

Parish Report March 2024

Councillor

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Information Updates

Cost of Living help and advice: <https://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/family.page?familychannel=6>

Benefits advice and support: <https://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/adult.page?adultchannel=0>

For information on supporting Ukrainian refugees in Suffolk, email: refugeesupport@suffolk.gov.uk or ukrainesupport@communityactionsuffolk.org.uk

Council Budget for 2024-25

At Council on 15 February, Suffolk councillors met to discuss and vote on the administration's budget proposals. The council is borrowing heavily from its reserves to meet the growing demand for social care for adults and children, and council tax is due to rise by £74 annually for Band D properties from April this year. There will also be cuts to Family Hubs (children's centres) and Housing Related Support, which supports vulnerable people like care leavers to find accommodation. Funding for arts and museums will be maintained for 2024-25 but not from SCC core funding, and subject to a bidding process for grants from April 2025. The Bury St Edmunds local archives will be moved to The Hold in Ipswich, which like the arts funding cuts has been controversial locally.

My group were concerned about the lack of core funding from Suffolk County Council to arts and museums, as this is how they secure funding from other sources, and we proposed an amendment to this effect. We also suggested that some of the council's remaining Covid funding from the government be used to support young people not in education, employment or training, as this cohort had suffered a lot of upheaval in their final years of schooling and exams. Support for young people not in education, employment and training is one of the services that is due to be cut in the administration's budget plans. Our amendment was declined by the Conservatives, as was the Labour amendment which also proposed to reverse some of the planned cuts.

Ofsted/CQC SEND Inspection Report

As you may have read in the local press, Ofsted and CQC published their joint report into SEND services in Suffolk at the beginning of the month. The report was scathing about the county's SEND provision and detailed the failures of the council to communicate and work with parents and carers, improve the EHCP and annual review processes and waiting times, improve outcomes and reduce exclusions. My group was disappointed and concerned that the services are yet to get to grips with improving a service that has now received a third poor inspection result in a row and we offered our assistance to the Local Area Partnership (Suffolk County Council and NHS teams) in preparing the Priority Action Plan they now need to submit to Ofsted and CQC by 7 March.

The poor report led to the resignation of the Cabinet members for SEND, Education and Children's Services and prompted a reshuffle of the political leadership at the council. This report will be devastating for parents of children with special needs in Suffolk, and the council will need to work hard to make improvements quickly and build back trust.

Suffolk Devolution in Sight

Devolution is something there has been a lot of talk about in Suffolk in recent years, and it looks like it may be happening from 2025. The deal the government is offering Suffolk is the same as the one for Norfolk and would give the county more freedom on decisions and funding for transport, skills and adult education, regenerating brownfield sites and retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient. If the deal is approved, the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk - every four years, residents will be given two votes, to elect their local county councillor AND the leader of the county council. The first election would take place in May 2025. The council will be consulting on the deal soon and residents will be able to give their opinions on the changes proposed. For more information, see <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution>

Changes to Local Archives

Following the recent controversial proposal in the county council's budget to move local records from Bury St Edmunds to The Hold in Ipswich, the council have announced that that they will be inviting community representatives from both Lowestoft and Bury St Edmund's to form two new Working Parties to consider local access to historical material. This could allow relevant collections to remain in the local area, but any proposals would need to be funded locally rather than by Suffolk County Council. This is not a reversal of the council's decision, and the majority of the records are still planned to move to The Hold, with the North-East and West Suffolk branches of the archive service to close.

Suffolk's wettest ever winter breaks highway response records

After months of extreme and sustained downpours, highways teams in Suffolk are breaking response and repair records whilst battling their most challenging operational period ever. Storm Babet saw nearly two months' worth of rain fall in 24 hours, the subsequent storms and severe weather events saw more sustained rainfall, leading up to what Met Office described as the fifth wettest February on record since 1836 with several days still to go.

As a result of the extreme weather, Suffolk Highways has seen an 82% increase in requests for action on the highway - 18,000 additional customer reports so far during the 2023/24 financial year.

The number of drainage and flooding issues have increased by a staggering 364% in the last five months when compared to the same period in 2022/23. Suffolk Highways has also responded to 2,117 emergency incidents in the same period, which represents a 64% increase on last year.

The increased wet weather coupled with occasional freezing temperatures this time of year results in a sharp rise in pothole breakouts. Despite these challenges, highways has completed 34% more repairs to potholes in 2023/24 when compared with the previous year.

To help keep up with this unparalleled increase in demand, Suffolk County Council is investing more resource and trialling new ways of working, including:

- Increased highway funding allocated to fix potholes, resurface roads and repair drainage
- 70% increase in highway crews to maintain and repair the roads
- Launching a trial of new 'Dragon Patcher' equipment – a pothole-repairing machine which can repair potholes up to five times faster than traditional methods
- Trailing a 'Road Mender' – a patching machine used in urban areas which will help boost productivity and present more environmental benefits

Council to review weed control for roads and pavements

Suffolk County Council's Cabinet will reconsider how Suffolk Highways uses chemicals to control weed growth. In February 2022, the council agreed to stop using glyphosate in its routine weed treatment programmes, to find more natural alternatives to help protect the local environment.

However, the alternative products proved unable to meet requirements, which was further exacerbated by exceptional growing conditions. Multiple applications were sometimes needed which could introduce other negative environmental impacts.

It has proved a challenge to reduce high performing treatments, whilst significantly mitigating the environmental impact. Other local authorities locally have experienced a similar situation. Regular weed treatment on our highway network will continue using a variety of methods, with plans for glyphosate being considered only when appropriate – the ambition still remains to reduce the use of glyphosate as far as possible.

Teams will continue to monitor and research the different approaches being used to remove weeds on our roads and pavements. Where needed, glyphosate would be used responsibly as it is one of the most cost-effective and long-lasting solutions.

Applications open for new Suffolk Business Board

Suffolk County Council is inviting applications for a new Suffolk Business Board which aims to drive economic growth in the county. Inspirational and influential local businesspeople are sought to form the board, which will represent the local business community and will help steer the local economic strategy to create a stronger and higher-skilled economy for Suffolk.

The board will meet 4-6 times a year to help shape economic strategy and priorities for Suffolk, to oversee delivery of funded programmes such as business support and skills training for Suffolk, and to work closely with partners such as District councils, neighbouring counties and national economic and trade bodies.

The county council is seeking candidates who represent the diversity of Suffolk's people and economy, whether that be sector, geography or business type. Expressions of interest should be emailed to businessboard@suffolk.gov.uk by Friday 22 March, with a short biography or CV and a brief cover letter outlining your interest in the opportunity and what area(s) of expertise you feel you could bring.

Board membership is a voluntary position and terms are for up to three years from the date of appointment.

The Business Board will be supported by a dedicated team of council officers.

The establishment of the Business Board follows the Government's announcement in 2023 that Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) would be integrated into upper tier local authorities. The Suffolk Business Board will succeed the existing New Anglia LEP Board which ceases on 31 March 2024.

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