

**Report on County Council Matters to Kingswood Annual
Parish Meeting
30th April 2018
John Cordwell**

County Council Elections, May 2017

The Conservatives now have an overall majority on the County Council, having gained a net six seats from Labour, UKIP and independents. Liberal Democrats retained all 14 seats they held and with all the same councillors! The Conservatives took all the Cabinet places, plus a new one and took the chairmanships of all the council committees except one they can't constitutionally hold where they supported Labour.

My roles on the County Council

My committee memberships remain unchanged and I continue as my group's lead member on these. I also became a member of a Highways Cabinet Panel, which monitors the awarding of the three new highways contracts. I also represent the county on various outside bodies.

County Council Budget 2018/19

The council has had to absorb a continuing year on year reduction in Government revenue support grant (RSG). By the end of the present five-year comprehensive spending review period in 2019/20 RSG will have reduced by 84%. In the Government's financial settlement, the County Council was accepted as a 100% business rates retention pilot. This also means it gets no RSG this year.

At the February budget meeting the Council took up half the extra increase that is now being permitted without a referendum, adding 0.5% to council tax on top of the 1.99% previously proposed. Most of the extra money raised through this and other changes would enable an additional £5M funding for Children & Families following the highly critical Ofsted inspection. To this

must be added the 2% permitted by Government specifically to fund Adult Social Care, giving a total council tax increase of 4.49%.

Several amendments were proposed to the budget by the Liberal Democrat group and also by the Labour & Green alliance. These were in part accepted but did not alter the final revenue budget for 2018/19 of £412.90M which gives a Band D precept of £1,232.21, an increase of £52.95 over 2017/18.

The money allocated to councillors to recommend for use in their individual divisions for the coming year is £20k for Highways Local (following a successful Lib Dem amendment to increase it from a proposed £10k: last year it was £30k) and £10k for a new Growing our Communities fund which replaces the previous £5k Children's Activity Fund.

For Public Rights of Way my group had asked for an extra officer to tackle the large backlog of requests for definitive map modification orders. The administration agreed to look at this. The 2026 cut-off date for using historical evidence will increase the number of applications.

Bids for a £300k project on domestic abuse focusing on young people who have either witnessed or been victims, and £200k for the expanding of the self-harm hotline for vulnerable people were not agreed but the administration said that it will carry out an in-depth review using a scrutiny committee and report back in September. A bid to reinstate a £32k cut in mental health support was not supported.

A £50k per year grant to each district council to support youth work, following the cutback in county provision, has ended after 3 years. The administration was not prepared to continue it.

Highway Contracts

A post-election mind-change by the Conservatives meant the Amey contract has not been extended beyond April 2019.

There will now to be three contracts dealing with different highways aspects:

Term Maintenance Contract for seven years starting next April to deliver routine highways maintenance. Five contractors have been shortlisted. Amey did not put in a bid.

Final tenders are to be submitted in July and a decision made in September this year.

Structural Maintenance Contract a two-year contract to deliver roads resurfacing work, which Tarmac won and has now started. It has now been agreed that they will also take over all road patching work with immediate effect.

Professional Services Contract to support council staff in specialised detail design work such as on bridges, geotechnical (landslips), drainage schemes as well as to provide design and project management support for major schemes.

This will mean that some services, involving around 46 staff, will return to be delivered in-house. Public rights of way staff have already transferred back.

Road Safety

Shortly before last year's county budget meeting the Police and Crime Commissioner withdrew the contract for NDORS driver retraining from the Road Safety Partnership. An emergency change protected the road safety budget for a year. A review during the year has led to a cutback in staff previously used for road safety educational work and road safety being restricted to statutory requirements. In 2017 the Stroud district area had its lowest number of road casualties ever and no fatalities.

Ofsted inspection of the County Council's Children's Services

An inspection was carried out last spring, but the findings not published until after the County Council and Parliamentary elections. It found that overall the children's services were inadequate. The experiences and progress of care leavers required improvement and leadership, management and

governance were inadequate. Several children's services senior managers left the council. The former cabinet member with this area of responsibility did not stand for re-election in May. Ofsted required the council to submit an Improvement Plan addressing the recommendations and findings of their report by 19th September. The Plan was agreed by the Cabinet on 18th September!

In the latest visit, Ofsted inspectors saw some recent improvements, but said children in need of help and protection in Gloucestershire continue to experience delay at every point of their involvement with children's services.

Motions at County Council meetings during the year

Around twenty motions have come before the council in the last twelve months. At last September's council meeting the Conservatives appeared to filibuster, preventing some motions being discussed. At the meeting this March they used their majority to push through amendments that greatly diluted the wording of most of the motions. For example, a Green/Lib Dem motion that called on the council to phase out the use of unnecessary single use plastic products in all its buildings and at council events by January 2019 and to end the council's purchase and procurement of single use plastics was amended to put January 2019 back to "by 2020" and to only cease buying single use plastics by 2025.

Highways Local Funding

My allocation for 2017/18 included £7k kerbing and carriageway patching in Walk Mill Lane. I was concerned to see the number of defects still in the lane and raised this with Local Highways Manager, Paul Helbrow. It turned out he was already pursuing it.

Planning Application for bunds for clay pigeon shooting

The application came to the January meeting of the

Planning Committee. It was refused on the grounds of insufficient information and lack of a clear demonstration that the proposed development could adequately secure the shooting operation safely within the site boundaries.

John Cordwell