Sorry I can’t be there tonight - I am at DMC representing the Abbotsley villager in a contentious planning matter. Please accept my sincere apologies.

It’s a fun time to be a councillor. During the past year six councils have declared bankruptcy, including Nottingham and Birmingham City Councils.

One in five councils is on the verge of going bankrupt.

50% of councils expect to go bust within the next five years.

At County Council our anticipated £16m deficit turned into a £23m deficit, because of inflationary pressure and increased demands on services especially in social care, due to the very high-cost children’s social care and an increased demand for bed-based care for older people. There have also been delays in plugging some of the council’s solar energy projects into the national grid.

Through “efficiencies” and cuts, we have managed to set a balanced budget for 2024/25, but we will continue to face extreme budgetary pressures in the final year of the administration.

The irony of this is that most people would by happy if the county council sorted out potholes and weeds.

On the weeds front, we scored a massive own goal a year ago by unknowingly subscribing to a risk based approach to weed management - which was supposed to mean concentrating our resources on the most serious weeds - but actually meant that almost no weed spraying happened at all.

I was a very vocal opponent on this, and together with other members of Joint Administration, we managed to reverse this decision and reinstate the previous weed spraying regime.

The JA at CCC is Record levels of highways funding (£23m) to strengthen and improve the standard of our roads and pavements, including tackling potholes, weeds and gulleys. Unfortunately this will not be enough to reverse decades of underinvestment and neglect.

Two weeks ago I took Frank Jordan - the head of Highways - for a tour around the St Neots East and Gransden decision to explain some of the problems that we are facing. And he told me how that is implementing a root and branch upheaval of the highways department, that will put more power and accountability into the hands of local highways officers and improve the communications levels and accountability throughout the service.

Much of the Council’s time this year was taken up discussing buses, busways and congestion charges. I tried to be a loud voice for Huntingdonshire in this debate. Especially for Waresley - where you have to pay a mayoral bus precept, despite having no buses.

St Neots and Gransden division was perhaps the only one, in which the congestion charge consultation result showed more people in favour of the congestion charge than against.

I represent the County on A421 Strategic Stakeholder Board, the Regional Flood Committee, the Police and Crime Panel, and on the Development Consents Group that oversees planning permission for EWR, A421, and any number of large solar farms that are cropping up.

I also tried to be a prominent voice against the Luton airport flight approaches, which have disturbed the tranquillity of many villages.

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At the District Council the picture is more positive.

Although we inherited an £8m deficit in our medium term budget, we have managed to close that hole entirely, by taking an unpopular decision to charge for green bins.

Over the 8 years before I was elected to HDC in 2022, the Council’s spending power decreased by 25% as a consequence of austerity based cuts in government funding, and 14 years of sub inflationary council tax rises.

We inherited an administration which was on the edge of crisis, with services having been cut to the bone, and employees not having had a cost of living pay rise for many years.

By introducing a charge for Green Bins we have managed to put the council on a firmer footing financially, filling the deficit and staving off threatened industrial action from disgruntled staff.

Although unpopular, the subscription scheme has been a great success - the original target was to sign up 30% of households in year 1, 40% year 2, and 50% by year 3.

In fact we have managed to exceed the year 3 target before the scheme was launched with over 50% of eligible households signing up to the garden waste collection service.

This money is being put to good use meeting our key objectives of keeping people out of crisis, and rescuing those who are already in crisis from it.

As a cabinet member, I brought forward a scheme to reduce council tax owed by the 4000 poorest people in the district to zero.

I’m currently bringing forward a paper that proposes adding the over a million pounds the disabilities facilities grant scheme, which allows people with disabilities to stay in their homes.

And by bringing a record number of affordable houses online - we have managed to greatly reduce the number of families stuck in temporary accommodation as a result of homelessness.

HDC is much more fun than CCC.

I wanted to finish by saying how much I will miss my friend Richard West, as he understandably retired from council life a few weeks ago.

Richard was a great friend and mentor to me, and despite political differences, we never disagreed once in supporting our community.

Although I did used to enjoy provoking him into one of his rants about EWR.

Richard specifically chose the date of his retirement so that a proper election could be held for the vacancy on the same date as the Police and Crime Commissioner elections. This ploy seems to have worked with 42% of voters turning out to elect Richard’s replacement, by far the highest turnout in the District.

Congratulations to Cllr James Catmur, who I’m sure will do an excellent job, I look forward to working with him.