

Council secures government money for Arborfield by pass

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen, the Executive member for transport and highways said " We are delighted that the government has given us £24 m of funding to help reduce congestion in Arborfield and Arborfield Cross by funding the infrastructure we so badly need"

Construction is starting this summer with an estimated completion date for the by pass next summer. The village needs relief from too much traffic through it at the moment, and growing traffic volumes require extra roadspace to cut congestion and delays.

Commemoration of Brexit?

I asked the Business Secretary what plans there are to issue commemorative coins and stamps to mark the UK departure from the EU. I have at last received this answer:

"Matters relating to postage stamps, including commemorative stamps, are the responsibility of Royal Mail. The commemorative 50p to mark the UK leaving the European Union will be made available following the UK's departure"

This is a curious reply as the Business Department is responsible for postal policy but not responsible for the Royal Mint.

What wasteful public expenditures would you like to see reduced?

One of the strange features of the much discussed age of austerity has been the barrage of demands for lower public spending that have gone unheeded by Ministers claiming they want to reduce public spending.

Foremost has been the £10 to £15 bn a year sent to the EU. A majority of the public voted to end this in 2016, only to find three years later some Ministers and MPs are insisting on still giving it away, with many wanting to lock us into more of the same for years to come.

Then there is the case of the world's dearest new railway, HS2. Many have made proposals for much cheaper and quicker ways of increasing north south train capacity. Many of us want more spent on northern commuter rail improvements into the main cities as a priority. This could be done much more quickly than HS2 and at a fraction of the total cost of the large project. Latest estimates of a total cost in excess of £70bn imply more than £5bn a year could be saved by cancellation, prior to allocating decent capital sums to faster introduction of digital signals and by pass sections of track on existing main lines to boost capacity, and similar improvements on commuter routes into the main northern cities.

There is the pledge to spend 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid. This Parliament is unlikely to want to cut that, but we should spend more wisely within that budget. The set up costs for the first year of a refugee or an economic migrant from a poor country are allowable expenses to qualify. Given the continuing large numbers entering the UK, we should allocate substantial sums to the housing budget from the overseas aid budget to cover more of the costs of provision of additional homes for new arrivals. There should also be larger transfers to the education budget to allow for the extra school places needed and the additional language skills to teach new pupils who have little or no English on arrival. This would increase those budgets whilst reducing total spending.

The new government should implement the agreed policy that any visitor to the UK needing non emergency treatment should have to pay the NHS. Visitors should be advised to come with health insurance or the cash. Migrant workers coming to the UK should not qualify for all the benefits for a specified period, as Mr Cameron wished to do but was unable to get EU agreement.

Environmental matters

At my surgery on Friday I had an interesting conversation with people concerned about a range of environmental matters.

We discussed the government's targets for CO2 emissions, the state of the fossil fuel industry, the contribution of meat and agriculture to emissions, taxation of domestic heating fuel and aviation, family size, population growth and female education in low income countries, food miles and other important matters.

We found considerable common ground over energy conservation, helping countries out of poverty, more local produce, more holidays in the UK, better balanced diets and the role technology can play in improving our quality of life and protecting the environment. As readers of the blog will know I am keen to promote more tree planting, to have more home produced food, to make it cheaper and easier to insulate homes, improve heating and control systems and reduce energy usage through greater energy efficiency.

I did not feel able to support ideas to make domestic fuel dearer by higher taxes given the impact this would have on fuel poverty nor to unilaterally make UK air flights dearer when we cannot do the same to competitors.

Power outages

I am glad there will be an urgent review of what went wrong with the power system.

It appears from the records that there was a 740 MW drop in gas generated power supply (Little Barford) and a 1000 MW fall in wind supply (Hornsea) in quick succession. This was followed five minutes later by a 1000 MW increase in pumped storage supply, presumably the quickest acting power that could be brought on. This all took place against the background of relatively low summer demand for electric power which meant there was plenty of potential capacity available. It is also interesting that though we are using well below domestic capacity levels of electricity we are tending to import power from France, Belgium and the Netherlands anyway.

Questions for the review should include

1. Now the system is running on high percentages of renewables when the weather permits, does it have enough quick acting stand by plant for when the wind drops or sun goes in? If not can we rapidly remedy this defect?
2. Why do we continue to import when we are well below capacity? What account is taken of the different fuel mixes and subsidy patterns for continental power which includes fossil fuel power in its mix?
3. Given the use of pump storage, how long did the outages last and why did they last as long as they did?
4. Why did the wind power fail, given the current size and the planned large expansion of this new plant?

The government also needs to ask the railway industry why it was unable to quickly adjust services and get trains running as soon as the power was restored.