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Extra Investment agreed for Special Education Needs

At Cabinet on Tuesday 25 July, the proposal to invest a further £9.1 million in Suffolk's SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) service was agreed. This is to fund extra staff and capacity to make sure the council can achieve its targets for assessing children and production of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The investment will be funded through the council's reserves, and will be £2.6 million extra for the rest of this financial year, £3 million in 2025/26, and £3.5 million in 2026/27, although the extra money in the coming two years will be subject to ongoing review. This comes at a time when the outcome of the 2023-24 budget was also presented, showing a nearly £15 million drop in the council's useable reserves – their 'savings' for a rainy day. My group also expressed concern that the council's target for EHCPs was to complete 50% within the legal 20 week timeframe, rather than the required 100%.

Youth Justice Plan

At Council on Thursday 11 July, we reviewed the new Youth Justice Plan for 2024-2025 which outlined the ways the council plans to support young people who become involved in the criminal justice system. The plan outlines the ambitions of the council to reduce the number of girls, children in care and minority ethnic children currently over-represented in the Suffolk system, and support children involved in the criminal justice system or at risk of re-offending to engage with education, training or employment. My group are concerned that the Ministry of Justice funding for the Turnaround programme is due to end in March 2025, as this early intervention programme was doing good work to prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system in the first place, and suggested that the council should ask the county's new MPs should lobby for the continuance of this program in Westminster.

Developer funding and highways works

My group brought a motion to the council meeting on Thursday 11 July to propose that the council review and streamline processes to use housing developer funding for local improvement work. It was acknowledged that often, infrastructure works needed following additional housing were delayed for years, whether this was due to designing, programming or undertaking the works to a decent standard. Often these works are scheduled and provided by SCC, but sometimes the developer will be responsible for them which can also lead to delays and make local communities frustrated and ultimately resentful of new development. The motion was passed by councillors and the hope is that this will speed up the process for new junctions, footpaths, cycle paths and road improvements near new housing developments.

Scrutinising the State of Suffolk Roads

On Tuesday 23 July, the council's scrutiny committee met to discuss the state of the roads in the county, how much was spent annually and how works were prioritised. Officers from Highways explained how roads are categorised from Green to Red (poor condition), that the optimal resurfacing programme would require around £50m per year in funding, whereas the current amount available for resurfacing works was more like £17m per year. My group are pressing for a review of the county's Highway Maintenance Operational Plan (HMOP) which sets out the parameters on what defects Highways respond to and the timeframe for response. We also believe the reporting systems for defects is not working correctly. All of the committee agreed that better communication with residents and timely fixes for road defects would be beneficial to the public perception of Suffolk's roads – as overall the condition of roads rated Red (in poor condition) has dropped since 2012, and the number of roads rated Green (in good condition) has risen.

Suffolk Youth Climate Conference

On 3 July, 250 local schoolchildren pledged to write to their local Member of Parliament about climate change after an inspiring address by Chris Packham, renowned UK naturalist, at this year's Suffolk Youth Climate Conference. The event was held at Suffolk One Sixth Form College and organised by the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership. The partnership is engaging with schools, charities, and community groups to bring about positive change for the environment and also the health and wellbeing of Suffolk residents. A range of workshops were held on topics such as electric vehicles, nature-based solutions, the global food system, coastal adaptation, plastic pollution, flood and water management, sustainable fashion and climate anxiety. Students also had the opportunity to engage with 30 charities and organisations working to improve the natural environment in Suffolk.

Local Businesses attend Carbon Charter event

On 11 July, Suffolk County Council's annual Carbon Charter event was held to honour businesses from Suffolk and Norfolk for their achievements in environmental sustainability. More than 100 delegates from a range of local businesses shared their experiences of reducing their environmental impact. Since they were established in 2010, over 500 businesses have received Carbon Charter awards for taking climate action, by reducing their carbon emissions, supporting their local community and developing green spaces. Carbon Charter Gold Awards were presented to leading print company, Denny Bros, from Bury St Edmunds, and to Seckford Hall for their exceptional environmental contributions.

Peninsula water testing update

Thank you again to our volunteers who are keeping an eye on the shorelines around the Peninsula.

Last weekends results showed 5 colonies at Pin Mill, the remaining 4 locations were clear. This is likely to be due to the lack of rainfall recently.

People have asked me what the point of doing this is. The answer is that we build up a body of evidence that can be used in future to encourage Anglian Water and others responsible for pollution incidents to clean up their act and invest in the necessary infrastructure to do so, which has been lacking, some say since privatisation of the water companies.

Some other places locally have used the evidence and experience gained, and support of local people, to get bathing water status for certain areas which then puts a requirement on the Environment Agency to test these regularly, and act on illegal pollution. We are a long way off getting this for our Peninsula shoreline areas but the volunteer led testing programme is in my mind the first step, and persistence with this will give us sufficient information to lobby effectively in future.

Testing will next be done the weekend of 10/11 August.

Wishing you all a lovely August, which I will be away for most of, so hope to see you all in September.

Simon

Simon Harley Suffolk County Councillor for Peninsula Division