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Funding for Local Government

My group proposed a motion for council on Thursday 23 May to lobby the government for improved funding for local authorities, which was seconded by the Conservative administration and voted through unanimously in the chamber. Politicians of all parties are concerned by the £4 billion funding 'gap' predicted for councils in the next few years, particularly for social care. To balance the books this year, Suffolk County Council had to withdraw £15.9 million from its reserves - the equivalent of council savings accounts – but this is not a sustainable approach. Councils that have become bankrupt have to cut services back to the minimum they have to provide by law, and seek to raise revenue by increasing council tax and other avenues they have such as charges for parking or social care.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylons

At Cabinet on Tuesday 21 May, two reports were tabled on Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) in the region. The first was our response to the Five Estuaries wind farm proposals, this will have landfall in Essex but will be visible from the Suffolk coast and the developers are paying for a wildlife project on Orford Ness as environmental compensation. The second report detailed the council's response to the proposed Norwich to Tilbury 400kV grid reinforcement, and the Cabinet voted that the council should object and call for a pause until alternative options have been explored. The proposals include 183 kilometres of pylons, with four sections of underground cabling running through and near to the Dedham Vale National Landscape and the Waveney valley, but the council wants to see alternative options explored for additional undergrounding in the Waveney valley and expressed concerns about the route which see pylons placed close to several Suffolk airfields. The council also discussed how to make sure that energy projects in the county were coordinated, as it was agreed that the impact of all the proposed projects in a similar timeframe would have a massive impact on the county, its landscape, economy, and transport routes.

Transport for Post-16 Students

Cabinet also considered a paper on recommendations for charges for post-16 school transport. Although students now have to be in education or training up to the age of 18, the council receives no funding from the government to pay for their transport. This means the council asks parents and carers to pay for part of the cost with the rest subsidised by the council. In 2023-24, the average cost for a mainstream seat was £1,701 and the average cost for a SEND student seat is £11,819.

The proposal approved by Cabinet was for the charge for a mainstream seat to rise to £1,050 a year, which is a £90 increase from last year. There will be no increase for SEND students so their seats will remain at £780 a year. The 50% reduction in charge for families on a low income and in receipt of free school meals will continue for another year. The council will continue to signpost families to public transport routes where these may be cheaper and in addition, many schools have bursaries for travel which students can apply for.

SEND Strategy 2024-29

On Tuesday 21 May, Cabinet approved the new SEND Strategy for the Local Area SEND Partnership, which is made up of the council's inclusion service and relevant NHS services. The new strategy takes on board recommendations from the recent Ofsted/CQC inspection to set the Partnership's direction for SEND services for the next five years. The strategy was co-produced with children, parents, carers, and members of staff who work in SEND services and aims to improve services in several areas: communication, outcomes for SEND children and improved timeliness and quality of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Annual Reviews. The strategy still requires some formatting/design work but will soon be available to view on the council's website.

Children's Services Inspection

The council has just received notification that Ofsted will be coming for a two week inspection of its children's services. This inspection is focused on social care, youth justice, corporate parenting, family services and safeguarding. It will also look at partnership working with other council teams and external partners to support children and keep them safe. Suffolk County Council had its last children's services Ofsted inspection five years ago and was rated as Outstanding.

Dementia Strategy

Suffolk County Council, NHS partners and adult social care organisations have launched a dementia strategy. The number of people with dementia in the UK was estimated to be close to one million in 2021, but by 2050 this figure is expected to rise to 1.6 million people. In Suffolk, a predominantly rural county with an ageing population where 23.6% of Suffolk residents are 65 years or over - higher than the England average - the number of people who develop dementia is likely to be higher, so having a robust and effective strategy to manage this is essential. The strategy has been co-produced with people with dementia and their carers, and will look to promote early diagnosis, providing better information about care and treatment options, and focus on improved signposting for people of all ages with dementia, their carers and families, to help them get the support they want and need to enable them to live well with dementia within their own community. You can read the new dementia strategy here: suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/digital-version-suffolk-dementia-strategy-2024-20292.pdf

New Vehicles and Equipment for Suffolk Fire and Rescue

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has unveiled a £3.5 million investment in new firefighting vehicles and equipment, including a 32m turntable ladder vehicle, a specialist rescue tender, six new fire engines, a driver trainer vehicle plus a fleet of electric pool cars. The new vehicles will be on the road by summer 2024. The new vehicles are part of a planned replacement programme whereby fire engines are replaced every 15 years, and include the latest technology to help keep Suffolk residents safe. They also support the council's net zero targets as officer and pool cars will now be electric vehicles. Fire engines are generally diesel vehicles, although there are some electric-hybrid vehicles currently being trialled in London.

Nature survey

In order to prepare Suffolk's Local Nature Recovery Strategy, the council has launched a public survey so residents can share their favourite nature spots and which habitats they think should be protected. Farmers, landowners and land managers are also encouraged to submit practical,

achievable proposals to support nature conservation, as well as sharing how land is currently managed and any challenges faced applying for government funding schemes. The strategy will form a plan to help reverse the decline in nature across the county, and to connect and expand existing areas that are important for wildlife and the landscape.

You can share your thoughts in the Suffolk Local Nature Recovery Strategy Survey by visiting <https://www.nsnrp.org/get-involved>. It closes on 30 June 2024.

Failure of application to reduce speed limits on B1456

I have been working with Woolverstone Parish Council for the last 2 years to try to reduce the speed limit between Woolverstone and Chelmondiston to 40mph where it is currently 60mph (the only National Speed limit section of this road between Freston and Shotley). Most local people support this, and many have been actively calling for it due to concerns over some drivers travelling at excessive speeds on this narrow and windy section. There have been serious accidents as well but fortunately no fatal ones. We have commissioned speed surveys and a report, and this was considered by the Cabinet Member responsible and the Director of Highways, but they decided against the new speed limit of 40mph (which seems entirely reasonable to most) on this section of road.

Unfortunately, there is no appeal process to these decisions (unless circumstances change, such as new housing developments along that stretch of road or further serious accidents).

I am conscious of the serious concerns many local people will still have and am calling for a change in the system, which seems to our group to be undemocratic (with two individuals making these decisions in private) and prevents local communities having a proper say in the traffic issues that directly affect them.

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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>

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