



THE BACKNUMBER

Norfolk UNISON Retired Members' Newsletter

201st edition

Number 201 – April 2023

EDITOR'S NOTES

Welcome to the spring edition of Backnumber and we hope all of our members are well. We know, of course, that not everyone will be well and, as if to illustrate the point, we report on the death of our long time Committee member and all round good egg, David Beard, in this edition. A proper obituary will appear in the next Backnumber.



Since the last publication, much has happened in our Trade Union community both locally and nationally and also in the county and the country. At the time of writing it looks like disputes in the NHS and on the railways have been settled although the consultations on nurse and ambulance staff settlements are not yet complete. Locally there have been a number of disputes about waste collection and the branch has been active in securing some spectacular wins for members involved. Were it not for the resolve of those members of course, the disputes would not have been successful.

Locally, there is talk of the creation of a "Norfolk Mayor" (in fact a directly elected Council Leader) as part of the Government's "Levelling Up Agenda". It comes with promises of £20 million per year for 30 years to be used in prescribed circumstances. As Jonathan Dunning writes in these pages, this hardly compensates for the loss of £500 million in Revenue Support over the last 13 years as Local Government has been strangled by swingeing cuts over that time. The proposal is discussed in this edition and it's fair to say that we are not impressed. Neither, it would appear, are several other Tory leaders of District Councils.

One issue is certainly that of scrutiny. Jonathan makes the point that NCC cuts proposals are "vague" and that consultations rarely seem to sway any thinking. If more power is to be placed in the hands of just one person, it seems unlikely that scrutiny will be improved. This is proving to be a difficult subject generally with a number of District Councils concentrating decision making to a small cabal with little or no chance for opposition councillors to ask questions or put forward alternative proposals. No doubt taking their lead from the County Council and the Government itself.

Nationally, of course, the saga of Mr Johnson continues to run and run. Many liken him to Donald Trump in his refusal to accept decisions that do not go his way. Johnson himself likes to compare himself with Winston Churchill but a more apposite comparison would be with Henry VIII. An uncontrolled libido, financial incontinence, a controller of power and influence and a determination to rip us away from our close European neighbours, although, in this, the motivations may have been different.

Finally, local elections are almost upon us and, as ever, we urge you to vote for those most likely to protect local services. We also remind you that voter ID will be in place and to make sure you have it when you present yourself at the polling booth.

We hope you enjoy Easter and the spring and we look forward to being with you again in the summer. As ever, comments, letters etc to porterjames172@gmail.com



AGM REPORT

The Retired Members Section AGM took place on 15 February at the Sports and Social Club at County Hall. There were about 25 members in attendance which, given that this was the first in person meeting since 2020, was a relatively good turnout. (Photos front page).

Officers elected were James Porter (Chair), Jackie Mitchell (Vice Chair), Peter Cotterill (Secretary and Treasurer) and Biddy Rawlence (Assistant Secretary). Committee Members re elected were David Button, David Beard, Alan Cabbage, Jimmy Fisk, Verity Gibson, Paul Grant (S Norfolk) and Clare Marshall. Sadly, as you will see in this edition, David Beard died on 19 March. We have 2 women's vacancies which we are very anxious to fill and if you are interested, please contact James Porter at porter-james172@gmail.com.

The meeting was addressed by Jonathan Dunning who outlined the major issues facing the branch at the moment and also detailing some of the successes achieved in representing refuse workers across the county and beyond. We carry a piece by Jonathan in this edition on the cuts which we can expect in 2023/4.

We were also addressed by Stuart Adams from Trading Standards and his trainee, Jess, who both talked about the various scams which we may face either on the internet or on the phone. We have asked Stuart to write a piece for Backnumber on this important subject, which we will feature in the next edition.

As is traditional, lunch was provided, this time by "The Feed", Prince of Wales Road, Norwich. Thanks to Biddy Rawlence for the organisation on this and there was a quiz about former Prime Ministers. This was won by Barry Davies.

Probably the best part of the meeting was a presentation of a gift token and flowers to Tricia Arnup as she gave up the post of Treasurer, which she had held for many years. Tricia was the South Norfolk representative on the committee and her contributions are greatly appreciated.



LEGAL VICTORY FOR WOMEN AGAINST STATE PENSION INEQUALITY (WASPI)

Just as we were about to put this edition to bed, so news came of a legal victory for WASPI women fighting the injustice of being given insufficient notice of changes to the pension age, which led to many women, having decided to retire at 60, suddenly discovering that the pension age was to be raised to 65. It is estimated that in some cases individual losses have been up to £50,000.



The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) initially decided that the lack of notice had not led to financial hardship. This has now been found to be flawed and the PHSO is to revisit this decision with a view to making different decisions on the issue of financial loss.

The legal case was crowdfunded, with the Branch making a contribution of £100 to the cause. The proposal came from the Retired Members Committee Vice Chair, Jackie Mitchell. The legal case also had the unanimous support of Norfolk County Council.

The campaign, which was founded in 2015, goes on but this marks a major turning point in the call for justice for all of these women.

See <https://www.waspi.co.uk/>

DAVID BEARD

It is with great sadness that we have to report the death of David Beard. David has been a member of the Committee for several years and was Senior Steward in Trading Standards before he retired. He will be known to many of you and he was a very popular character at work, in the Trade Union and in the Sports and Social Club. He will be very sadly missed. He died on 19 March so we have not had time to compile a proper obituary but this will appear in our next edition.

SURLINGHAM

Surlingham is a small village on the south side of the river Yare about 7 miles east of Norwich. It lies on Wherryman's Way, a 37 mile, long distance footpath between Norwich and Gt Yarmouth. The path includes several circular short walks, one of which takes you through the many interesting facets of this village.



The river is central to the history of Surlingham. Norfolk people will know that there are no bridges over the Yare between Norwich and Yarmouth, the only public crossings being at Reedham chain ferry and until 1939 the ferry at Surlingham. The ferry came to an untimely end in 1939 when it collided with a coaster and has never been replaced.

There are a series of waterways making Surlingham notable. Bargate is a graveyard for more than a dozen sunken wherries while Surlingham Broad was the venue for Dr Joyce Lambert to research the notion that the Broads were created by human digging. At least one source tells us she was assisted in her work in the 1950s by boys from the City of Norwich School.

Wheatfen Broad was home to Ted Ellis, the well-known Norfolk naturalist, writer and broadcaster, who lived at Wheatfen until his death in 1986. For much of his life, Ted Ellis was Keeper of Natural History at Norwich Castle Museum. His name lives on in the Ted Ellis Trust which runs the Wheatfen Nature Reserve.



Another famous name is Surlingham born Susannah Holmes.

In 1783, still a she was convicted of theft from her employer and sentenced to death. Her sentence was later commuted to transportation to the colonies. In Norwich prison she met another prisoner, Henry Kable, also awaiting a date with the hangman. The two became lovers and had a son during the three years awaiting deportation. Susannah and her child were sent to Plymouth to await embarkation, but mother and child were separated there.

John Simpson, a warder from Norwich prison, who had escorted the prisoner and her child, was so moved by the distress of the separation he took the child to London and pleaded successfully with Lord Sydney, the Home Secretary, to intervene with the result that Susannah, Henry and the baby were reunited and set sail for Australia together on board HMS Friendship.



Henry went on to become Chief Constable of New South Wales and very wealthy. Susannah gave birth to another ten young Australians and was once voted as one of the 100 most influential people in Australian history.

A strange part of Surlingham's history was surrounding farmland called into use during World War II as a decoy airfield to persuade the Luftwaffe to drop their bombs on Surlingham instead of Norwich or the Stoke Holy Cross radar aerials. In 1942 it attracted at least ten direct hits.

TED ELLIS

"He was totally focussed on his love of natural history," said son, John Ellis.

CUTS

As was widely reported Norfolk County Council had to make revenue budget savings of £55m in 2023/24 with more cuts to come. As has been the case for many years the proposals that went to full Council for agreement were too vague to allow for meaningful public debate. How you can cut £55m without impacting the services the public rely on is in my view beyond belief; but if you read the proposals you'd think not much would change. Okay the Council are going to reduce from 2 to 1 the number of times they apply weed killer to the roadside verges they are responsible for but we can live with that. In fact why not cut out the fertilisers altogether? That will save a few extra thousand but hang on what is happening in Adult and Children's Services.....

The lack of detail made it difficult for the broad based campaign group, which UNISON were pleased to lead with Norfolk Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), to latch onto to stir up wider public support. However this group will continue to operate and will be assessing the impact of the cuts as the picture inevitably becomes clearer.

A theme in the budget for me was money management, reserves are being used to underpin a significant element of the budget which is just pushing the can down the road. Another big element of savings were the £17m coming from the Strategic Review with again no detail provided in the papers going to Council. NCC have seen a reduction of £500m in the Revenue Support Grant over the last 15 years; this is the money we receive from Central Government. The Director of Finance would argue that this has been replaced by alternative funding but we believe often this is ring fenced for specific projects we would not otherwise prioritise and is often time limited so not exactly like for like. It is clear the Tory & Liberal Democrats Governments policy of Austerity has been continued by subsequent Tory Governments and to the lasting damage of local services.

In the lead up to the setting of the budget UNISON were told the Strategic Review savings would come under two broad headings, either smarter and more efficient ways of working that better utilised technology or from job cuts where there was cross over of responsibility and therefore duplication. We were assured service delivery would not be impacted. This begs the question that if £17m is being spent unnecessarily why on earth has this been allowed to happen? Some of the savings may come from buying or utilising new technology differently. In UNISON's view this would be a small part of it. Therefore UNISON concluded that NCC were accepting that for a number of years they had been operating inefficiently and wasting money that could have been spent elsewhere or that the pledge to make no cuts that would impact service delivery was not feasible. Time will tell but either way it clearly is not a happy conclusion for our members to have to reach.



So locally it may be about damage limitation and trying to hold NCC to account for the decisions they make. However an important part of our work is combining with partner organisations in making the public aware of what is happening to THEIR public services. Part of this is reminding people when elections come around. If you want decent public services, then vote for the parties who seem most committed to not only the principle of local, democratically accountable services but also those that are prepared to fund them. Don't be fooled by a Mayor for Norfolk with more delegated power as being a demonstrate of such intent; no extra money has been promised and there is no reason to believe the annual cycle of swinging cuts will not continue.

Jonathan Dunning
Branch Secretary

PROPOSAL FOR A “NORFOLK MAYOR”

It was back in early December that the Government announced a deal with the County Council for the creation of a directly elected leader for Norfolk. Along with this comes £20 million of added funding per year for the next 30 years. Whilst this has been greeted with acclaim by Andrew Proctor, Leader of the County Council, quite the reverse is the case with many District Councils, the protests being led by John Fuller who leads South Norfolk. He is joined by Broadland, Breckland and N Norfolk who oppose the deal as, they say, it doesn't do enough for Norfolk. You may well have missed that there has been a public consultation on this which ended on 20 March.

On the face of it, it looks good that we will receive an added £20 million pa in funding for 30 years. Except when we recall that there have been endless cuts to County Council budgets over the years of austerity and that the Council currently faces the prospect of making a further £60 million in cuts in this year alone.

This all comes about as part of the government's "Levelling Up" agenda and its plans for devolution. The proposal clearly has caused division in Tory ranks, although N Norfolk District Council is currently run by the Lib Dems. Labour run Norwich does not appear to object to the proposal. Which brings us neatly to the question "What would Labour do?"

So that you don't have to, Biddy Rawlence has been looking at The Brown Report, authored by the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and seen as Labour's blueprint for devolution. This is written in a bid to stave off moves for independence in Scotland and Wales and the prospect of a border poll in Ireland which, if it was agreed by the electorate, would bring about a united Ireland and therefore be the end of the United Kingdom.

The report puts a strong emphasis on the role of mayors – crucial, it argues, to developing new economic partnerships and dynamic, new pro-growth strategies. Mayors, according to the report, can bring together business experts, research evidence and local communities in clusters of innovation, which will 'seed growth and create prosperity in every council across Britain'.

Does the model proposed fit with the local situation here in Norfolk? The Brown report is very metro - focussed, almost totally ignoring rural communities. Economic clusters would be based around cities and towns. Would a Mayor of Norfolk really lead to a dynamic, locally driven economy? Would any of our current councillors fit the bill ?

And surely any new constitutional arrangement should look at the current voting system for the Westminster government? Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland use proportional representation systems in their own devolved parliaments. England, the Westminster government, uses the first-past-the-post system. A change to a PR system, as anyone who has lived in Scotland or Wales (and a lesser extent in NI) will acknowledge, allows for a greater spread of representation in itself and could address some of those issues of economic neglect the Brown Report seeks to address.

Of course, the current government has decreed that only first past the post (FPP) will do and has ensured that mayoral elections in future would be decided on FPP rather than PR.

Unison is now committed to PR so it might just be that if the election were to be run on that basis there would be a better chance that the directly elected leader might better represent the electorate. And what larks if the elected leader did not come from the majority party on the County Council.

Our view is that the proposal does not replace the money we've lost, is quite limited in its scope whilst also running the danger of concentrating too much power in one pair of hands and is unlikely to significantly improve the lives of Norfolk residents. There may be a case for greater devolution but this proposal does not provide the answer.

Biddy Rawlence and James Porter

VOTER ID

You will all know that District Council Elections are to be held on Thursday 4 May. *Backnumber* always encourages members to vote in these elections as the outcome of them will determine the level of service which each District Council is willing to give.

This year there is an added hurdle that you will have to jump in order to be able to vote. You will have to provide photographic ID when entering the polling station. This does not affect your ability to vote by post.

Acceptable ID for older people includes your bus pass, driving licence, passport photo or Blue Badge if you have one. Travel passes for younger people are not acceptable (we can only guess at why this may be). If you have none of the above you can apply for a Voter Authority Certificate either on line or by post to your Local Authority or by making a personal visit. The deadline date for this is 25 April so we hope this gets to you before then. There is a helpline 0800 328 0280 if you need it. Whilst it is *Backnumber's* view that this legislation is entirely unnecessary, it is nevertheless there and needs to be complied with.

Activities

On **Mondays** from 9.30 am at NCC Sports & Social Club at County Hall we continue to offer **table tennis** and a mid-morning natter over a cuppa. Other activities [short mat bowls, snooker, pool, and darts] are available if there is sufficient interest.

Every month on the **third Thursday** of each month at 2pm there is a friendly afternoon of **whist**, also at the Sports & Social club.

We have a vacancy on the Committee for someone to represent us on the Sports and Social Committee. If you are interested, please contact the editor.

These activities are free of charge to our members and their guests. We should love to welcome more people to these activities so why not give it a try and join in?

NORFOLK AND NORWICH FESTIVAL 2023

The annual festival of the arts will be taking place from 12-28 May and will bring a large variety of events (some of which will be free) to the County. Although the bulk of the action will be in Norwich, events are also taking place in venues such as Sedgeford Village Hall, Hindolveston Village Hall, Sheringham Little Theatre, Diss Corn Hall and the Groundwork Gallery in King's Lynn.

It would be impossible in the space we have to preview all of the events but there is a wide variety to choose from. The Hallé Orchestra at The Halls on 27 May and the BBC Singers (get there before they are axed) at the Catholic Cathedral on 26 May may be among the highlights along with the Britten Sinfonia (East Anglia's only national orchestra orchestra faced with extinction) at The Halls on 21 May. There are various writing workshops which also celebrate Norwich as a Unesco City of Literature, a City Art Trail and numerous events in the Spiegeltent in Chapel-field Gardens which include Rag Roof Tea Dances and the rather splendid Vent du Nord from Quebec.

The Festival Office is now open for purchase of tickets and you can get the programme free in various places including the Forum. Telephone 01603 531800. We hope you will be able to take in some of the events and support the work of the festival. The editor will welcome any reviews you might like to write!

In the next edition, Jackie Mitchell commemorates the 70th anniversary of the 1953 Floods whilst Stewart Adams from Trading Standards will write on Scams.

WHERE TO FIND US

If you wish to make any comments or raise issues about ***Backnumber***, please e-mail the Editor

Jim Porter at porterjames172@gmail.com

It seems that the Branch Office will not be re-opening so we will try to find out what to do about letters through the post.

The retired members e-mail address at County Hall is

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