

The last few weeks have been extremely busy with some unusual events taking place, so I've decided to include slightly different aspects of council life in this report: -

1. The most unexpected event was what has come to be called the 'Saxilby Gas Crisis', when gas supplies to the whole of Saxilby were cut off for up to five days. This resulted in a massive operation run by Cadent, the gas distributor responsible. They had to shut off every single house individually, then re-gas the system before going to every house a second time to switch supplies back on. The problem was caused when a sudden change in gas usage caused significant fluctuations, which caused safety systems kick in and cut the village off. My role in this was to link with the county's emergency planners and to co-ordinate information to affected people. This took a significant amount of time and the operation was speeded up by at least two days because Cadent and residents worked so well together. In the process, Cadent found a family whose members had been ill for some time with unexplained 'viruses', which turned out to be a serious gas leak into their house. The relevance of this to Nettleham is that, on the first day of the crisis, it took me several hours to locate and activate LCC's emergency response. It was bank holiday weekend and, although people had been placed on call, the numbers had not been circulated and I had to make a series of calls to track down the right people. Even a very senior officer took two hours to get back to me with the emergency contact number and I've asked for this to be improved dramatically before any further events occur. Councillors are often not part of the emergency response preparations and that needs to change.
2. Highways officers are now round and about doing high-quality pothole repairs and are replacing the temporary 'make-safe' repairs, which are the cause of so many complaints. The new repairs are often square or diamond-shaped and are well-crafted to fit with the surrounding road surface. At the moment the online reporting system is being re-vamped, so any pothole reporting needs to be done by phone on 01522 782070, making sure that anyone who reports is given a number so that they can track repairs. Now is the time to make reports, because the weather window for good repairs is relatively short.
3. The new Chief Executive, Keith Ireland, will take up his post at the beginning of July. He comes with a reputation for 'turning things around'. The feeling is that he will not let the grass grow under his feet and will expect people to be sharply professional in the delivery of outcomes. I'm looking forward to my first meeting with him about the council's IT situation!
4. Last month a member of the Conservative group at the LCC decided to cross the floor to become an Independent councillor. I was surprised by the amount of work that created for officers and myself, who had to work together to re-configure every single council committee to cater for the new political balance. I would estimate that took three of us getting on for four days of work.
5. The next two new Scrutiny Panels are being set up and will look at the transition between Children's and Adults' services, plus the use of roundabouts in the county. I will be on one of these but don't yet know which.
6. I recently attended a meeting of the 'Overview and Scrutiny Management Board', of which I am a member. At this meeting we discussed the outsourcing of payroll services to Herefordshire Council. Councillors gave officers what was really a very extensive grilling, seeking assurance that a council the size of Herefordshire could deal with the needs of a much larger council, such as LCC. Assurances were given, but they were also given before the Serco contract was approved, so further investigations have been sought.

7. During the last month or so I've found an increased amount of my time being spent on councillors who have serious health issues. My role as Chief Whip includes a general brief to watch out for people's needs and there are at least five councillors currently who are quite ill and who require other councillors to get involved with their work. This is essential in order to see that representation isn't lost. I am also currently dealing with a situation where a councillor stood for election on the agreement with his employers that he could take unpaid leave for his elected duties, but now the employer has scrapped that agreement without warning. I'm currently working through this with lawyers, because this could make it very difficult or even impossible for any young person to become a councillor.