

The budget and the council tax

Decisions will shortly be made on the Council's budget and its council tax for next year.

Key dates to watch out for are:

11 February

Meeting of the Council's Cabinet

25 February

County Council meeting

It is the County Council that finally makes the decisions here.

The actual level of council tax is then notified to our district councils who combine our figure with their own, the Police Authority's figure and any parish council precepts.

All of this is brought together in the council tax demand which will be

coming through our letter boxes in late March.

A milestone along the way to these final decisions was the provisional Revenue Support Grant announcement in early December.

Whilst the Council's figures looked good in relation to neighbouring councils, they did not tackle a continuing worry about the need for adequate funding on Social Services.



In fact, if we were fully funded for our needs, we might not even have to levy a council tax!

The December Cabinet considered the overall implications of the provisional settlement and issued for public consultation lists of possible savings and growth items. These will be reviewed again in February.

The Leader of the Council wrote to the government in December about the settlement, stressing the importance of tackling the funding of Social Services.

The final figures for the settlement will probably be announced within the next two weeks.

Bob Summers
Director of Finance 01603 222400

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Spotlight on

Norfolk Traveller Education Service

Norfolk has one of the largest Traveller populations in the country. Each year over 1,000 Traveller children live in or visit Norfolk, and a quarter of our schools enrol pupils from the various Traveller groups, which include Gypsy, Circus and Fairground communities.

The Norfolk Traveller Education Service is one of 70 such services across England and Wales supporting access, attendance and achievement of Traveller children and promoting positive attitudes, equality of opportunity and full educational inclusion of Travellers in mainstream provision. The traditional Traveller population has no history of formal education after puberty.

Our service advises schools and, where necessary, supports the needs of Traveller pupils resulting from their culture and mobile lifestyle. Support often includes individual teaching to compensate for a fragmented educational pattern.

Our problem is that nothing is certain. We do not know which children of what ages will arrive where, with what needs and stay for how long. There is no way of predicting which schools will be involved and what advice and support is needed. Planning has to be flexible enough to accommodate the totally unknown.

However funding, which we receive from the Department for Education and Skills as a centrally-run peripatetic service, is fixed and, in real terms, diminishing. There is no age-weighted pupil allowance and the grant does not vary as numbers of children increase. In 2001-2 we have funding for a head of service, 7.9 teachers and 3 learning support assistants. Annual funding has remained constant for the past three years, taking no account of salary increases or inflation.

There are four possible ways of handling our fixed budget:

- Become a 'fire-fighting' force, supporting only highly-mobile pupils as and when they are in the county, but inefficiencies will result from the peaks and troughs of demand.
- Support only the more settled pupils identified at the start of the school year, leaving the highly-mobile unsupported.
- Meet all identified needs by going over budget.
- Prioritise highly-mobile children, schools with no previous experience of educating Traveller pupils and secondary-aged youngsters, giving lower priority to more settled Traveller children.

We currently adopt the last strategy. The downside is that, while meeting most needs for most of the time, the sudden arrival of new families inevitably results in our withdrawal from more settled pupils. They still have additional needs, so we 'disappoint' them and their schools.

There has to be a better way of financing equal educational opportunities for all Traveller children.

Lorna Daymond
Head of Service

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This unofficial stopping place has been occupied by a series of families since late November, with a total of eighteen children attending four different schools.

Norfolk Rural Life Museum

Life after capital development...

When the Norfolk Rural Life Museum was founded in the 1970s, it was the local manifestation of a national, even international museum movement.

Farming, and with it much of rural life, had changed radically during the war and post war periods.

There was a popular passion to preserve what could be salvaged of the old, and this Gressenhall museum was at the heart of Norfolk's move to protect some of what was being lost.

Fast forward for quarter of a century, and by mid season 2001, the museum had completed a £3.1 million capital development.

This unprecedented injection of money into the museum (principally from the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Regional Development Fund, East of England Development Agency and NCC Capital Challenge) has done everything that you might expect.

At a simple level, it has consolidated the buildings, improved facilities and enhanced displays. There were, and sometimes still are, problems, headaches, and the potential for stress associated with this project. However, coming new to this museum (as I did in August last year), the end result is something very positive, something to be proud of.

In response to the capital project, visitor services and income generation targets have been

enhanced. The central issue now is about moving from a mindset that is focused on capital considerations, to one that is much more attuned to revenue. What I bear in mind is that the capital development is not the critical factor in determining the museum's success - what matters

more is the way we now capitalise on our 'new improved' but more complex facility.

Many of the rural life museums that emerged elsewhere in the 1970s have stagnated.

If the museums do not survive, the link to the past will be lost.

Museums must seize their opportunity to make the past relevant to the present.

We are living through a time when strong and visionary organisations can attract significant capital funding.

At Gressenhall this has enabled a major stage of development that

has given us the basis for a bright and sustainable future.

This is not a model that is easily repeated elsewhere in the country. Community and Council should take pride in what has been achieved and feel optimism for the future.

Stuart Gillis
Area Museums Officer (Breckland)
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The main hall of Gressenhall museum, which is modelled on a popular Victorian moral game. The message to the rural poor was 'Put a foot wrong and you'll end up in the workhouse'.

If you would like this newsletter in large print, audio, braille, alternative format or in a different language, please contact Doris Piper on 01603 223488 or on minicom 223833.

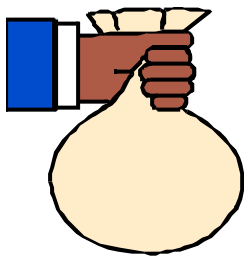


When cost effectiveness = more cash

The County Council is in the process of agreeing a cost effectiveness target with the Government which could bring in an extra £1m to Norfolk.

The arrangement is part of the Council's local public service agreement (LPSA), under which we get performance reward grants if we meet certain targets.

So what is cost effectiveness and what do we have to achieve?



Cost effectiveness means improving performance without increasing costs or reducing costs without affecting performance. Our target is 2.25% - made up of the 2% we would expect to improve anyway plus an

extra .25% to achieve the LPSA.

Our performance will be measured using a basket of between 30 and 40 best value performance indicators that meet the criteria set by the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions. These indicators represent the performance of the authority as a whole.

When is the money due?

The target is about continuous improvement, with the LPSA based on the three year period from 1 April last year. The performance reward grant will become payable once 60% of the target has been attained. The minimum payable then will be £640,000.

If the whole target is achieved we gain a total of £1.068m, to be paid in equal instalments in the financial years 2004/5 and 2005/6.

Carol Dawson

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But what does it mean??

This first of two articles on **revenue budget preparation** looks at the corporate strategic process.

In June, the Council's Cabinet starts the planning process for the following financial year and defines a framework based on assumed increases.

During the summer and autumn Members and Chief Officers prepare various options, listing known areas where more money will be needed than in the current year and suggesting savings that could be made to fund some or all of the pressures.

Late November sees the announcement by the Government of the provisional Revenue Support Grant (RSG), the Standard Spending Assessments (SSA) and the various specific grants.

This enables the Director of Finance to calculate the resources available to the authority.

The final RSG is announced in late January.

In February the Cabinet and Council formally set the budget and the council tax for the following financial year. Cash Limited budgets are then issued to service departments.

Next month we will concentrate on departmental budgets.

John Marjoram

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Tony Howard

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Local Government White Paper

The White Paper on Local Government, “Strong Local Leadership, Quality Public Services,” has now been published.

This paper is about far more than finance and is well worth looking at (see <http://www.local-regions.dtlr.gov.uk/sll/index.htm>).

Its main aims on the finance side are to reform the revenue grant system by April 2003 to distribute government funds more fairly, and give authorities more local freedom and flexibility. Major proposals include:

General grant - The current grant distribution system will be replaced in 2003/04 with a general grant, distributed by a new formula. There will also be ‘targeted grants’ not ring fenced to a particular service.

Education – Only some education funding will be ring fenced. A new formula will be used for the general grant for education which distinguishes between the responsibilities of schools and the LEA. Councils will continue to have discretion to set budgets at a local level but the Government will create a reserve power to set a minimum schools budget.

Capital - The current capital system will be replaced with one based on ‘prudential indicators’ to allow councils freedom to borrow money for capital projects. Councils will also be able to borrow more easily from money markets.

Council tax – Council tax revaluations will take place every 10 years, the next being in 2007.

Charges - Best Value authorities will be allowed to supply goods and services under contract to other public, private, and voluntary bodies. Councils will be able to charge for discretionary services, and use the proceeds of fines for additional spending.

Financial management – There will be new laws ensuring that councils have adequate reserves,

and allowing the Government to specify a minimum. The Government may also give grants in extreme cases to authorities in financial difficulties. Councils will have to publish their accounts by 30 June each year.

Performance – Councils will be classified as high performing, striving, coasting and poor-performing, with financial freedoms available according to which categories they fit into.

How does Norfolk view these proposals? They sound welcome but we will need more information, such as how the new revenue grant distribution system will work, to get a full picture.

It is also important that as well as improving the grant distribution system, the Government adequately recognises the spending pressures facing local authorities. The next three-year Spending Review, to be published in July, should indicate the way things are going.

Peter Roe

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FIMS: All systems go!

The FIMS - Financial Information Management Systems - Project is now well and truly underway again after its break for the Best Value Review of Finance.

We expect to appoint our supplier within the next couple of weeks, and we will then be working out the mechanics of how we use the new system to meet our needs, as set out in our statement of requirements.

Once again we will do this through workshops, with finance staff from all departments working with our supplier.

We’ve done all the groundwork – now let’s find out how to reap the rewards!

Suzanne Sowter
Project Manager

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It's SUPER!

If someone wants to open a bar in the centre of Norwich, they have to contact at least 13 different local agencies at present to get all the necessary permissions – some turn off!



However, help is at hand, in the form of the £500,000 EC funded SUPER Project based at Norfolk County Council. (SUPER stands for Single Unified Portal for Enterprise Requests to Public Administrations!)

In partnership with local authorities and IT companies in Belgium, Italy and Germany, the project is trying to create a single gateway to regulatory, information, advice and support for local businesses, accessible via the internet.

The project will also allow direct access to advice services, and transactions such as licence applications, and arranging appointments, site visits and inspections to take place over the internet.

So what about the person opening the bar? The SUPER database will make life much easier by giving him or her details about the main regulations that will affect the business in the areas of:

- ◆ Trading Standards
- ◆ Licensing
- ◆ Building Control
- ◆ Planning
- ◆ Environmental Health

The database is due to be completed within the next couple of weeks, and should be launched in early summer.

Bryn Davies
SUPER Project Manager 01603 222739

Vehicle use

Are you liable for tax?

Do you, or a member of your team, have the use of a vehicle that is owned or leased by the council?

Is that vehicle taken home at night?

If the answer is YES then the driver is probably, but not always, receiving a benefit on which income tax is due.

The tax team - Bob Batterham and I - are particularly concerned that the correct information is being declared for employees who take their vehicles home.

If this applies to you or a member of your team you will need to inform either Bob, on extension 2840, or me on the number below.

If we find that you are liable to any tax we will calculate the amount and negotiate with the Inland Revenue to minimise any penalties.

Officers who have a leased car through the NCC car lease scheme do not need to contact us as the Inland Revenue already have a record of these vehicles.

Sue Catton

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