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Email: simon.harley@suffolk.gov.uk

Energy Developments

At Council on 21 March, the council debated the impact of the various Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) planned for the county and voted that its strategic vision for the county would be to prioritise offshore rather than onshore coordination of schemes, undergrounding of cables rather than pylons, and protection of best quality agricultural land from solar development. NSIP energy projects are approved by the Secretary of State rather than local councils, which only act as statutory consultees. Councils can and do formally object or support proposed projects in the region, however, as East Suffolk have done with the recent Sea Link proposals affecting Friston and the nearby coast.

Libraries Consultation

On Tuesday 25 March, Cabinet reviewed the results of the recent consultation about the Suffolk library service, which is due to go out to procurement in the summer. Broadly, the members of the public who responded to the survey agreed with what libraries currently provided, including community and digital services, and the mobile library and home library services for people who were housebound. Recent pop-up libraries in village halls did not score highly in the consultation and it is unlikely these will form part of the service in future. It is also likely that mobile libraries will run from smaller vehicles in future. The successful bidder for the new libraries contract is likely to be announced in November, with the new contract starting from June 2025. The overall level of funding wont be increased though.

Growing Biodiversity

At Cabinet at the end of February we heard about the council's new responsibilities for planning and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). Under the Environment Act 2021, all planning permissions granted in England will have to deliver at least 10% biodiversity net gain (or increase) from April 2024. This means that developers must protect natural habitats or compensate for the loss of it when they build – for example, if a woodland is destroyed by a road, they need to create another one, either onsite or elsewhere, or enhance the natural habitat onsite so that the effect of the development is to increase nature rather than decrease it. This has been introduced to try and combat the biodiversity crisis in the UK; since 1970 UK wildlife species have declined by 19% on average, with near one in six species threatened with extinction. For more information about the new scheme, please see <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/understanding-biodiversity-net-gain>

Update on SEND Investment

Cabinet on 27 February also reviewed the new £4.4m investment in SEND services at the council will be spent on how the new funding will be used to increase capacity and recruit to extra roles in the SEND service, particularly around clearing the backlog of EHCPs and annual reviews. Since the poor SEND inspection report was published, the council has worked with health to create a priority action plan which was submitted to Ofsted/CQC on 7 March. This plan addresses two priority actions from the report (working better together to improve systems and outcomes for children and young people, and to improve quality and timeliness of EHCPs and annual reviews) and three areas for improvement (using performance data and information to plan and commission SEND services, engaging and communicating with children, young people and their families to reduce dissatisfaction, and working with providers of services for social, emotional and mental health and neurodiverse conditions to improve outcomes in these areas for children with SEND).

There has also been a recent announcement that Suffolk County Council is set to receive an additional £10.9 million to create new specialist school places for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in the county.

You can read the priority action plan here: <https://www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk/asset-library/suffolk-priority-action-and-improvement-plan-final.pdf>

Water Management in Suffolk

At Scrutiny Committee we heard how despite the wet winter this year, East Anglia is considered a Serious Water Stressed Area by the Environment Agency. By 2050, the demand will be 2538Ml/d (mega litres per day) but the amount available will be only 1700Ml/d. This will affect water bill prices - and limit economic growth in the region, as although housing developments are always guaranteed a water supply, this is not the case for commercial/industrial developments. The report included plans to preserve water or generate new supplies, including reducing water company leaks, two new reservoirs in South Lincolnshire and the Cambridgeshire fens, plus a small new reservoir in North Suffolk, and an increase in water transferred around the region.

Public Consultation on Suffolk Devolution

Following an extensive informal engagement period throughout January, February and early March, Suffolk County Council's formal consultation for the proposed Suffolk Devolution Deal was launched on 18 March. Once the consultation has completed, the analysed results will be presented in detail to Cabinet in summer 2024.

To read about the proposals and fill out the public consultation survey, please visit: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution>

New EV Funding

Suffolk County Council has been awarded a £7.3m investment for Electric Vehicle (EV) infrastructure following successful bids to the government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) fund, which supports local authorities to plan and deliver charging infrastructure for residents who do not have off-street parking. Suffolk residents without off-street parking will benefit from £5.9 million to support EV charging, and a further £1.4 million will be used to develop the county's existing EV charging network in community locations.

Suffolk residents are invited to 'nominate' their street for consideration for on-street charging points with this online form: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/requestchargepoint/>

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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