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Email: simon.harley@suffolk.gov.uk

Protection from Flooding, managed retreat from rising sea levels at Benacre

You may have seen in the press that Suffolk County Council have announced an extra £1.5m of funding to deliver the first phase of works identified in the flood investigations following Storm Babet. The council is also writing to the government requesting £20m for flood protection to help prevent future flooding in the county, as it is likely extreme weather will become more likely due to the effects of climate change.

At Cabinet on 8 October, a £2m financial contribution was agreed from the council towards flood protection at Benacre, south of Lowestoft. It was predicted that without the new measures, the A12 would be flooding at that location at nearly every high tide within a couple of years. The Environment Agency are also committing over £30m to the scheme, and Sizewell C agreed to make up the rest: the total cost of the works is £59m. My group raised concerns about other areas of flooding along the coast and whether the council had a strategy for dealing with the problems caused by coastal erosion and climate change.

From the Cabinet report:

The proposed project design will result in the creation of 82 hectares of high quality intertidal habitat and the protection of 450 hectares of grazing marsh. Both habitats play a vital role in maintaining ecosystem health and providing long term protection from ongoing coastal erosion. The newly created coastal wetland will be a strategic addition to the existing protected habitats along the Suffolk coast and provide a significant sink that will absorb carbon dioxide.

Finally, at Scrutiny Committee on 24 October, a report was presented on highways flooding and the responsibilities held by the council, water companies and the Environment Agency. Suffolk County Council is the lead flood authority for Suffolk and although it has responsibility for surface water flooding, it does not have the capacity to manage it all and has to prioritise its response. Priority is given to works to address internal flooding to five or more properties, or flooding to major infrastructure for 10 hours or more.

If you have a stream or watercourse on your land, you have responsibilities to mitigate against flooding. You can find information about this in the council's guide to riparian ownership: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/flooding-and-drainage/maintenance-of-ditches-and-other-watercourses/riparian-ownership-in-suffolk>

Extension of the North Falls Windfarm

Cabinet on 8 October also included the council's response to the proposed wind farm extension at North Falls. This will be off the coast of Essex with no onshore infrastructure in Suffolk, although it still has the potential to affect transport routes, Suffolk ports and the local workforce. It will be visible from Suffolk but the impact of this has been judged as less than significant. The connection for this scheme to the National Grid is planned to be at Lawford, which will only be possible if the planned Norwich to Tilbury grid reinforcement goes ahead. My group pointed out that consent should not be granted for schemes that depended on other projects which were not yet approved, but it was noted that this was not unusual for the National Grid, which often granted grid connections for projects where there was no guarantee they would proceed.

Cuts to Winter Fuel Payment

At Council on 17 October, a motion was passed that the council would write to the government and ask them to reverse the decision they have made to cut the eligibility for the winter fuel payment for pensioners. The council also announced a new £3m fund for interest-free loans to residents wishing to undertake energy efficiency upgrades such as insulation, solar panels, batteries, glazing, or heat pumps. The loans (up to £15,000) to be repaid over a maximum of seven years at 0% interest. The scheme will be open to homeowners across Suffolk from November: register your interest now at <https://www.lendology.org.uk/warm-home-suffolk-loan>. My group are obviously in favour of retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient, although as the council will be returning an unspent £5m to the government in March from their previous retrofitting scheme, we would urge people to apply if eligible - to make sure we are reducing energy bills as possible.

Pavement safety and preventing trips and falls

At Council on 17 October my group brought forward a motion that the county review its priorities for repairing pavement defects. Currently, if there is a difference in the surface level of the footway of 20mm or more, this will be repaired, but we argued that in areas of high footfall or where a trip or fall had been recorded, this threshold was too high. Most members of the public who trip or fall are over 65, and in areas outside GP surgeries or opticians it would make sense for the repair policy to be more flexible. The administration at the council would not vote to pass our motion, but reported that a review of their highways processes was being undertaken. Councillors from my group will be taking part in the review to try and ensure that poor quality footways are made safer.

Suffolk Local Transport Plan

A newly-developed plan which details the long-term vision for transport in Suffolk has been launched for public consultation. Local communities helped shape a new draft of the Suffolk Local Transport Plan by sharing their views back in February of this year and the council is now asking for feedback on the final proposed document. The plan details activity between 2025-2040 and sets out a long-term vision for transport in Suffolk, including decarbonisation of transport, strengthening the local economy, promoting health, wellbeing and social inclusion, and creating better-connected places that encourage a range of transport choices.

The consultation is available via www.suffolk.gov.uk/LTP and will close on Monday 25 November 2024. The Local Transport Plan and its associated plans will then be presented to Suffolk County Council Cabinet in 2025.

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>

Flood preparation advice: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/suffolk-fire-and-rescue-service/fire-and-rescue-safety-advice-in-the-community/preparing-for-flooding>

Flood recovery advice and support: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/about/flood-recovery-information-for-suffolk>

Simon Harley Suffolk County Councillor for Peninsula Division