

South Norfolk finalist in Council of the Year Competition

I am proud that our small district Council in South Norfolk reached the last six of over 380 UK Councils in the LGC Council of the year awards. Sadly, we were not successful in winning outright but we were pleased that the judges, distinguished figures from local government, recognised our outstanding achievements, leadership and value for money in making South Norfolk one of the best places to live and start a business in the country.

Parish Boundary Review

A "Community Governance Review" started on 20th March. Whilst there are about 5 reasons to undertake a Parish Review including changing the name of a parish, the two main opportunities are to square-off any boundaries that no longer make sense, perhaps because of new house building or roads AND/OR whether it makes sense to ask parishes to join up with each other.

Just think about how many changes there have been in our lives over the last 20 years. Twenty years ago the Internet had just started, mobile phones were as large as a brick and John Major was still the Prime Minister.

Now imagine what changes might come in the next twenty.

I say this because every twenty years South Norfolk Council has to think about the boundaries of the Parish Councils within it and whether it's sensible to alter arrangements.

It's to straighten out simple lines on maps that a "Community Governance Review" provides an opportunity for South Norfolk Council to work with its parishes to make practical sense of its area. At its simplest a Parish Boundary might be tweaked a bit because new homes have been built on the edge of the village. I know of one person who extended his home at Little Melton with the result that his kitchen is now in Bawburgh!

But there is another angle that we cannot ignore.

There are 119 parishes in South Norfolk. In 2015 only 19 held parish council elections. And many of those didn't have elections in 2011. Or 2007 either. It's not good for local democracy if those that govern us are not subject to election.

It shines a light on the wider fact that we all live such busy lives. The internet allows us to live much more individual lives communicating with people much further away as if they were neighbours. And the result is that fewer people serve in local voluntary capacities in sporting clubs, the cubs & brownies, the WI and, yes, Parish Councils.

And there's another angle. Not only are many of our smallest parishes not elected, the proportion of the tax they raise that they spend on their own administration has got out of control. In the smallest parishes like Bergh Apton about 2/3 of the tax it raises is spent on the Clerk, Insurance and other subscriptions leaving just one third to be spent on the village. If it was a charity it would be closed down. And Bergh Apton is not alone. With well over half the precept going on running costs in the smaller parishes, my informal feeling is that rural villages should seek to club together on a canvass of about 1000-1250 electors – perhaps on the footprint of the village school catchment.

Now is the time to consider whether you should invite other neighbouring parishes to by join together to form joint Parish Councils. There's no question of removing the road signs and the village boundary would still exist. It's just that several parishes would club together to have a single Parish Council serving all of them.

We need arrangements that are going to hold good for the NEXT 20 years that address the realisation that it's difficult to get people to serve and to solve the problem of smaller parishes spending over half of their income on running costs.

South Norfolk is encouraging Parishes to think deeply about their future and want the initiative for any changed arrangement to come from you, a bottom up, not a top down process. Our consultation opens on 20 March and you can have your say by visiting www.south-norfolk.gov.uk.

District Council Boundary Review

The Boundary Commission has issued its final guidance regarding the District Council ward boundaries. Subject to Parliamentary Approval, their recommendations will result in 26 wards in South Norfolk

with 46 Councillors. There will be more multi-member wards including some in the Waveney Valley, which has traditionally been single member territory. Wicklewood is staying a single member ward.

It means that it's most likely that the 2019 elections will be fought on these new boundaries.... that is if we have elections in 2019 assuming that there isn't a Local Government Reorganisation before then, which some MPs called for on the Sunday Politics show the other weekend.

Business Rates Review

There has been a lot of angst in local businesses about the publicity over the business rates review. I asked our expert to give me an idea of businesses in South Norfolk and the effect on business rates. In aggregate, bills in South Norfolk have reduced by 5% although some have gone up a bit. To take Wymondham as an example, a typical shop with a rateable value of, say £5000, has seen a reduction of about £200. But that's misleading in that, single shops [not part of a chain] with an RV of less than £12000 pay nothing at all.

It's only places like Southwold where the Brexit-Boost to tourism has seen Rateable Values exceed £12000 for the first time that has taken shops from paying almost nothing into the territory where no discounts are allowed.

And in the meantime, your council still forgives the rates bill on a discretionary basis to the last pub, club, garage or shop in the village.

The Next Local Plan

Councils have canvassed landowners to suggest land they'd like to be considered for building. It's work that precedes the decisions Councils will take about where new homes are built in future. In the recent past development has been focused in a small number of places and villages which used to see a lot of growth have slowed down or ceased all together.

But now as some school rolls are falling and pre-schools closing down in the smaller villages there's a realisation that we need a proportionate number of homes in EVERY village, regardless of size. Obviously that means more in villages with services. And more in villages along transport corridors - especially closer to Norwich.

But a more evenly-distributed pattern of growth if Villages are to grow and to help small builders, who take more care over design and build more quickly. Larger allocations >20 allow room for a better mix of homes - not just 5-bed Executive Homes because wide choice to the market is important. And more smaller sites will reduce the price for land enabling people to build their own homes.

We'll start to put flesh on these bones later in the year with our detailed ideas, which will need to take into account the Government's latest 'White Paper' policies in the new year.

Cllr Michael Edney
Deputy Leader South Norfolk Council
Cabinet Member - Finance and Resources
Member for Wicklewood Ward