

Ticking Time Bombs

I'll start by reading something that the County Council Leader wrote to all managers about this year's budget, as I think it's pertinent to the topic.

Now is the time for us to be bold, ambitious and to work together to build a strong future. We are at a time of enormous pressure on public services and are facing significant challenges, but we are ready to tackle these head on. That's our context today – tough times but partnership is a key step in our journey.

The topic I've been given sounds threatening. What do we think the bombs are and how are we going to defuse them?

An area I want to focus on, partly because it is so significant for public services, is changing age demographics.

In 2030 our communities will look different – not only will our population be larger as Cambridgeshire continues to grow, but trends indicate that the biggest increases by far come before and after the “working age” period – and the date when people retire is changing. And within that working time, when people are contributing to the public purse, we see little change or even relative decline in numbers.

And, of course, population change does not follow a neat regular graph, changing equally across the county. We'll see some areas where the population is ageing and fewer children are born and others where the reverse is true.

Life expectancy in Cambridgeshire is expected to increase by about 4 years between 2010 and 2031 (from 79 for men to 83 and for women from 83 to 87. (The ONS forecasts that – nationally – 35% of babies born this year will live to be 100.) This gender imbalance is not new. Nationally, there were 500 women and 92 men aged 100 + in 1961; in 2010 those figures were over 10,000 and about 2,000.

Behind those figures we can assume that many of those women find themselves now alone, having been in a long term relationship, or marriage. We see couple who are both getting on but are able to support each other – when one is suddenly unable to carry on, then their partner – previously unknown to us – presents as needing services.

Living longer is to be celebrated; but there will be effects that we need to consider.

Firstly, we can't class everyone over 65 into one group. That would be as foolish as having a cohort of 0 to 35 years of age. Post retirement, people will be living longer and will be more active. This should be seen as a huge opportunity – what skills, experience and added value can older people bring to their communities? Can they be the activists who are at the heart of, and champion, their local communities?

But we also see that our over 85 year olds now have escaped major health problems and are fitter than their counterparts in years past. That won't be the case necessarily as we move forward. The concern is that very old people won't be in good health, could be socially isolated as they outlive friends, family and may be trapped in unsuitable housing. They are seen as a burden.

The increase in births poses challenges for our health and education services. Pressures are caused in the education system because we haven't got the places in our schools. Educational attainment may suffer and we may not have the workforce we need in this area to fill jobs in the skills-based economy. If employers then recruit from outside, those "incomers" may not be welcomed.

Being in employment is the single biggest factor in an individual's health and well-being. So we could predict that high levels of unemployment, especially for young people, causes tension as there is a growing older population that needs support and may be perceived as having more opportunities. There is already some backlash in the media about the baby boomers who "never had it so good" compared with young people starting off now, facing the challenge of getting a job, a house or flat and being able to afford to start a family.

Cambridgeshire is a growth area so we will see more houses. By 2031 we forecast that the number of dwellings is expected to increase by 27% , if development continues on the expected trajectory. This includes Northstowe, but growth is not restricted to that new town. More people, more houses, more travel all pose threats unless we think afresh.

The challenge to the public sector is to design good communities – not dormitory towns and villages. Northstowe is the biggest development since Milton Keynes and we have an opportunity to build places that are better designed for older people both to live independently but also to interact with people around them. It's important that the right amount and mix of housing is built – affordability is a key issue for all age groups, especially those of working age. The infrastructure must also be designed to meet needs and not to create division.

We also have to re-design services as the numbers of people who need support grow and change. The gap between what services society expects and what the state is able to provide cannot be ignored. Expectations need to be managed.

A stronger focus on prevention – so that fewer people need services, or need them much later in life – anticipates strong and inclusive communities where low level support is provided through social and other networks. Older people tell us that having friends and a social life is an important factor in keeping them well – and active. But we also have to persuade people to make lifestyle choices that will delay or prevent long term health conditions and support people to live in their own home, independently, for as long as possible.

Underpinning all of this is a strong need to ensure that generations and communities don't grow further apart. If it is seen that older people are relatively better off, have more stuff, and that all young people are "yobs" and "hoodies", those perceptions are wrong, but are hard to break . The public sector has a role to play here, but so too does the voluntary and community sector which can do so much more at a very local level. I can't pretend that everyone working for the County Council has an intimate knowledge of every community – be that geographic or a community of interest. But I do know that volunteers and others working very closely with those communities understand what's important and what worries people, as well as their capacity and willingness to play an active role. I think one of the ways to defuse the ticking time bomb is for us to harness those resources and to work together better for the future.