2025-26

Annual Parish Report

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Council Motions

At council meetings throughout the year, my group passed two motions successfully:

- In May 2025, we proposed that the council ban the giving pets as prizes on council owned land and writes to the government requesting an outright ban on live animals as prizes on both public and private land. The motion referred to animals intended as pets, and excluded farm animals which may be given as prizes by farmers and farming businesses
- In March 2026, we proposed that following the revelations in the media about the 'Epstein files' and the indication that there would continue to be a high volume of press coverage on the subject, that the council release a statement of support for victims of sexual harm and exploitation, and launch a social media campaign so that survivors in Suffolk would know where they can access local advice and support via Ipswich charity Survivors in Transition

My group also proposed several other motions throughout the year which were voted down by the Conservative councillors in the chamber:

- In March 2025, we proposed that Suffolk County Council gain accreditation as a 'Council of Sanctuary' to welcome refugees and displaced people, ensure that services work together to provide support to them, and to establish more 'Schools of Sanctuary' in the county to teach children why people come to UK and how to treat them with kindness and empathy. Currently there is only one school of sanctuary in Suffolk, whereas Norfolk has thirteen. This was voted down by the Conservative councillors on the basis that this would create extra cost for the council
- In July 2025, we proposed that the council change it procedures to make it easier and simpler for residents and communities to adopt safer speed limits, including 20mph speed limits. The Conservative administration rejected the motion on the grounds that it was preparing a review of this process already (see details below)
- In December 2025, my group tabled a motion proposing that the council recognise the Rights of Rivers in Suffolk, including to be protected from pollution, to flow freely, and to recover from environmental harm, and that the council should work with districts, boroughs, local communities and national agencies such as the Environment Agency and water companies to advocate for healthy rivers and improved water quality. The administration voted this down on the basis that

rivers flowing freely suggested that flooding should be enabled, which was not really what the motion was proposing.

Local Government Reorganisation

This year has seen a number of developments in terms of council structure and plans for the future. Following the announcement of Local Government Reorganisation in December 2024, councils in Suffolk had to submit plans to the government in September 2025 stating how many unitary councils should be set up in Suffolk after county councils, district and borough councils are dissolved in 2028. This means that the services provided by different councils in Suffolk would all be provided by one council for a specific area. Suffolk County Council submitted a proposal to the government for one unitary council for the whole of Suffolk via their 'One Suffolk' campaign. District and borough councils in Suffolk worked together to agree a proposal for three unitary councils in Suffolk: Western Suffolk, Central and Eastern Suffolk and Ipswich and Southern Suffolk, which includes the county town and Felixstowe. At the end of March 2026, the government announced that this was the option they wanted to go forward with. The next step will be for elections to the new councils, which will be held in May 2027. The new councillors will then 'shadow' existing councillors for a year until the new authorities are 'vested' from 1 April 2028.

Devolution and the Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral Authority

Concurrently with rearranging the councils is the process of devolution in the region. The government announced in December 2024 that a mayoral authority would be set up for Norfolk and Suffolk, with mayoral elections held in May 2026. The mayor and mayoral authority would have responsibility for strategic planning, transport and economic growth for the region and would include some members from local councils, but with the mayor having the deciding vote on decisions. In December 2024, the government announced that the mayoral elections would be delayed until May 2028. Following the announcement in February 2026 that the county council elections in May 2026 were back on, the leader of Norfolk County Council announced publicly that devolution was 'off' in Norfolk. However, the reinstated county council elections means it may be a completely different set of politicians in Norfolk and Suffolk taking this forward. Currently, the plan is for the mayor to be elected in May 2028 and everyone in Norfolk and Suffolk will have a chance to vote.

Libraries Brought Back in House

Following last year's report, the county's library service was brought back in-house at Suffolk County Council from 1 June 2025. Cabinet agreed to put aside £1.8m for the transition period, with the service expected to be back within budget by the second year. As at December 2025 it had spent £0.6m of this fund, with most of the remaining funds already committed. Since taking the service back into SCC, the council has also undertaken a restructure in the libraries 'central team' which has made savings of £340k per annum in staff redundancies. Front line staffing and volunteering numbers remain the same, with most library users stating when surveyed that they had not noticed a difference in the service provided. Library 'Friends' groups continue as normal, with all funds raised by the Friends being used to benefit their local branch. Those working in libraries have had to undertake the annual training modules which all Suffolk County Council employees have to complete, and also learn how to use the council's HR and finance processes, which is a lot of change initially. In addition, although the council initially honoured all terms and conditions of employment, from April 2026 employment terms and pay will be harmonised with council standards and pay scales. The transition was reviewed at Scrutiny Committee in March 2026 and during the meeting the libraries team also laid out their volunteer recruitment plan and governance systems for the new service (how it will be overseen). The library service is now part of the council's Public Health and Communities directorate with oversight from the Suffolk Community Libraries Strategic Group which has members from the council and the libraries service.

Council Budget 2026-27

In February 2026, the council set out and voted on its budget for the coming financial year, including its intention to take the maximum 4.99% increase in council tax. Even raising council tax to the maximum, it will still have a budget 'gap' of £5.9m this year which it will have to fund from council reserves. It set a £46.5m target for savings across the council, with more planned in further years to keep the council financially sustainable. The main cost pressures are for social care in adults and children's services, which the council has to provide by law whatever the cost. Future savings will need to be made to service the council's predicted budget gap for 2027-28, which it estimates will be £23.4m.

The council also has an enormous debt for provision of services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities held under the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This is described as a 'negative reserve' as the council is allowed to hold the debt, with the government recently providing an override for it until the end of March 2028 and an agreement to fund 90% of each council's DSG debt later this year. This will still leave the council with many millions of DSG debt though, and it will keep rising until the council is dissolved in 2028. The council predicts that its DSG deficit will be -£356.4m by 31 March 2028. It also spends millions on interest costs for the DSG debt which affects the council's borrowing ability and its financial resilience.

The government hopes that the spiralling costs for councils everywhere will be mitigated by the Local Government Reorganisation process. This means that from 2028 there will only be three councils in Suffolk to fund rather than six.

Net Zero Financial Savings

In January 2026, the annual Net Zero Carbon Budget report was brought to Cabinet to assess the progress of the council towards its carbon reduction goals. Previously the council had an ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030, although as the council will cease to exist in 2028 it has adjusted its target to 63% of carbon emissions by 2027-28. The Cabinet agreed that any new measures for carbon reduction during the remainder of this term would have to provide in-year financial savings for the council to be considered. The council's Net Zero work has so far provided £4.8m of savings by reducing electricity and gas use, which is incredibly important at a time when the council is struggling to remain financially resilient. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability, which is the UK professional body for accountants in the public sector, judges that a council has healthy financial reserves if the amount in its Unallocated Reserves fund is at least five per cent of the year's net expenditure budget, and if the reserve did drop below this threshold, the finance officer for the council (Section 151 Officer) would require remedial action. For 2026-27, five percent of the council's budget is £42.499m, with the amount in Unallocated Reserves being £44.436m. This means the threshold has been met, but only just: the difference is only £1.937m, which means the £4.8m of savings made by the council's carbon reduction initiatives have been critical for financial survival. In terms of the savings made, these include changes to heating controls in Endeavour House in January and February 2025 where gas use was reduced by over 42% without impacting electricity use, reducing energy costs for the council by £30k each year, and a car park solar array established at Beacon House, comprising three solar canopies with bifacial panels and batteries to capture excess power for use in the building, this is expected to save more than £50k a year.

Suffolk Roads Rated Red by UK Government

As you may have seen in the press, the government recently released RAG (Red, Amber, Green) ratings each county based on how effectively they use the government's highways maintenance funding and the condition of their roads. Suffolk's road maintenance was rated as Red, the worst category. This has struck a chord with residents in the county, who have been clear that they agree and want the quality of Suffolk's roads to improve. Suffolk County Council's administration, however, has denied that the rating is accurate, saying that overall the condition of Suffolk's roads are rated Amber, with the overall Red rating being arrived at because the Department for Transport did not include in its assessment £10m of highways funding that it brought forward from the 2025-26 financial year and invested early in a resurfacing programme in 2024-25. The council has met with the Department for Transport to press for the Suffolk rating to be raised to Amber, pointing out that Department for Transport data shows that only 3% of the county's A roads is in poor condition, which is better than the England average. In addition, in December the council received £2.9m from the Department for Transport's Incentive Fund, which rewards authorities with a record of good performance in highway maintenance. The wet weather since Christmas has caused a lot of damage to roads in Suffolk and the council has been active on social media to provide updates to residents and information on how they make their decisions on which potholes and defects they prioritize.

The council's Highways Maintenance Operational Plan is published on the SCC website and details the size and depth of potholes and the number of days it will take to repair them, based on size and depth. If the council has repaired a defect in line with its published criteria, then claims made for damage to vehicles are not likely to succeed.

You can find this document here: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/highway-maintenance/highway-asset-management/highway-maintenance-operational-plan

New 20mph Policy

You may recall that last summer, my group proposed a motion at council to make it easier and simpler for local communities to reduce speed limits, including 20mph areas. The Conservative administration voted down our plans, claiming that they were already planning to review their processes and would bring this back for agreement at a later date. At Cabinet on Friday 9 January, the new 20mph speed limit policy was tabled and approved and is now in place for speed limit change requests. The aim of the new policy is to make the process for communities to apply for a 20mph speed limit easier and more streamlined. From now on, any application for a new 20mph limit in an area where recorded average traffic speeds are 28mph and under is likely to be approved by the council. The local county councillor must also be in favour of the change, and there should be majority support from residents. My group pointed out that the new requirement to prove majority support for the new speed limit was likely to make the process more onerous for town and parish councils rather than less, as the new process states that local engagement should be carried out to gauge support, for example a survey or consultation of residents living in the area or along the stretch of road where on the change is proposed. Any new 20mph limits will also still need local funding to be in place, unless the scheme aligns with a council programme as part of the Local Transport Plan. The new policy is based on recording speeds as follows:

- Below 28mph – likely to be accepted, with a speed limit sign only, although signs warning that a 20mph zone is ahead may be required
- Between 28 - 32mph - unlikely to be acceptable with signing alone. Gateway signing and traffic calming throughout the area may be required
- Above 32mph - Unlikely to be acceptable without extensive traffic calming measures such as road humps, plus night-time lighting. It would also be subject to a Road Safety Audit

You can read the new 20mph speed limit here on the council website:
https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-management-and-road-safety/speed-limits

Suffolk Minerals and Waste Plan

In December 2025, preparation arrangements were agreed at Cabinet for the county's updated Minerals and Waste Plan, which is now five years old and due for renewal. The plan looks at the county's needs and decides what planning measures need to be taken to meet them – for example, aggregates such as sand and gravel which are necessary for housebuilding. As the government has announced high targets for housing in Suffolk, the county will need more of these materials in future. As the Local Government Reorganisation process means that Suffolk County Council will likely not exist by the time the plan is due to be adopted, the decision made by Cabinet was to undertake all the preparatory work for the new plan and gather evidence for it, so that the new authority/ies who have to publish the plan will be well-placed to put it in place later.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy Approved

In September 2025, the council's Cabinet voted to approve the new Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which was produced following a public consultation on the draft strategy between April and June 2025. The strategy is a new requirement for the council, and sets out priority species and habitats for nature conservation in the county, giving advice on how different habitats can be improved by landowners to protect and encourage nature. Most of the area mapped out for Suffolk's nature priorities is private farmland, and the strategy does not make habitat improvement mandatory, but the officers who have produced the strategy will now work with farmers and landowners to support them and work to find investment for the measures outlined in the strategy. Landowners can use areas mapped in the strategy to produce 'units' of biodiversity for purchase by developers, as developers will be required to meet the government's new Biodiversity Net Gain requirements which state that all development should be increase biodiversity by a minimum of 10%. The units of biodiversity do not need to be on the site of or near the development.

The new strategy should also help Suffolk County Council to improve the land it owns in the county, for example County Farms, and local planning authorities will have to take account of the new strategy when development is considered. In the future, mayoral authorities like the one currently planned for Norfolk and Suffolk will be in charge of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for their area.

Following Cabinet approval, the strategy was shared with neighbouring authorities, Natural England and local partners like district and borough councils and the Broads Authority for their feedback.

You can read Suffolk's final and published Local Nature Recovery Strategy here, including an executive summary, which is a much shorter read: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/planning-waste-and-environment/local-nature-recovery-strategy-lnrs

New Funding for Buses and Sustainable Travel

In June 2025 we heard that the council had been given a grant of £8m from the Department for Transport for improving bus travel in the county during 2025-26, of which £2.8m was for service improvements and £5.2m of capital funding for improving bus stops, priority measures for buses on busy streets or upgrades to vehicles.

In December 2025 we heard that Suffolk had been awarded £27m of funding for bus services from the government's Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG), this can be used for routes, ticketing or improving infrastructure like bus stops and shelters. Previously known as the Bus Services Improvement Grant, communities and parish councils in Suffolk will be able to suggest improvements in their area and 'bid' for funding via the Suffolk on Board website: https://www.suffolkonboard.com/

The council has also been awarded just over £12m from Active Travel England to promote sustainable travel in the county. This can be used to invest in footpaths, cycle lanes and other infrastructure. Examples of how this funding has been used recently include pedestrian crossings in Bridge Street and College Road by Ipswich waterfront, and improved cycle routes including from Ipswich Hospital to the waterfront area, Nacton Road in Ipswich, Main Road in Martlesham, and within Woodbridge as part of the town's current active travel project.