

Report from your County Councillor, Cllr Steffan Aquarone

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Directly Elected Leader (DEL)

After some deliberation, I voted in favour of the 'devolution deal' that was proposed to Full Council by the Conservative administration just before Christmas. The core features are: a directly elected leader of the County Council, around £20m a year in additional investment, delegated decision making on Adult Education spending, and fast track access to government funding schemes.

On the one hand, I welcome moves to transfer power down from central government into our communities. On the other hand, a cynical reading of the latest enthusiasm for this version of devolution is that it provides government with one point of contact for the purposes of enacting government legislation.

There could be some interesting side effects too, in the event that the directly elected leader ends up being a from a political party that is different to the majority of elected members - but in the end I felt the deal was better than none, in particular given that failing to pass it would put Norfolk even further back in the queue for future funding opportunities.

Norwich Western Link (NWL)

After years of work and nearly £50m already spent, it now looks like the Norwich Western Link has hit a major roadblock due to the Environment Agency refusing to grant it a license.

There is clearly a serious congestion issue in the West of Norwich that needs addressing. But as far back in 2017 I was unconvinced by the speed at which alternative schemes were dismissed in favour of a project which has now ballooned in cost to over £250m, and is set to cause untold damage to a major conservation area and Site of Special Scientific Interest.

I have in fact resigned my only political job (leader of the Liberal Democrat group) over this issue in 2021 because I couldn't support the road and I remain unconvinced that adding this road offers good value for money as a way of enabling economic growth.

My hope is that changes can be made, and a "plan B" developed that meets the need to reduce congestion, before any more money is lost on the project.

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