

REPORT FROM COUNTY COUNCILLOR RICHARD SMITH, MVO

TO ALDEBURGH TOWN COUNCIL

11 JANUARY, 2016

May I wish you all happy and healthy New Year.

I had to spend the Christmas period looking after my Mother in Lowestoft who is recovering from an operation, but it did not mean I was unaware of Christmas activities in Aldeburgh, as I read *The Times'* correspondent's account of the Boxing Day swim, the large number of participants and onlookers and the general success of the event. Well done to all those brave people!

May I also commend the efforts of the Town Council, in association with the Business Association, for providing the fine array of Christmas lights and decorations which all most definitely added to the collective festive spirit.

My first other piece of news is to breathe a big sigh of relief that the Alde Lane works are now finished and traffic is using the road again. It has taught me a lesson and, although I have no responsibility for planning decisions, it is necessary to balance the need for a prolonged road closure causing inconvenience to many townspeople, against the benefit of the owner of one property. This closure was out of kilter in any balancing exercise, and I hope others have learned lessons from this experience, as I most certainly have done.

Following your generosity to Aldeburgh and Thorpeness Rugby Club at last month's meeting, I am pleased to inform you that I have allocated £1,000 from my Locality Budget towards Phase Two of the clubhouse refurbishment and, what's more, I know that my SCDC colleagues have also chipped in with further support. Good luck to the club with its future endeavours.

I have always stated that my Party went into the last County Council election pledging not to increase the County's share of the Council Tax for four years, and the budget that I helped prepare for the year commencing 1st April, 2016 envisaged no rise. However, you will be aware that the Chancellor is raising the National Living Wage in four stages to £9 by 2019. The costs of this to the County Council are estimated to be between £6 and £7 million. We looked to the Chancellor for compensatory help in his Comprehensive Spending Review announcements in late November, but came there none!

Instead, he has given upper-tier local authorities, i.e. Counties and Unitary Authorities, permission to raise Council Tax by 2% which, in our case, will bring in an extra £5.7 million next year. This extra money has to be hypothecated to social care spending and, after much debating with my colleagues, we have had to accept that the Chancellor has effectively moved the goal posts and that we have little choice but to follow his suggestion and impose the increase on Suffolk's residents who, in reality, will pay the extra costs of the Chancellor's decision. This year's County budget already includes a contribution from reserves of £14 million (out of a total of £47 million 'free, uncommitted' reserves) and we simply can't increase that take to £20 million. It is another example of how hard the efforts to get the Country's finances back into balance are affecting local government, who claim with some considerable justification to be the most efficient part of the public sector.

Difficult decisions aside, I am sure that the next year will be a good one for Aldeburgh and that its special lure for visitors will continue to be as strong as ever. We will always need to be vigilant and responsive – as the County and the Environment Agency have been over repairing so quickly the damaged road to the Martello Tower. Praise should be given where and when it is deserved!