off to a difficult start I am now confident that the new service has bedded down and that the service is considerably better now in 2022. I suggested to the Overview & Scrutiny Commission that a Task and Finish Group of Councillors should be set up to oversee this contract and I am

delighted that this was agreed and I am one of the group's members. Our discussions with Breckland Council officers and Serco have been very productive and this scrutiny will be ongoing over the coming months.

I am a member of the Planning Committee which continues to meet monthly to deliberate on the larger and more contentious development proposals as opposed to the majority of applications which are determined by planning officers under delegated powers. There continues to be a great deal of uncertainty around at the moment because the Government has for some time now been promising significant changes to the planning system. The indications coming from Whitehall is that they wish to reform the system to make it easier for developers to get planning permission and remove the requirement for developers to provide a percentage of new build homes as 'affordable' type homes. Instead, developers would be required to pay a levy to Breckland Council and it would be for the Council to build the affordable homes. I have serious misgivings about these proposals and I believe it would result in less local accountability and fewer affordable homes being built. Over the last ten years Breckland residents like the rest of the country have been subjected to what feels like constant top down planning policy changes designed to try and achieve arbitrary housing number targets. The term 'affordable homes' means different things to different people. It covers social rented, shared ownership and first homes. In reality our young people earning wages in Norfolk's rural economy are finding it increasingly difficult to become homeowners as the gap widens between house prices and mortgage affordability.

In the last month there has been a stop placed on all planning permissions containing overnight accommodation in Breckland because Natural England provided advice to around 40 Local Authorities on 16th March 2022 that high levels of nutrients (mainly phosphorus and nitrogen) in protected water bodies were resulting in poor water quality. The sources of nutrients generally include sewage treatment works, septic tanks, livestock, arable farming and industrial processes. Where sites are already in unfavourable (poor) condition, extra wastewater from new housing developments can make matters worse. This affects the Broads and River Wensum tributary areas. Work is underway to more accurately define and map the areas affecting the River Wensum. Breckland Council is also working with other Norfolk councils to come up with suitable mitigation requirements to allow new developments to proceed. I am advised by Breckland Council's Planning Director that this could take a couple of years to properly resolve although it is hoped that areas outside the defined tributary maps could commence much sooner. Swanton Morley with its close proximity to the river is very much affected by this.

Work has commenced on the review of the Local Development Plan. I am pleased this work is underway but I continue to have misgivings about the approach being taken and the timetable proposed. At the present time the Council has not produced a draft development strategy. Instead, it has decided to first carry out a public call for more development sites and once the outcome of this is known it will produce a development strategy designed around these sites. In my view this is just an easy exercise in development by numbers, making policy fit the available land. I believe that a well considered strategy should be making clear where is the best place to build new homes in the district taking account of current infrastructure, utilities and services and identifying what improvements to these would be needed to accommodate the new homes. Once the strategy is devised, landowners in key identified development areas should then be approached. I am appalled at the timetable given to complete this Local Plan review with a proposed adoption date of 2027. It was clear from the Cabinet meetings I attended that this was done primarily for financial and resource reasons. My concern is that if the Local Plan is not reviewed and updated in a more timely manner a number of existing key planning policies will start to carry less 'weight' in the determination of planning applications and developers will find it much easier to obtain planning permission, sometimes to the detriment of local communities. I believe that this work can and should be carried out faster.

Looking to the future the closure of Robertson Barracks has been brought forward to 2029. This will have huge repercussions for Swanton Morley and the neighbouring parish of Hoe & Worthing. MOD analysis has identified that the land including the airfield has potential for thousands of new homes to be built on the site. Such a large development would in my view require very significant improvements to our infrastructure and local services such as the school and doctors. To this end I have already had discussions with the Leader of the Council and Planning Director with my suggestions for better road connectivity to the site. It is my opinion that the future of all of the MOD owned property at Robertson Barracks will be the defining issue for our community over the next twenty years as plans are developed and construction work is completed. The site does also offer an attractive proposition for the

development of new and existing businesses utilising existing buildings and the construction of new ones. The Defence Infrastructure Organisation is already engaging with Breckland Council and the site may very well be put forward as part of the current local plan call for development sites.

Breckland Council owns much of the grassed areas and some footpaths and a car park in what is known locally as 'middle camp'. This comprises Thompson Close, Gray Drive, Middleton Avenue, Ward Crescent and Hannah Road. I have for some time now been in discussion with the appropriate cabinet members and officers to consider ways of improving these areas in terms of play areas and additional car parking. This would likely involve a proposal for the parish council to take over the ownership of these areas. We are currently looking to see if there is any way that funding could be provided by Breckland Council along with the transfer of the title to the land. These discussions are ongoing and any proposal would have to be carefully considered by the Parish Council and agreed before any final decision is made.

As always, I am available to help residents where I can and would encourage anyone who needs assistance with a Breckland Council related matter to either call or email me.

Yours Sincerely

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