

SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S REPORT – MARCH 2025



Cllr Stephen Burroughes - Framlingham Division

• NEW CABINET ROLE TO LEAD ON DEVOLUTION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

A new Suffolk County Council cabinet role responsible for devolution and local government reform has been created, following a reshuffle announced by council leader Cllr Matthew Hicks. The changes take effect immediately.

Cllr Richard Rout has been appointed to the role – which comes as Suffolk is one of only six areas in the country chosen by the government to be fast-tracked for devolution and local government reform.

The reforms will see all six of Suffolk's district, borough and county councils disbanded, to be replaced by one or more unitary (singular) authorities responsible for delivering all local services that are currently delivered by the different tiers of local government. It will also see the election of a mayor (covering Suffolk and Norfolk) in May 2026, who will take control over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, economic development, health improvement and blue light services – along with devolved government funding to deliver positive change. The mayor would not run the unitary councils or have oversight of them.

Alongside his new responsibilities, Cllr Rout will continue to lead on Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), a role he held as deputy cabinet member prior to this reshuffle.

The new Cabinet and Deputies will now consist of:

- **Richard Smith** – Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Economic Development and Skills
- **Beccy Hopfensperger** – Cabinet Member for Adult Care
- **Paul West** – Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding
- **Andrew Reid** – Cabinet Member for Education and SEND
- **Bobby Bennett** – Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services
- **Philip Faircloth-Mutton** – Cabinet Member for Environment, Communities and Equality
- **Chris Chambers** – Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy, Planning and Waste
- **Steve Wiles** – Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection
- **Richard Rout** – Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs
- **Alexander Nicoll** – Deputy Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy
- **Nadia Cenci** – Deputy Cabinet Member for Property and County Farms
- **Debbie Richards** – Deputy Cabinet Member for SEND
- **Judy Cloke** – Deputy Cabinet Member for Flooding

• SUFFOLK PREPARES FOR ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT SOLAR FARM PROPOSAL

Suffolk County Council is preparing to respond to another large solar farm proposal, set to cover around 1,500 acres, near Eye. EcoPower Suffolk is putting forward plans to build a solar farm and battery storage facility, which would impact Yaxley, Brome, Gislegham, Mellis, Eye and Occold, with connections made at the existing substation to the north of Yaxley.

The project aims to deliver around 250 megawatts of renewable energy. At that size, it will be classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), requiring planning approval from the Secretary of State, rather than the local authority.

A number of consultations, beginning in March 2025, are being held by EcoPower Suffolk as it shapes its final planning application.

The county council will be contributing to these, to support and represent residents, businesses, agriculture, our landscape and ecology. EcoPower Suffolk hopes that the project will connect to the Grid in 2030.

More information can be found at www.ecopowersuffolk.com

- **£1.6 MILLION INVESTMENT PROPOSED FOLLOWING INSPECTION OF SUFFOLK FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Further funding is earmarked for the county's fire service following a key report by Government inspectors.

Suffolk County Council is proposing to invest an extra £1.6 million over two years into Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) following a government inspection. Inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found SFRS effectively operates its 35 stations, 43 fire engines and a range of specialist vehicles strategically situated around Suffolk.

The inspectors rated the service as good at preventing fires and risk, and protecting the public through fire regulation, and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, plus managing and developing its leaders. However, the assessment highlighted areas where inspectors feel the service needs to improve – leadership, culture, commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, and IT infrastructure.

A targeted action plan is already being developed with staff to drive improvements in areas highlighted within the report. These include IT infrastructure and staff, cultural changes and risk management.

To deliver the plan, Suffolk County Council is set to propose an additional investment of £1.6 million.

All fire services in the UK undergo inspection every two years. The last inspection report of SFRS was published in 2023.

However, new assessment criteria has since been introduced by HMICFRS that gives a more stringent evaluation, which means the 2025 report for SFRS cannot be compared with inspection gradings from previous years. The inspection took place last autumn and assessed how well Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service performed across a number of areas.

- **FUNDING MADE AVAILABLE FOR SAFER, HEALTHIER AND ACCESSIBLE TRAVEL AROUND SUFFOLK**

Suffolk County Council has been awarded £3.7 million to continue to encourage cycling, walking and active travel across the county, and making journeys more accessible.

Government has awarded the county council £0.9 million from the Round 5 of the Active Travel Fund, and £2.8 million from the Consolidated Active Travel Fund.

Funds are available to be spent on projects such as:

- Better footpaths and crossing points
- Maintenance of existing walking and cycling infrastructure
- Improved cycle routes
- Traffic calming measures
- Improvements to the Public Rights of Way network
- Rail station access improvements

With the funding confirmed as of 12th February 2025, the county council is now considering suitable local projects, which will be announce in the coming months.

• SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL CONFIRMS 2025/26 BUDGET

Suffolk County Council has confirmed how it will spend its money in the forthcoming financial year - an £803.7 million plan focused on protecting essential services and supporting the county's most vulnerable residents. The council's budget for 2025/26 was approved at a meeting of all councillors on Thursday 13 February, with an emphasis on meeting rising demand for children's and adult care services.

For every £1 the council spends in the next financial year, 77 pence will go directly toward services that support the health and wellbeing of people in Suffolk.

The remaining 23 pence will fund other critical areas such as fire and rescue, highway maintenance, climate initiatives, waste management and bus services, as well as the infrastructure, staff, and technology required to keep services running efficiently. The council's budget will increase by 6.7%, from £752.9 million in 2024/25 to £803.7 million in 2025/26.

Despite a slight uplift in Government funding for local authorities, rising costs and growing demand have required the council to set significant savings targets to balance the books.

The council has approved £10.9 million in new savings, which will focus on restructuring and transforming how services are delivered. This follows £17.5 million in savings approved in the previous year, bringing total savings for the 2025/26 financial year to £28.4 million.

Suffolk County Council's share of Council Tax will rise by 4.99% next year, which includes a 2.99% general increase and a further 2% dedicated wholly to helping meet the rising costs of social care.

This means households will see the following changes in their weekly Council Tax payments:

- Band B property: £24.67 per week, a £1.17 increase from 2024-25 (Band B properties are the most common in Suffolk)
- Band D property: £31.72 per week, a £1.51 increase from 2024-25.

• ARTS ORGANISATIONS AND MUSEUMS ACROSS SUFFOLK GET £500,000 FUNDING BOOST

Thirty-three arts organisations and museums from across Suffolk have been awarded funding from Suffolk County Council's £500,000 Culture Project Fund.

- 33 organisations made successful bids
- Vast array of projects cover all corners of Suffolk
- Successful bids range from £1k to nearly £30k

Thirty-three arts organisations and museums from across Suffolk have been awarded funding from Suffolk County Council's £500,000 Culture Project Fund.

From baby classes to a new community radio show, the successful projects range in size and scope, and support an array of different people across Suffolk. Examples include promoting performing arts in Sudbury with the Quay Theatre, environmental events at Dunwich Museum, and an education and arts project to address racial inequalities in Ipswich.

The successful bids range from £1,000 to £27,000.

The new fund, which was launched last year to boost cultural activity across the county, attracted 131 applications, requesting a total of £2 million in funding. The quality of applications was exceptionally high, and more than 60 projects scored 'excellent' or 'outstanding' against the assessment criteria. Following a rigorous selection process, a panel of experts from across the arts, heritage, and community sectors reviewed 62 shortlisted applications. This resulted in 33 successful bids.

One successful bid was made by Ipswich Community Media for a project called Making Waves, which engages young offenders and those at risk of offending in music, media and the arts. The project aims to divert young people from offending towards positive activities, building confidence and self-esteem and was awarded £9,000. Another example is the Red Rose Chain, which has been awarded £20,000 to deliver theatre activities for disabled and disadvantaged children and young people within mainstream and SEND schools across Suffolk.

A number of small grants – up to £1,500 - are still available for arts organisations and museums across Suffolk. [Visit the website for details](#). There will be another round of funding for large and medium projects, which will open in Autumn 2025. These new projects will be delivered in 2026/27.

- **SUFFOLK COMMUNITIES TO SUFFER FROM LACK OF ENERGY PROJECT COORDINATION**

National Grid's decision for the LionLink interconnector project to make landfall at Walberswick, will have serious implications for Suffolk's coastal and inland communities, and environment. The interconnector is a new subsea cable, creating an electricity link with the Netherlands, and connecting to a Dutch offshore windfarm.

Should proposals go ahead, the impact on Suffolk will mean significant onshore construction work at Walberswick, a 26-metre tall converter station at Saxmundham, a substation at Friston, and underground cabling between all the sites. Another National Grid energy project, Sea Link, is already planned to make landfall just a few miles down the coast at Aldeburgh.

In March 2024, National Grid published details to say that it has no intention to coordinate LionLink with the more advanced Sea Link project. Suffolk County Council has long campaigned that both projects should share as much infrastructure as possible.

The county council has raised such concerns on a number of occasions throughout LionLink's consultation process in recent years. It has made clear that any proposals where greater coordination between LionLink and Sea Link is not achievable, would require very robust justification. There should be a full assessment of increased levels of impacts across both LionLink and Sea Link.

Should LionLink press ahead with landfall at Walberswick, then the council is adamant that implications such as increased construction traffic, suitability of road networks and long core working hours are addressed.

These are the same critical concerns that the county council currently has with the Sea Link project.

The council's long-standing position has been to support safeguarding the future energy security of the country, but not at the cost of local communities, their wellbeing, and the environment.

You can read [the county council's submissions to previous consultations for LionLink](#). National Grid Ventures expected to submit a Development Consent Order application in 2025.

- **SUFFOLK'S 45 LIBRARIES TO REMAIN OPEN AND SEE NEW INVESTMENT AS SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL PLANS TO TAKE SERVICE BACK IN HOUSE**

Suffolk's 45 libraries would remain open, see no change to opening hours and have new mobile libraries and computers as part of a plan to bring the service back into Suffolk County Council.

Subject to a formal Cabinet decision on 18th March 2025, staff running Suffolk's library service – along with their years of experience and love for libraries - will transition to the direct employment of the council on 1st June 2025. The county council would invest £200,000 in replacing Suffolk's aging mobile libraries with a further £157,000 for new books and to replace public computers in libraries across Suffolk. This is in addition to the £6.6 million a year in the budget which is available across all of Suffolk's libraries.

It follows an attempt to secure an external provider for a new six-year contract (with the option to extend for up to a further six years) which had to be abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets. Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1 June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included a reduced opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

Background

- Suffolk's library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on **31st May 2025**.
- Suffolk County Council is the main funder of the service, with an agreed budget of £5.9 million a year. In 2023/24, Suffolk County Council increased the annual budget by £720,000 to £6.6 million a year.
- The contract to operate libraries in Suffolk had to be put out for competitive tender in 2024 as it had reached its maximum legal length.
- The procurement was abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.
- Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1st June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.
- In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

Suffolk County Council published two open letters explaining its proposal, one to Suffolk residents and the other to Suffolk Libraries staff, volunteers and supporters.

• SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL CABINET APPROVES LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN

The council's vision for how people can move around Suffolk over the next 15 years is set out in the new plan. Suffolk County Council's Cabinet has today (25th February) approved a Local Transport Plan to improve how people travel round Suffolk. The plan has been updated to set out the council's vision for the transport network from 2025 to 2040. It provides the context, policy and objectives to improve travel options for Suffolk's residents and visitors.

As part of this county-wide plan, 15 area transport plans and a Suffolk local cycling and walking infrastructure plan have also approved. These outline how the local transport plan's vision and objectives will be delivered, in some cases funded, in key locations across the county. Schemes within the 15 areas include walking and

cycling improvements and road junction capacity improvements. Every local highway authority is required by law to produce and keep current a Local Transport Plan. The Suffolk plan was developed following a public consultation during February 2024.

More than 1,000 responses revealed good support for the four themes of the Local Transport Plan – decarbonisation of transport, a strong sustainable and fair economy, health, wellbeing and social inclusion, and creating better places.

Following further public consultation during October and November 2024, the previous Local Transport Plan and its associated schemes were reviewed and updated to provide the new plan which was approved by the Cabinet.

The plan underpins Suffolk County Council's commitment to working towards achieving a net zero Suffolk by 2030, something in which travel infrastructure has an important part to play.

Suffolk is one of only six areas in the country chosen by the government to be fast-tracked for devolution and local government reform and the LTP would become the responsibility of the new Strategic Authority.

Further details of the plan can be found on [the Suffolk County Council website](#).

- **SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL CABINET APPROVES £2.7M FUNDING FOR BENACRE FLOOD PROTECTION SCHEME**

A vital scheme to protect the A12 and surrounding homes near Lowestoft from being regularly flooded can now proceed. Suffolk County Council's Cabinet has approved a plan to underwrite a £2.7 million funding gap in a major flood management scheme to protect the A12.

The council had already pledged £2m to the Benacre flood relief scheme, but the extra £2.7m will ensure it can now go ahead. The scheme will see 82 hectares of grazing land transformed into saltmarsh, along with construction of clay embankments and two new pumping stations.

The new habitat will absorb the energy of the sea during storms and ensure the A12, homes, businesses, farmland, freshwater resources, and wildlife are protected against a 1 in 200 year storm for the next 50 years. Were the scheme not to go ahead it could cost an estimated £235m over the next 50 years and compromise not only the A12, but also 200 domestic and commercial properties, and 450 hectares of farmland.

In October 2024 the Council agreed to the £2m contribution alongside £25m from Sizewell C and £32.1m from the Environment Agency, which funded the planned-for project costs of £59.1m.

In late December 2024, the final total project costs became known and exceeded the planned-for value by £5m. Alternative funding sources and cost savings found £2.3m, but there was still a £2.7m funding gap.

The Cabinet agreed to underwrite the project up to £2.7m during the construction period up to 2029. The money will be used to cover existing risks identified in the project and will only be used if they materialise.

The A12 at Benacre is low-lying and identified as being at significant flood risk from both the sea and the river. Water flowing down the Hundred River valley is currently pumped out to sea over the beach at Kessingland via an aging Environment Agency pumping station. The pumping station and the whole valley is at significant risk due to coastal erosion that will result in the sea breaching the current sand ridge and beach. Rock defences currently protecting the beach cannot be maintained in the long term due to the ongoing natural erosion and breaches are expected to occur in the next couple of years.

The project is being promoted and constructed by the Waveney, Lower Yare and Lothingland Internal Drainage Board (IDB) and maintained by the Environment Agency and the landowner. Now the council has approved funding the IDB can sign the main construction contract at the beginning of next month.

• COUNTY LEADERS TO PROPOSE ONE COUNCIL FOR SUFFOLK

One council for Suffolk would make delivering public services simpler, cheaper and quicker, and better meet the needs of residents and businesses, county leaders have said.

Following a recent government announcement that Suffolk's county, district and borough councils will be replaced with a single-tier system, Suffolk County Council argues that consolidating all services under one unitary authority is the only effective way to deliver against the government's criteria for local government reform.

The move would see all council services, such as waste collection and disposal, housing, social care, planning, highways maintenance, leisure, school placements and travel and street cleaning, all provided by one authority - rather than the six that currently exist in Suffolk.

Bringing together district, borough and county council functions is expected to reduce duplication, lower administrative costs and ensure a more coordinated and cost-effective approach to delivering essential services. The council warns that splitting services among multiple bodies would force the duplication of essential functions - such as social care, highways maintenance and schools - currently managed at a county level.

The key benefits of one council are:

- **Simpler for residents** – one council would make it easier to understand and contact local government
- **Clearer accountability** – there would be less confusion over who is responsible for what
- **Better use of funding** – a more coherent, strategic, financially sustainable, county-wide approach to budgeting
- **Better alignment of services** – since everything is under one roof, services can be more easily coordinated, creating opportunities to improve services for residents
- **More efficient decision-making** – with just one council, decisions can be made more quickly
- **Stronger leadership** – a single, visible and accountable body providing a clear strategic voice for Suffolk.

The council will submit its initial proposal to the government by 21 March, with a more detailed business case to follow later in the year. The government will then undertake a public consultation.

The government's plans will also see the election of a mayor for Suffolk and Norfolk in May 2026, who would take control over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, economic development, health improvement and blue light services – along with devolved government funding to deliver positive change.

• OCTOPUS ENERGY AND SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL TRIAL 'ZERO BILLS' UPGRADE ON EXISTING HOMES

Octopus reveals first 'Zero Bills' green tech upgrade for existing homes, offering no energy bills for at least 5 years.

- Kicking off trials in Suffolk, with county council offering £15k interest-free loan for residents to kit out their homes with solar panels and a battery
- Octopus Energy estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to 'Zero Bills' standards

Octopus Energy, the UK's largest energy supplier, is taking its world-first 'Zero Bills' initiative to the next level by trialling an upgrade offer for existing homes, allowing more householders across the UK to eliminate their energy bills.

Octopus's upgrade trials will transform existing homes by installing cutting-edge green tech - a heat pump, a battery and solar panels - bringing them up to Octopus' 'Zero Bills' standard, where customers receive no energy bills for at least 5 years, guaranteed.

The energy supplier is kicking off a series of trials in new homes in Suffolk. The company is teaming up with Suffolk County Council to help more local people benefit from low-carbon tech through the County Council's £15,000 interest-free Warm Homes Loan. The loan covers the upfront costs of installing solar panels and a battery, allowing Suffolk homeowners who already have a heat pump to embrace low-carbon living while unlocking major savings on their energy bills. Octopus is reaching out to local Suffolk customers with homes built since 2015, offering them a chance to join the revolutionary trial and take advantage of the council's funding.

The energy supplier estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to a 'Zero Bills' home. Octopus Energy aims to deliver 100,000 'Zero Bills' homes by 2030, and has already rolled out the initiative in Germany and New Zealand, as well as the UK.

Octopus has already accredited well over 1,200 'Zero Bills' homes through contracts with a number of prominent developers. Accredited homes span affordable and private rent, as well as private and shared ownership.

Cllr Stephen Burroughes

*County Councillor for the Framlingham Division
Suffolk County Council*