

ANDREW SMITH

This could be the most important card I send

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SHARON GRIFFITHS

Winter catches too many people unawares – again

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BRITAIN'S REGIONAL NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR



PROTEST: More than 1,000 people marched through Norwich on Saturday in protest at the county council and government cuts to public services.

'IS THIS JUST ONE BIG CON?'

BY SHAUN LOWTHORPE
Public affairs correspondent

Norfolk County Council's much-vaunted Big Conversation has been branded a "Big Con" by disabled rights campaigners fearful at the impact the proposals will have.

County Hall is looking across the board at cuts in services as it seeks to bridge a £155m funding black hole in the wake of cuts in council funding, which could see council-run support cut for thousands of people and the loss of around 3,000 jobs.

The authority is currently carrying out a wide-ranging "Big Conversation" with residents, asking them what they would like services to look like in the future, alongside a series of statutory consultations, including cuts to services for adults and young people, and public transport.

But Mark Harrison, chief executive of the Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People (NCODP), said the "Big Conversation" consultation was "tokenistic" and people were not being given enough

Campaigners furious at council consultation

time to make a proper response.

Campaigners believe that they have not been given enough meaningful information about the plans, which include proposals to shut down council-run sensory support services for the deaf and the blind.

Members of the NCODP were among those out in force at an anti-cuts protest in Norwich on Saturday as more than 1,000 people marched through the city in protest at the county council and government cuts to public services.

Organisers said the march, which brought together public sector workers worried about jobs losses and users of services, was the biggest protest the city had seen since anti-poll tax protests in the late 1980s.

And in a further sign of how protest against the council cuts is gathering, hundreds of students will today march from City College Norwich to County Hall in protest at plans to cut transport subsidies for college students.

Mr Harrison said that with more than 180,000 disabled people in Norfolk, the county council's cuts would be too severe and beyond central government requirements.

He added that combined with national cuts to benefits and health care, the measures would have a dramatic and long lasting effect on a large part of Norfolk's population.

"The Big Conversation is a big con," Mr Harrison said. "It is not a conversation between equal parties as the county council is deliberately

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More seats for Norwich to London trains

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Lifeboat heroes given award for brave rescue

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Father and son reunited in Afghanistan

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Four-day nativity series begins



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A winter warmer for the freezer



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PULL-OUT

Why Chris Martin is enjoying the high life for City



PINK UN



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Leftovers today, ready meal tomorrow

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Pictures: ANTONY KELLY



Council process 'isn't a fatuous exercise'

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withholding the information Norfolk citizens need to make an informed contribution.

"We are challenging the 'Big Conversation' on the amount and accessibility of the information available, because we do not believe there is enough information or details for people to make an informed contribution. The consultation needs to begin when sufficient information is available and that all the information is accessible in formats that the disabled citizens of Norfolk can access."

And he said the NCOCP was pressing the council for a change in the Big Conversation timetable because it did not believe that the current one meets statutory requirements.

Norfolk County Council leader Derrick Murphy urged the NCOCP to meet with the authority to talk through its concerns and he insisted the council was listening to concerns and suggestions being put forward.

"The Big Conversation ends on January 10 and I think people will be genuinely surprised to see what we have taken on board," Mr Murphy said. "There are a lot of people working incredibly hard behind the scenes."

"People will see that this isn't a fatuous exercise."

And he said that the authority had been in constructive talks with college principals, which could see some innovative solutions to the transport subsidy problem, when a decision is made in January.

"We both realise it's a major issue particularly for a rural county where the number of sixth forms is limited in the eastern part of the county," Mr Murphy added. "The reality is there have been some very good suggestions which we are responding to. If we don't carry the hearts and minds of



OUT ON THE STREETS: Protesters demonstrate on the streets of Norwich on Saturday.

Norfolk people with us, it's going to be a problem for everyone."

The Norfolk Coalition Against the Cuts march brought together a range of people affected by the cuts from council staff at risk of redundancy to people receiving services such as social care worried about the impact of losing services.

Protesters also questioned why no Norfolk MP was willing to join the march.

Philip Barrett, 42, from Attleborough, who is deaf and relies on support from the county council's sensory services team, said he was very worried about the proposals.

"We're really worried about what this will mean," Mr Barrett said. "I use the deaf centre in Norwich to meet people and have a cup of tea, and if they cut the funding there is going to be no support and equipment available. How are we going to be helped going out, and with things

like paying our bills, and doctor's appointments?"

Vicky Royall, who is a Communities Support Worker, for Norfolk Deaf Connexions, said: "If funding is cut, then interpreters' jobs will go. They hope people are going to do it for nothing or people pay for it out of their personal budgets, but the problem is that money is already being used and it won't be increased."

Jo Rust, from the Norfolk Coalition Against the Cuts, said Saturday's march had demonstrated that it was many ordinary people who would be hit by the cuts.

"It's been brilliant," she said. "It's not just about the trade unions; we have had hundreds of service users turn out prepared to speak out about how these cuts are going to devastate their lives."

"This is going to grow into something bigger."

EAST ANGLIA

Extra seats for London trains

By SHAUN LOWTHORPE

Passengers heading to London will soon be able to board faster trains with more available seats, with the introduction of a new timetable next week.

Rail firm National Express East Anglia has unveiled a raft of changes, which include a faster rush-hour 1hr 44min service from Norwich to the capital at 7.40am, stopping only at Diss and Ipswich, and more than 4,000 extra seats on peak-time trains to and from Liverpool Street.

The firm is also investing £1m in improvements to train cleaning and customer information following feedback from passengers, while next year will also see the introduction of wi-fi facilities on intercity services.

The timetable includes additional seats and increased capacity on many services as part of a service improvement plan agreed in conjunction with the Department for Transport.

In Norfolk, the key improvements include longer peak Intercity trains between Norwich, Diss and London, with nine trains each carrying an extra coach and some faster off-peak services between Norwich, Diss and London, with a journey time of 1hr 47 mins.

More Norwich Intercity services will stop at Stratford and most Norwich to Cambridge services will



CAPITAL CHANGES: More spaces are to be made available on London services in the new National Express East Anglia timetable.

be modern three-carriage trains and extra Sunday services will operate at 10.03pm from Norwich and 8.48am from Cambridge.

There will also be two extra morning and evening peak services between Great Yarmouth and Norwich.

A new 7.30pm Norwich to London service means that trains will leave the city every 30 minutes until 10pm and there is also a new 9pm service

from London to Norwich, while a 5am service to London, stopping only at Diss, will arrive in the capital before 7am.

Andrew Chivers, managing director of National Express East Anglia said: "The December timetable provides a real step-change for our customers, with longer trains and over 4,000 extra seats at peak times into London Liverpool Street.

"The investment of £185m in our service improvement plan to provide capacity enhancement on the East Anglia network, agreed with the Department for Transport, is providing 188 new and additional vehicles with the first 68 carriages on our mainline route from this December and 120 new carriages on our Stansted Express and West Anglia route in 2011.

"Overall, by the end of 2011, National Express East Anglia will be providing 11,000 more seats for our customers using services into London Liverpool Street – an increase of 18pc on the current seating capacity levels."

The firm was told by the previous government that its franchise deal would not be extended beyond March 2011, but has since been given a six-month extension by the coalition.

It has also been putting pressure on Railtrack to improve the way it carries out engineering work after a spate of delays caused chaos for commuters.

And speaking at a Shaping Norfolk's Future conference last week, Mr Chivers said progress was being made in realising a vision of an upgraded train service.

Last year, Mr Chivers set out a vision of new trains, faster journey times and upgraded infrastructure for the route and now he has explained how initial progress towards those

goals had been made through significant improvements in this December's timetable, and with the development of a strategy to build a business case and stakeholder support for major upgrades to the route.

Specific work to develop a business case and stakeholder support for a Great Eastern Mainline (GEML) route upgrade has seen coordinated pressure from MPs and county councils to help raise the issue with ministers, while a East of England Development Agency study has shown that a route upgrade would generate £3.7bn worth of economic benefits for the region.

The creation of a GEML stakeholder group, including local authorities along the route, is helping to give added momentum to the plans and aspirations for a route upgrade are now recognised in the franchise specification process for the Greater Anglia franchise and it is expected that future Network Rail plans will now place an increased priority on enhancing the route.

Network Rail is also looking at increasing the stretches of track where the line speed is 100mph.

Business leaders in Norfolk have also been involved in the Norwich in 90 campaign, calling for a 90-minute journey between the city and London.

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