



Annual Councillor Report

Jonathan Harris - Liberal Democrat Councillor - Brixworth Ward
May 2022

Background

West Northants Council has been up and running since vesting day on 1st April last year, with councillors elected in the following month. The current make-up of the council is as follows:

65 Conservative councillors
20 Labour councillors
5 Liberal Democrats
2 Independents
1 Non-aligned Independent

The council is run in 'cabinet' style meaning that the vast majority of decisions are taken by the cabinet made up of a Conservative administration. Cabinet meets once a month and is open to members of the public to make statements, and councillors to question/comment on the deliberations of the cabinet.

Brixworth Ward

The Brixworth ward is made up of 13 parish councils and 8 parish meetings, serving the following: Arthingworth, Brixworth, Clipston, Cold Ashby, Cottesbrooke, Creaton, Draughton, East Farndon, Elkington, Great Oxendon, Hanging Houghton, Haselbech, Kelmarsch, Lamport, Maidwell, Marston Trussell, Naseby, Scaldwell, Sibbertoft, Sulby, Thornby, Welford and Winwick. Some 5,000 dwellings and an electorate of around 10,000 people.

West Northants Council

It is fair to say the council is still finding its feet, and operating, to some degree, in silos. There is work taking place to address this, and it is worth remembering that although there was an extra year for the council formation, COVID came along and certainly did not help in the preparation or transformation process. The general expectation is that this process is probably going to take at least five years to complete.

The council continues to evolve and there is ongoing restructuring taking place in planning, transformation and sustainability. Planning appears to be under a great deal of pressure due to changes in resources and processes.

The council managed to balance its books following the disastrous Northamptonshire County Council years, and has healthy reserves and a contingency balance in the region of £70 million. Arguably this is an over-cautious approach when there are so many service areas which would benefit from further investment. The Liberal Democrats pressed for further funds on the climate/sustainability agenda, as well as early intervention in Children's Care. We also asked for a freeze on country park charges across West Northants rather than the 10% proposed, which will take Brixworth Country Park parking prices from £3.20 to £3.50. The Conservative administration declined to support these proposals.

The highways contract is due to be determined in June of this year, with the successful bidder commencing in September 2022. The contract will run for an initial seven year period with options to extend. It is expected to cost in the region of £30 million per annum and, at time of writing, it is not clear whether the West and North will award their contracts to the same provider or not. Either way, they will be operated as two separate contracts.

The boundary review process is well under way and will be carried out in two phases;

Phase One - size of council

The council will make its submission to the boundary review commission, outlining how many councillors it believes it needs to carry out its business and scrutinise its activity. This submission will be made towards the end of June/early July and will go to public consultation. Once determined, it will move to phase two.

Phase Two - warding determination

In the second phase, once the number of councillors have been agreed, work will begin on recutting the wards. These could be single or multi-member wards. Once again, when the submission has been made and agreed, this will go to public consultation.

It is expected that the new wards will be in place at least one year ahead of the next round of elections in May 2025.

My year as councillor

The primary focus of my twelve months has been working and serving the needs of parishes and residents alike, dealing with issues as needed and working a wide variety of case work. I have attended in the region of 35 - 40 plus parish council meetings since the May elections.

My council responsibilities include representation at the following committees and working groups:

Committees:

Strategic Planning
Democracy and Standards
Planning policy

Also I am substitute for colleagues on:

Daventry Area Planning
Corporate Scrutiny

In addition I have responsibilities on the following **Working Groups**, working on specific projects and/or policy proposals:

Equalities board
Boundary review
Welford Education Trust (council nominated position) - soon to change constitution which won't require councillor representation
Bus Service Improvement
Bus Enhanced Partnership
Norse Liaison
Constitution Review
Sustainability oversight group

In addition to these committees and working groups, there are regular briefings and training sessions and my group regularly attend meetings with officers, including Director of Place, Director of Adults, Children's Trust, S151 Finance Director. I attend regular monthly cabinet meetings - usually with 1 or 2 Lib Dem councillor colleagues - where we make statements, ask questions and challenge the thinking of the cabinet with a view to encouraging them to see an alternative perspective to the issues that they are debating as well as representing residents perspectives from our own wards.

Some of the Liberal Democrat areas of focus and campaigns:

- Our equality motion to ensure access to services for those without internet access was successfully supported in July 2021 - still ongoing work and challenge
- We are fighting for focus on climate - finally resulting in council signing UK100 net zero pledge & holding council to account on their, yet to be published, strategy. We now have a pathway and cross-party oversight group, but will be working on clarity around the strategy itself
- We are fighting for greener planning policy - linked to the above point
- We are continuing to push for council to become White Ribbon accredited in the campaign for the prevention of violence against women and girls
- We've campaigned to save Fraser Park (Northampton) green space from developers (the inspector in local planning is now insisting that equivalent green space must be found)
- We have proposed the declaration of an ecological emergency to sit alongside the declaration of a climate emergency (sadly defeated at the April council meeting)
- We've campaigned for pension divestment from Fossil fuels to greener funds and for more ethical investments, particularly on light of the war in Ukraine
- Locally, the FOCUS team have carried out a number of 'knock and drop' survey visits to villages within the Brixworth ward to get views on local resident issues and we included Welford in this process late last year.
- Currently engaged in supporting **Homes For Ukraine** with local volunteer networks and working to create a hub in Brixworth

Brixworth Ward - some parish/ward work examples

- ensuring the follow-up and implementation of the two EV charge points - which have taken far longer than they should have, but we now have installation dates (Welford)
- Working with Welford Action Group (WAG) - picking up on the issue of the Mick George Quarry - taken to our MP at Brixworth coffee morning for further support, establishment of local liaison group - requirement for Northamptonshire under Waste and Minerals policy but no so for Leicestershire I understand
- weight limit signage and zone - installation now imminent. Requested installation takes into account the conservation area; there is no specific signage for conservation areas but posts will be black, not shiny grey!
- Earlier in the year, successfully added a one day a week community bus service to Scaldwell which has been without any service since NCC cut all services during its financial difficulties.
- Progressing casework across the ward linked to highways - white lines and pot holes! In addition there have been drainage/flood issues for some of our residents.

- Councillor covid grants allocated to support community projects to recover in East Farndon, Creton (2 projects) , Naseby, Clipston, Brixworth (2 projects). The full allocation of £2500 I had available was awarded.
- Introducing a “Shopper Hopper” service around Brixworth, working in conjunction with Community MiniBus (a 14 seater minibus) The plan will be to bring shoppers to the new Aldi in Moulton/Overstone Leys or to Weston Favell Centre/Brixworth stop enabling them to travel and do their weekly shopping independently. Bus pass holders will be able to travel for free. The route will be ‘on demand’ and will initially cover Cottesbrooke, Haselbech, Naseby, Cold Ashby, Thornby, Creton and Brixworth. Spratton have requested to be included, so we have adjusted the route to do so. The pilot service will launch on **Tuesday 17th May**. I hope that we will be able to run the pilot for two to three months to gauge demand with a view to running a regular weekly service from there on in.

Moving Forward

I will continue to support parishes in their plans for the future and work with each of the communities that I represent, ensuring that I am easily accessible and contactable to residents on casework. I will also continue to provide communication to residents directly through our Focus newsletters.

Jonathan Harris
May 2022

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