

News from County Councillor Dr Marie Strong
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Dear All

A few notes following the council meeting – forgive me if it is a little stilted!

Whilst spring is with us it is only a short while since our coastal parishes were on flood alert. But of course it is not only our coastal villages which suffer from flooding and this is one of the reasons I agreed to chair the recent Norfolk Flood Summit. This was quite a challenge involving all major organisations engaged in flooding from rivers, surface water, foul sewers and coastal flooding. As some of you will know from experience it is often confusing as to who is responsible for what and it was felt, that whilst there is more work to be done, we moved forward in establishing the answers.

Representing Residents:

Apart from attending the twenty town and parish council meetings I thought you might be interested in the range of committees and working groups on which I presently represent residents across Norfolk at county council meetings: I chair the Broadband, Mobile 'Phone & Digital Working Group and the Flood and Coastal Management Working Group; am a member of the Policy & Resources Committee, CAG (Constitutional Advisory Group), Employment Appeals Panel; Norfolk County Council representative and executive member on the County Council Network (CCN), NCC representative on the LGA (Local Government Association) and on the Norfolk Coast Partnership (AONB). I am a member of the North Norfolk Advisory Group and of the Wells Dementia Friendly Committee. (I am also a member of the NCC Emergency Committee but that is being decommissioned!)

Mobile Phone Coverage:

Unlike fixed connectivity (broadband), European State Aid rules mean that only very limited public subsidy can be used to invest in mobile infrastructure. Only locations that are classified as complete 'Not Spots' - with not even an emergency phone signal available from any of the main four operators) can attract public subsidy. Such a subsidy was used some two years ago with the MIP system (Mobile Infrastructure Project). Therefore the provision of mobile infrastructure is largely dependent on commercial investment. The main mobile operators in the UK are: EE, O2, Three and Vodafone and whilst some operators now share mast sites coverage in many locations is poor with differing signal strength from different providers. The following Ofcom website provides a postcode checker and access to coverage maps for each of the four providers at postcode level: <http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/check-coverage>. Choosing an operator using this checker means at least at home you should have a satisfactory signal. (You can also check out 'boosters' which I believe I referred to previously.) I also spoke previously of the agreement between the government and operators to increase coverage to 90% geographic voice coverage by the end 2017.

Whilst I tend to avoid conferences, as referred to last month, I accepted the request to attend a recent Digital Divide Conference led by Matthew Hancock MP, the new Minister of State with responsibility for broadband and mobile 'phone connectivity. As well as being able to put forward Norfolk's case to the Minister at the conference I am now waiting a response to my follow up question as to when we might expect 100% coverage in Norfolk!

Better Broadband for Norfolk: The improved website can be found on: www.betterbroadbandnorfolk.co.uk and should make it easier for people to find out if an address in Norfolk has access to high-speed broadband or is likely to be able to access it. Using the new mapping tool you can now check by postcode area where better broadband is already available or whether there are plans to provide it under the BBfN programme. It is planned to keep the website

map and search tools updated with the latest information – so please keep checking if you are waiting for news. And because the map on the website gives a much clearer picture of where the BBfN programme is making a difference we will no longer give long lists of places that have had fibre go live. Having listened to people's feedback and suggestions we have tried to make sure the website has the answers to your questions.

Mobile 'Phone Boosters': If you receive a weak signal at home you might find a booster useful. If you are interested google Mobile 'Phone Boosters and read carefully what is promised and check out any queries with the manufacturer. I googled and see Vodafone and '3' offer such equipment - in each case it looks as though it works only for calls with people using the same provider. Another company claim to handle E/Vodafone/O/3. Some people find the equipment very useful, some are disappointed – it depends on a number of factors so check very carefully before you pay.

NCC Budget: You may have heard about the recent County Council meeting to set the budget. Whilst obviously I cannot condense the details of that meeting into a few words I can say that it lasted from 10.00 am to 3.00 pm. This enabled all councillors the opportunity to speak and to vote on the main budget proposed and all of the four amendments. Whilst we may not agree with each other's views it is important to listen to them. After considerable debate the Council tax 2017-18 was set to increase by 4.8%. This includes an increase of 1.8% for general council tax and 3.0% for the Adult Social Care precept.

Power Cuts: Are a nuisance to us all but very worrying for the vulnerable - older people, people with chronic medical conditions or parents of very young children. To provide support there is a free 'Priority Services Register' (PSR) which helps Power Networks identify vulnerable people quickly in the event of a power cut and get them the help they need. You can find more about PSR by calling 0800 169 9970 or online at ukpowernetworks.co.uk/priority.

Broadband:Openreach: A few people moving to fibre broadband have made complaints that Openreach excludes other Internet Service Providers (ISPs) from offering fibre broadband for several weeks after BT has had the opportunity. I am informed that Ofcom regulates Openreach tightly on this matter. When a fibre cabinet becomes available the commissioning process means Openreach release the cabinet to all ISPs including BT ISPs at the same time. Other ISPs would definitely raise a complaint with Ofcom if it believed BT were not treating all ISPs in the same way. What differs is that different ISP internal processes appear to take different amounts of time to start offering services once a cabinet is live.

Road & Transport Improvements: Good news that central government is providing Norfolk County Council with an additional £5.1 million to spend on road and transport improvements in the 2017/18 financial year. The money can be used for a wide range of improvements including, I am pleased to say, upgrading and improving the maintenance of local routes.

40 mph restricted areas: There has been talk in the press regarding the possibility of increased 40 mph restricted areas – even entire towns and villages. Nothing concrete to report yet other than that Norfolk County Council is talking with DfT (Department for Transport) and have stated our interest in a trial scheme. In the event that DfT are willing to fund a scheme we would establish the precise details and hold a public consultation

Avian Influenza: This is a an extremely worrying time for anyone keeping poultry from large scale organisations to domestic settings. NCC Officers are providing advice and general information can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu>.

All good wishes, Marie