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Devolution and Local Government Reorganization

Following the publication of the government's White Paper on devolution in December, the council held an extraordinary meeting on Thursday 9 January to decide whether to pursue inclusion in the Devolution Priority Programme. Councils had to submit an application for this 'fast-track' devolution by Friday 10 January, including a request for local elections in May to be cancelled if this would assist them to prepare for an accelerated process including mayoral elections in May 2026. The result of these changes is likely to be a joint mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk, and amalgamation of the county council, districts and borough council in Suffolk into one unitary council, or possibly two unitary councils. Unitary councils undertake all local services and replace a 'two tier' system of county and district/borough councils. The government will make a decision on which areas will be in the Devolution Priority Programme and whether their local elections will be cancelled by the end of January. I am attaching a briefing on this for parish and town councils which gives more detail.

Suffolk's SEND Needs Assessment

At Health and Wellbeing Board on Thursday 16 January, the council's Public Health & Communities attended to provide insights into the county's SEND needs and how they are being met. The report states that SEND needs in the county are rising and expected to rise further, and that delays in EHCP assessment, ADHD and autism assessment and support, and access to mental health services for young people were unsatisfactory and in some cases getting worse, like speech and language therapy. The report recommends engagement with families and young people, address inequalities in service provision and improve planning for future services. The report also noted that national data on SEND need was poor and lobbying the government to improve this would also help councils and health partners to better plan and support families.

Council Budget 2025-26

One Tuesday 28 January, SCC Cabinet voted to approve the proposed budget for 2025-26. This included approving a maximum rise in council tax this year of 4.99%, including the 2% social care precept for adult care. The budget this year does not include borrowing from the council's reserves, which was a concern last year. Instead, the budget relies on delivering £28.4m of savings and mitigations across council services. Cost pressures for the council include care purchasing for adult social care, Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and placements for children in care. The level of debt the council is carrying from the Designated Schools Grant is still extremely worrying – this is due to increase by £62.175m over the course of the year, with the council DSG deficit forecast to be £358.7m overall by March 2028. Currently this 'negative reserve' is allowed by the government, but this statutory override is due to end in March 2026. The government is yet to come up with a solution for this issue, which affects many local authorities, not just Suffolk. The DSG debt is largely down to the cost of services for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Aside from the financial risk of the DSG debt if it is called in by the government, the council is projecting significant budget 'gaps' in future: £33.1m for 2026-27 and £96.2m in 2028-29. This means that in the next few years, additional government funding or more savings or cuts to services will be needed to balance the books.

SCC Carbon Net Zero

At Cabinet on Tuesday 28 January, the annual report was presented which details the council's progress towards its target of net zero carbon by 2030. The council is not on track to achieve this target. It has achieved a 2% reduction in emissions overall during 2023-24, but Scope 3 – the largest scope and the one the council has least control over, as it includes the emissions of council suppliers (for example home to school transport) – has increased by 2% this year due to an increase in the standard conversion factor for bus travel emissions, and a rise in staff travel due to increased demand for care services. The council is trying to reduce Scope 3 emissions, and currently 40% of the council's top 100 suppliers have a carbon reduction plan for their businesses. It is unlikely the council would be able to be completely carbon free in future as large vehicles like fire engines would require fossil fuels, but it is possible that the council could offset remaining carbon emissions by planting trees in the county.

Never Stop Trying: New Stop Smoking Campaign

Suffolk County Council has joined with Ipswich Town Football Club to launch a new stop smoking campaign to encourage people to '*never stop trying*' on their journey to quit smoking. The campaign directs people who are thinking about quitting to Feel Good Suffolk, the county's stop smoking service. NHS figures show that smokers are up to three times more likely to quit with support from their local service. In Suffolk, smoking contributes to nearly 1,000 deaths a year and tobacco presents the single greatest risk for early death, more than other issues such as high blood pressure, obesity or alcohol. In 2024, smoking cost Suffolk an estimated £703m in health and social care costs, lost productivity and smoking related fires.

The service offers various methods designed to assist people at every stage, including one-on-one coaching, phone support, or digital tools. Those seeking support on their quitting journey should visit <https://feelgoodsuffolk.co.uk/stop-smoking/>

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Website - [Suffolk Green, Liberal Democrat and Independent Group – The GLI Group at Suffolk County Council \(suffolkqli.wordpress.com\)](http://suffolkqli.wordpress.com)

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/what-to-do-in-a-flood>

<https://suffolkprepared.co.uk/get-prepared/risk-advice/flooding/>

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

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