

Cabinet Scrutiny Committee Meeting with MPs

Minutes of the Meeting Held on Friday 23 July 2010

Present:

Mr P Morse (Chair)

Mrs J Chamberlin
Mr J Dobson
Mr T Garrod
Mrs S Gurney
Mr P Hardy
Mrs D Irving
Mr C Jordan
Mr J Joyce

Mr M Kiddle-Morris
Mr M Langwade
Mr G Nobbs
Mr R Rockcliffe
Mr M Scutter
Mr T White
Mr R Wright

Also Present:

George Freeman MP	Member of Parliament for Mid Norfolk
Norman Lamb MP	Member of Parliament for North Norfolk
Brandon Lewis MP	Member of Parliament for Great Yarmouth
Chloe Smith MP	Member of Parliament for Norwich North
Elizabeth Truss MP	Member of Parliament for South West Norfolk
Simon Wright MP	Member of Parliament for Norwich South

Officers Present:

Mrs Kristen Jones	Committee Officer
Mr Chris Walton	Head of Democratic Services

1. Apologies and substitutions

- 1.1 Apologies were received from Mr Adams (Mrs Gurney substituting), Mrs Clarke (Mr Joyce substituting), Mr Duigan (Mr Langwade substituting), Mr Hanton (Mrs Chamberlin substituting), Mr Shrimplin (Ms Irving substituting), and Mr Wilby.

2. Declarations of Interests

- 2.1 There were no declarations of interest.

3. Items of Urgent Business

- 3.1 There were no items of urgent business.

4. Public Questions for Norfolk MPs

4.1 Members welcomed six of the nine Norfolk MPs. The Chair thanked them for attending to answer public and Member questions and to discuss ways of how they and the County Council could better work together for the benefit of Norfolk and its residents.

4.2 Group leads had reviewed the public questions received and agreed that five of these questions would be asked during the meeting. Two members of the public were present to ask their question directly to the MPs and the other three questions were asked by the Chair on behalf of those individuals who could not be present.

4.3 Question from Mr Ray Walpole, Norfolk Local Access Forum:

"The access arrangements paid for under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, which were previously paid for under the old Countryside Stewardship Scheme, have opened up many new permissive paths, enhancing the public rights of way network. These have undoubtedly led to an increase in the number of people regularly taking exercise, with the undisputed health benefits derived from this. At the same time the availability of more paths and circular walks have encouraged tourists into the countryside with the obvious benefits to the local economy, including restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfast houses and shops.

In the light of the above benefits to the whole community, will our MPs support the continuation of the Environmental Stewardship Scheme and ensure that its funding is not reduced in the current round of spending cuts?"

4.4 The MPs responded that while they completely supported the work of the Norfolk Local Access Forum and they hoped that the new DEFRA framework would maintain this work, they could not guarantee that the funding for this work would not be reduced. It was added that a public consultation was ongoing on how all services funded by the taxpayer could operate more efficiently and preserve the current level of service. From a health perspective, the work of the Norfolk Local Access Forum and groups with a similar focus was very important in improving and maintaining healthy levels of walking and other outdoor physical activity. From an education perspective, this work allowed access to open spaces and engaged young people who had an interest in nature, farming, and the biosciences.

4.5 Question from Mr Robin Twigge, East Anglian Regional Chairman for the Federation of Small Businesses:

"How does the Government intend to prioritise major infrastructure schemes such as the A12 and A11 roads?"

- 4.6 The MPs responded that the improvement in Norfolk's infrastructure was one of their top priorities for Norfolk. Norfolk was being held back by its lack of infrastructure due to lack of investment for decades. There was huge potential for comparatively little investment. In response to a recent question, the Chancellor, George Osborne, stated that investment would be distributed on the merits of business cases and those which proved to have the highest cost/benefit ratio. The Norfolk MPs thought that the benefit/cost ratio for investment in Norfolk's infrastructure was 19:1. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, had also stated that business cases would be prioritised on the grounds of public safety, maintenance, and then by the highest benefit/return projects. They stressed that capital projects needed to be rationalised across all government departments and not within each department. Norfolk was an international leader in the fields of biomedicine, food science, and clean energy and fuel. These three sectors would play a major role in the business case the Norfolk MPs would put forward. An adjournment debate would be taking place on the morning of Tuesday 27 July at Westminster and Norfolk MPs would make the case about how important these improvements were to Norfolk, and indeed its neighbours in Suffolk, with whom the Norfolk MPs were working on this issue.
- 4.7 The MPs made the point that they were actively working together and were recognised by ministers as an effective lobby for Norfolk. The MPs thought they were an exemplar of the coalition in action and they were working together to achieve things for Norfolk. By working so closely together, along with the local authorities who would be able to provide the relevant data, the MPs were confident that they would be able to put forward a solid business case to ministers to invest in Norfolk's infrastructure, be it roads, train links, or high-speed broadband internet.
- 4.8 Question from Tony Cozens:
- "Will MPs state whether they will support any proposal from the Government to discontinue or alter the funding that is provided for concessionary travel?"
- 4.9 The MPs responded by saying that they felt that in Norfolk the bus pass was not a perk, but essential for many older people to travel and remain active in later life. MPs were in favour of continuing the scheme but had some concerns with the way local councils across the country had implemented it to date. As an example, there were different start times in some areas.
- 4.10 Question from Roy Cornwall:
- "In light of the changes to the health service proposed by the Coalition Government's health White paper what are MPs' views of the proposed scrapping of the two primary care trusts (PCTs) in Norfolk and the potential savings this may bring?"

- 4.11 The MPs responded, noting that even though spending on the NHS has been ring fenced, savings still needed to be made to cover the rising costs of healthcare. MPs stressed the need to reduce bureaucracy and the number of quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental/national government organisation) within the health sector, and the need for bringing together health care and social care. The MPs also referred back to the difficulties arising from the lack of infrastructure in Norfolk saying that, for example, if Norfolk had high-speed broadband internet, GPs would be able to use e-prescription systems and enable them to do more for patients.
- 4.12 Question from Peter Gallop:
- “Why are local politicians accepting the intentions of the so-called economic experts in the government who are intent on adopting ruthless short term measures to cut public services to redress the national debt? Whilst everyone accepts this is necessary, surely it is better to adopt a medium to long term approach whereby the impact on local services can be better managed. The potential redundancies alone are alarming given the social consequences of sacrificing / dumping many loyal employees. It must be obvious that the consequences of this strategy will rebound on to the local economy, health services and other government budgets. It is incumbent on the local politicians to stand up for the local population which cannot be compared to many other areas with better infrastructures and alternative employment opportunities.”
- 4.13 The MPs replied saying that they were doing all they could to address the country’s economic problems as sympathetically as possible but if the deficit was not handled quickly and promptly it would become worse. They noted that £800m was spent every week paying the interest on the UK’s debt. The MPs did not feel that there was an option of spreading out the cuts across the medium to long-term as the debt interest was rising rapidly and if the debt was not addressed, the interest on that debt would rise further. MPs noted that while productivity in the private sector was rising, it was falling in the public sector. The cuts were not something that the MPs wanted to do, but something they had to do and that there was nothing progressive about spending billions of pounds on the national debt.
- 4.14 The Chair thanked the MPs for their responses to the questions from the members of the public and thanked all of those who submitted questions.

5. Member Questions for Norfolk MPs

- 5.1 The Chair asked MPs what they considered were the priorities for Norfolk.
- 5.2 The MPs replied that their priorities for Norfolk included:
- Addressing the low level of skills and aspirations in the county;
 - Education including tackling the shortage of teachers willing to teach in rural schools, and broader post-16 provision;
 - Developing transport, communications, and low carbon economy

infrastructure (i.e. road links, rail links, broadband);

- Tackling deprivation and exclusion;
- Creating jobs;
- Building housing;
- Care for the elderly;
- Localism (the new legislation would give local authorities much more freedom and responsibilities to improve their communities)
- Promoting the Norfolk way of life; and
- Improving local services.

5.3 Norman Lamb MP suggested that a summit was held of Norfolk public sector organisations (District and County Councils, the NHS, and the Police) to identify ways of working together to ensure best use of public money in Norfolk and protect front line services. He offered the example that in a 5-year period £22m could be saved by combining waste contracts. This proposal was endorsed by the other MPs. The Chief Executive of Norfolk County Council was present and agreed to the suggestion.

5.4 Mr Dobson asked:

“Norfolk County Council lost £24million of Revenue Support Grant funding in the 09/10 budget as part of the government's damping arrangements. How will the MPs ensure that this damping is put back into the budget of Norfolk County Council prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review?”

5.5 The MPs said that this was subject to a review of local government finance, already pledged by the new government. They were happy to take this up with ministers on behalf of Norfolk County Council after discussing the issue further with County Councillors and officers.

5.6 Mr Jordan asked:

“What points did the MPs raise when lobbying the Treasury last week, and what responses did they receive?”

5.7 The MPs said that they made the case that Norfolk was discriminated against because it suffered from significant hidden rural deprivation. Unlike many areas, however, Norfolk could make a substantial contribution given the proper infrastructure. Investment in Norfolk would make a healthy economic return and the MPs hoped that county and district councils in Norfolk would work in partnership to gather evidence to strengthen the case for investment in the county. The MPs added that the coalition government was developing a Regional Development Fund to which local authorities could bid for funding.

5.8 Another issue the MPs discussed when lobbying the Treasury was the description of Norfolk as part of the ‘Greater Southeast’. Although Norfolk was labelled as part of this region, the county suffered from lower skill levels and higher numbers of people not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

5.9 Mr Scutter asked:

“In light of the demise of regional bodies how do Norfolk’s MPs intend to work with parliamentary colleagues in the Eastern region to promote regional issues?”

5.10 The MPs noted that the regional bodies were not popular and said that many people were pleased to see the demise of the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). Norfolk now had the opportunity to establish its own Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which better reflected the unique priorities of Norfolk and gave local people the opportunity to have their say. The MPs acknowledged that they would also work with their parliamentary colleagues in the Eastern region to promote regional issues, including working with Essex to encourage faster rail links to Norfolk.

5.11 Mr Hardy asked:

“With changes to regional bodies, planning structures and funding reviews, how will MPs help in ensuring that an appropriate level of growth can be delivered sustainably for Norfolk and growth point areas for Norwich and Thetford?”

5.12 The MPs replied that they needed to ensure that government departments worked together with local authorities. With Norfolk on the UK’s frontline for climate change, the MPs said they did not have a choice when it came to moving forward in a more sustainable way and they thought that Norfolk could become the UK’s capital for the sustainability industry. It was highlighted that the rail services to Norfolk needed updating so that Norfolk could achieve this.

5.13 With regard to house building and development, the MPs thought that the best approach was to have these developments planned by local people for local people. They thought that an organic approach was best—to have a few houses built in each village rather than large suburban developments—where local people decided on the number of houses to build.

5.14 Mr Nobbs asked:

“Would you not accept that many of the service cuts, and tax increases, recently introduced by the government will fall on the more vulnerable and that many Norfolk citizens—particularly the old, the young, and those on low incomes, especially those living in our more remote rural areas—will suffer disproportionately? As a Norfolk MP what steps can you take to alleviate the worst aspects of this? As we’re all in this together, what sacrifices are MPs making?”

5.15 MPs replied that it would be a difficult time for everyone. Those on the Government payroll (Mr Lamb and Miss Smith) had taken a 5% cut in pay and they thought that those who were most able to bear the burden should

help to do so.

- 5.16 The MPs felt that localism was so important that more revenue-raising powers should be devolved to a local level. That way local people had more control over their own lives and could focus their taxes on local problems. MPs argued that the Chancellor's budget would mean child poverty would decrease and went out of its way to protect the poorest in society. It was necessary to create an environment where business could grow and jobs could be created.

6. Closing the meeting with Norfolk MPs

- 6.1 The Chair thanked the six MPs for attending and Members of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee for all of their questions. He summarised by saying that he felt that it was clear that localism was on the horizon, that the MPs were working very closely together, and they all felt passionate about Norfolk.

The meeting concluded at 12:05pm.

CHAIR



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