

Overview

The local government environment is still dominated by the aftermath of the global economic crash, the need to reduce Government and personal borrowing and the austerity measures aimed at achieving that. With a cross party intention to protect the NHS and education spends local government is a main target for reductions, some necessary and some that hit vital services.

The reductions have forced up efficiency with significant reductions in senior management at Mid Suffolk and at the County. The two authorities take different views on council tax with MSDC raising tax by some 1.7% while putting some £7.5M into a "transformation" reserve. The county has kept tax rises to zero again while putting the government grant for that behaviour into reserves that now total some £121.6 M.

Transformation

I would like to see effort put into further lean systems reviews aimed at providing what people want and need as efficiently as possible but it is unclear what much of the "transformations" are expected to yield. At Mid Suffolk the process of defining where we want to go has occupied most of the last four years, an extraordinary time. The County is getting on with change in Adult and Community Services and in Children and Young People, the two big spenders.

The outsourcing programme, turning the council into a body that collects your money and commissions services has moved ahead. The library change to Industrial Provident Society structure part funded by the County is successful and has won national recognition. The outsourcing of our care homes is delivering new buildings but care standards problems have forced temporary closure of some.

The initiatives involved in the "team about the child", "family focused care" and "make every intervention count" appear to be delivering needed improvements with a more preventative emphasis. Early interventions increase up front spend but improves overall quality of life and reduces overall costs, or so we hope and believe. In child protection, an area that concerns us all the "signs of safety" approach is sound.

In these areas where substantial "savings" have been made it is easy to measure spend, much harder to measure the quantity and quality of service delivered or the level of service needed. We hear a lot about demand management but it is difficult to discover how much is produced by people not getting services they want but don't need and how much is essential service not delivered which has knock on costs.

Education

We have progressed in Gipping Valley with all our schools now rated at least good and one "outstanding". This is a tribute to the hard work of teachers, leadership teams, governors and of course of children and their parents. We must keep it up, improve further and as governors try to ensure that cuts do not leave schools without the resources to provide booster work for pupils who are struggling.

Across the county the picture is less good and schools, particularly those in deprived areas pull overall performance scores down. That leaves pupils without the skills to compete in the modern world, a poor quality of life and industry without the local people it needs. "Raising the Bar" is not praised by school staff and its effect appears limited. I believe the County needs to put in more resource from its reserves over a short period to get the improvement needed. The administration sees it as a problem for teachers and governors to be solved by academies. I tend to see that as a change from one problem set to another.

IT, Finance and HR

The move of IT, Finance and HR services in house has been accomplished with a cost saving but no significant disruption. A success!