

COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S REPORT TO SKEEBY PARISH COUNCIL.

No one in Skeeby will need me to tell them that this has been a very different year to that which anyone of us can remember, regardless of how old we are. It is a year which I hope will never be repeated, but I fear we will never quite be back to 'fully normal' again.

I never for one moment thought at the beginning of the year that I would be deprived of the pleasure of seeing your beautiful village in April, daffodils in full bloom, my favourite time of year, because of a lock down which none of us have known before. I again give full credit and indeed thanks to all those souls who spend hours keeping Skeeby tidy and indeed beautiful with flowers from one end of the year to the other.

As a County Council in January, we were on track for a £19 million shortfall in our budget at the end of the fiscal year. This was largely caused by HAS ie. Health and Adult services, which year after year gives further pressure, understandably to the system principally because of an ageing population. However, this was child's play compared to what was to come.

The cost to NYCC of Covid 19 is now put at £73 million with a contribution by the government contributing £33 million to date. I rather suspect that this may be all that we will receive given the state of play with finances and borrowing in Whitehall. It will therefore be necessary to take a very substantial amount from reserves to balance the books this year. A very sobering thought.

Devolution is something that the government are very keen on. There have been talks and plans put on the table now for what seems like years, but at last a proposal has been put forward to have a devolved region encompassing the footprint of NYCC and the City of York. There would have to be an elected Mayor and what better example can I give of a success story than Ben Houchen and Teesside. There are huge opportunities for us in North Yorkshire to gain significant extra funding for all sorts of projects if we go down this route.

However, the minister has said that he would only agree to a devolution deal if plans are brought forward for a Unitary Council to replace the present outdated and very expensive to run system of District and County Councils which has been in existence since 1974.

There is a proposal to be put forwards by the County of a Unitary Council to cover the footprint of NYCC and leave the City of York as it is. The savings to be made here are estimated at £25 million per annum. A second proposal is going to be put forward to have 2 unitaries, one based in Northallerton covering the existing Richmondshire, Craven, Hambleton and Harrogate district councils, and another unitary based in York to cover Selby, Ryedale, Scarborough and the City of York. There is fierce resistance to this proposal from the City of York Council which is a unitary anyway.

There is currently much lobbying going on from the district councils who favour the 2 unitary system, but until concrete proposals are put on the table, I can't say which I favour. In any event, the process is simply being carried out to formalise proposals which can be put on the table in front of the minister. These will be examined etc. in detail and then I understand the minister will have a consultation process with residents.

The final decision as to which proposal to accept, if any, will be made by the minister Simon Clarke. Hopefully the devolution will be accepted and implemented also. Forming a Unitary will save large amounts of tax payers money in the long term, but devolution is absolutely critical in my view for North Yorkshire.

There has been much hype about the representation and services in rural areas of Richmondshire in a large Unitary, but whichever proposal is accepted, it will be down to elected members like myself to represent our constituents and make sure that the rural voice is heard.

Unless there is no progress into a Unitary(s), the County Council elections scheduled for May next year will be postponed for a year. The Boundary Commission will almost certainly be called in to reassess ward boundaries after we have been in the Unitary for a year or so.

My report has been consumed with Devolution and Unitary and I fully appreciate that there so many unknowns at present, but one thing which does please me is that all proposals for future local government in our County have to be in London by the end of September. It is therefore unlikely that we will have a situation like Brexit which dragged on for an eternity, thank goodness.

As always, if there are any matters which I can assist with, please don't hesitate to get in touch. I can give an absolute assurance that when it comes to which Unitary proposal I will give my support to, it will be the one which I think will best serve the needs of the residents of Skeeby.

Angus Thompson.

27th August 2020.