

News from County Councillor Dr Marie Strong

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Devolution came to an abrupt end for Norfolk days before the county was to vote. We heard that West Norfolk had said no to the proposed devolution and within days it was over for Norfolk. I would add that not only in retrospect but throughout the process I have felt the proposal for was a parson's egg, partly bad partly good. People I spoke with appreciated the idea of devolved powers but a mayor and cabinet were seen as an additional layer between them and government – and at a cost; concern was also expressed that funding over a 30 year period might not be secure. If another devolution proposal is to follow I would like to think it would be tailored for Norfolk not Whitehall. However within hours of 'Devo 1' being stopped the question of Unitary was back on the scene but a motion at full council asking for an investigation into unitary lost the vote. The reason for rejection was two-fold: first officers and members need to focus over the coming months on the February budget – one of the most important for a number of years; secondly there are county council elections in May 2017 and any ideas and plans made before then could be rejected by the new administration.

Broadband speed issues or faults: Whilst more and more parishes are being fibre enabled whether or not you have this provision problems can still arise. So in the event of any problems relating to broadband faults or speed issues customers in the first instance should contact their internet service provider (ISP) (e.g BT, Sky, Virgin Media). Internet service providers will be able to identify if the issue is something they will be able to fix or if it is an issue with the infrastructure they will escalate it to Openreach. Openreach can only work with internet service providers, not directly with members of the public, in order to ensure that all ISPs are treated equally. Many internet service providers have guidance available on their websites which can alert customers if there is an existing network problem in their area and this often includes information on how long it will take to be resolved. Their websites also provide guidance for users to help identify if there is anything they can do to resolve the issue (e.g changing a wifi channel). If internet advice is unavailable most providers will offer a similar service over the telephone. It is very important for everyone to report faults to their internet service provider so the provider can understand the extent of the issue and escalate to Openreach if necessary. People should not assume that if they see an Openreach vehicle in the area that their fault is being fixed – they should always check with their service provider.

Mobile 'Phone Coverage: Because Wells division is particularly rural, covering some 35 parishes and hamlets, and because I travel all around all these places I am acutely aware of the problems with mobile 'phone coverage. As Chair of the Broadband, Mobile Phone and Digital Working Group I, along with fellow councillors, am also aware that the problem even exists in some of our towns. I hope the following update is useful: I am in regular contact with Mobile UK, which represents mobile operators, putting across our concerns and seeking information as to developments. Additionally the group has met twice with representatives from the four main mobile network operators (EE, O2, Three and Vodafone). We already knew that mobile operators have an agreement with government to achieve 90% geographic voice coverage across the country by the end of 2017.

We have now been assured that operators are on track to meet this commitment which should also result in an increase in 4G data coverage. In turn the government is reviewing the Electronic Communications code to help operators deploy new infrastructure – particularly important in rural areas. (And please remember that at present infrastructure means masts.)

The government will review the coverage situation once the 90% coverage target has been achieved and the new Emergency Services Network (ESN) has been deployed. (The ESN is the new communications system which will be used by the Police, Fire & Rescue, the Ambulance Service and other public safety users. Where public money is used to subsidise ESN expansion in rural areas the infrastructure will be made available to all mobile operators.) Network operators are working together to share sites and improve infrastructure. However they are still commercially independent so the operators will not publically share future coverage plans.

However, whilst not a universal solution, you can use a coverage checker to determine the best network for the places where you will be mainly using your mobile phone. Most mobile phone operators have a coverage checker available on their own website but there is also a coverage checker available on the OFCOM website. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/advice/mobile-coverage-checker>

And whilst, as you will have read, the situation is improving and will continue to do so, concern remains. Therefore early in 2017 we will be writing to the Minister responsible for Culture, Media and Sport requesting intervention regarding Norfolk's access to mobile 'phone networks.

Helping Vulnerable People Stay Warm this Winter: I know many readers will be keeping an eye on those who need help to get through the winter safely and that includes keeping warm. Encourage people to apply to the Surviving Winter fund – to get details go to www.norfolkfoundation.com. If you know someone who struggles to prepare hot meals go to www.Norfolk.gov.uk/mealsonwheels. If you think someone is at risk please contact Norfolk County Council on 0344 800 8020. In an emergency ring 999.

Dance Workshops at Wells Community Hospital: We members of Wells Dementia Friendly Committee are delighted to have persuaded Creative Arts East to bring the Green Candle Dance Company to Wells Community Hospital (Mill Road). The programme is called 'Improving Wellbeing through the Arts'. It will provide the opportunity for older people to make new friends, enjoy a 'cuppa and cake' in a fun and dementia friendly environment. Sessions are free but space is limited – to book a place call Lea on 01953 713390 or email lea@creativeartseast.co.uk. This is not overly energetic so no excuses! (I just cannot resist saying: Be there or be Square!