

Annual Parish Report – 2024/25

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Motions

My group passed three successful motions at council over the year:

1. In May 2024, we proposed that the council lobby the government for proper, long-term funding for local councils and support policies to address the long-term funding of adult social care. We tabled this motion as the Local Government Association had recently estimated that councils in England will have a funding gap totalling £4bn over the next two years. Suffolk County Council is predicting a 'budget gap' of £33.1m for 2026-27 so this is a very real concern for Suffolk and will affect Suffolk's local services.
2. In July 2024, my group tabled a motion that the council would do everything it could to avoid delays with local infrastructure funded by developer contributions. We were aware that a lot of local projects that are due to be paid for by developers are very overdue, in some cases for years – for example, new pedestrian crossings for roads where there is new housing. Sometimes these works are due to be undertaken by the developer and the delay is caused by them, but our motion acknowledged that the design and programming of works by Suffolk County Council was also often delayed.
3. In December 2024, my group successfully proposed a policy for the council of 'Roofs before Rural' regarding solar panels. The motion noted that the new Labour government was proposing to triple the amount of solar power in the UK by 2030 and set out the council's position that rooftop solar was preferable to 'solar farms' which are becoming an increasing sight across the county. The council agreed to write to the government to seek assurances Suffolk's best quality agricultural land would be protected.

My group also proposed the following motions which were voted down by the Conservative administration at council:

1. In October 2024, my group tabled a motion to revise the Highways Maintenance Operating Procedure so that repairs to footways and pavements would be prioritized in areas with heavy footfall, or where a recent fall had been reported. This motion was rejected by the Conservatives.

Devolution and Local Government Reorganization

Since the publication of the government's White Paper in December, Suffolk councils have been scrambling to develop their proposals for reorganizing local government. Under the new system, Norfolk and Suffolk will have a joint mayor (with elections held in May 2026) leading a mayoral authority, with two tier government (county councils and district/borough councils) replaced by unitary councils – single councils that undertake all local services like

education, adult care, waste collection, housing and highways. Suffolk County Council's administration have been clear that they would prefer a single unitary council for Suffolk, and they ratified this decision by voting for it in the council chamber on 13 March and at Cabinet on 18 March. Opposition councillors, like my group and the Labour group, are less convinced that one massive council would bring decision-making closer to the communities, which is what devolution is supposed to enable. Councils have to submit interim plans to the government by 21 March, then detailed proposals in September, with a decision from government by the end of the year on what will happen. It is likely that councillors for the new council/s would be elected by Suffolk residents in May 2027, a year after the mayoral elections.

Suffolk's Library Service

At Cabinet in March 2025, the council administration voted to bring Suffolk's libraries back in-house at the end of the current contract for the library on 31 May. Suffolk Libraries, who have held the contract since the service was divested in 2012, were the only bidder for the contract, but negotiations broke down and the council felt it had no alternative but to bring the libraries back under council control. The proposal to do this was passionately opposed not just by Suffolk Libraries, but also Suffolk residents and the many volunteers and Friends groups who work for and raise money for libraries in their communities.

Following the Cabinet meeting, both my group and the Labour group submitted requests that the decision be 'called in' – a process by which an issue can be tabled at a meeting of the council's Scrutiny Committee to be looked at more closely. Both the requests were rejected by the council on Wednesday 27 March after being reviewed by the council's monitoring officer.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylons

At Cabinet in May 2024, the council voted to object to the proposed Norwich to Tilbury 400kV grid reinforcement and call for a pause until alternative options had been explored. The proposals which were reviewed included 183k of pylons, with four sections of underground cabling through and near the Dedham Vale National Landscape (the new name for an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the Waveney valley. The council were keen that more underground cabling take place in the Waveney valley than proposed, and it was agreed more generally that energy projects in the county needed to be coordinated better to reduce the impact on residents and the local environment, particularly as so many of them are due to be under construction at the same time. Other councils in the area have also objected to the plans. Since then, the National Grid has confirmed it will not be proposing any further underground cabling in the plans, holding several consultations with local residents which have been largely negatively received.

State of Suffolk's Roads

In July 2024, a report was brought to Scrutiny Committee which looked into the condition of Suffolk's roads, the amount spent by the council to repair them and how repair works were prioritised. The findings were that amount of funding available for repairing highways was around £17m per year, but £50m per year would be needed for an optimal programme of resurfacing. Works are prioritised by the council's Highway Maintenance Operational Plan, which sets out the parameters for repair work and the order of priority repairs. Unsurprisingly, main roads and roads which have a lot of traffic are prioritised over quieter

roads which do not. Having said this, the council is currently undertaking a scheme of resurfacing residential roads which have fallen into disrepair, having announced an additional £10m of funding for this project in May 2023.

Council Budget 2025-26

In February 2025, the council voted to adopt its proposed budget for the 2025-26 financial year. 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 across many 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. There is still a lot of concern about the level of debt the council is carrying from the Designated Schools Grant (DSG), a debt which is due to increase this year by £62.175m. Councils are allowed by the government to hold this 'negative reserve' until March 2026. The government is yet to come up with a solution for this issue after that date; many councils are holding enormous levels of this debt which they would not be able to pay off if they had to. In addition, the councils have to borrow money to cover the interest on the debt which affects their finances every year: over 2025-26, the debt will cause a £6.8m cost pressure for the council. The rising DSG debt is mostly for council services for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

The council is also forecasting that in the next few years, it will have budget 'gaps' that will only grow: £33.1m for 2026-27, and £96.2m in 2028-29. The council has lobbied the government for better funding – my group proposed a successful motion on this in May 2024. The council hopes that Local Government Reorganization (see above) will make enough savings to improve the medium and long term picture for local services.

Ofsted Inspection of Children's Services

In June 2024, the council was subject to an Ofsted inspection of its social care services for children and young people, known as an ILACS inspection (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services). These inspections are undertaken approximately every three years to judge how the council are performing in their function to support children who are vulnerable and in need of protection. Previously, in 2019, the council had been rated as 'Outstanding', but in 2024 it had dropped two grades and was assessed as 'Requires Improvement'. This meant that the council had to prepare an action plan for improvement, which was submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education. The council has recruited extra staff to and has organized peer reviews with other local authority to learn how to improve practice. It has also established a new Strengthening Services for Children and Families Board chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Nicola Beach. The council particularly needs to improve services for care leavers and ensure that young people leaving care are aware of the support they can access until they turn 25.

Improving Services for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND)

Following the poor Ofsted/CQC inspection report published in January last year, the council has been trying to improve SEND services. In May last year they produced and submitted a SEND Strategy, and in June they produced a Priority Action Plan for improvement, including

extra funding of £4.4m to recruit more staff, including Educational Psychologists. In July the council approved an additional £9.1m over three years to increase capacity to clear the council's backlog of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and Annual Reviews. This was funded from council reserves.

In January 2025, the council's Public Health team presented a SEND Needs Assessment for the county at the Health and Wellbeing Board, which forecast that SEND demand in Suffolk has risen sharply in recent years and was likely to continue to rise. It also found 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.

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service Inspection

In February 2025, the government published a report following its recent inspection of Suffolk's Fire and Rescue Service. Inspections for fire services are relatively new, with the first ones undertaken by the Home Office in 2018. The inspection report was not complimentary; it found that the service was good at preventing fires, protecting the public and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, but also that it needs improvement in several areas, including improving culture and morale, and behaviour of senior leaders, who it advised should act as role models and show they are committed to the values of the service through their behaviour, improving communication with fire service employees and making sure they felt confident about raising concerns. This report was followed shortly afterwards by allegations in the press by the Fire Brigades Union that Suffolk County Council had made mistakes processing firefighter pay and pensions for years and has not addressed them properly or listened to employee concerns about the errors. The council subsequently announced additional investment of an extra £1.6 million over two years to improve the service.

Warm Homes in Suffolk

This year saw the end of the Warm Homes Grant fund, in which £5m of government money intended to improve insulation and make houses more energy-efficient was returned to the government unspent by the council. The reason given for this was that the criteria for the scheme, which was set by the government, was too stringent and meant that many Suffolk families who needed help were unable to access the funding. There are still schemes available to help with making homes more energy-efficient though – The Suffolk Loft Insulation Offer is funded by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group (which includes Suffolk County Council) and this scheme will only close once the allocated funding has all been spent. Suffolk County Council is also running a new scheme to offer residents interest-free loans to upgrade the energy efficiency of their homes, that includes insulation but also solar panels, glazing and heat pumps. Loans are from £2k to £15K to be repaid over a maximum of seven years at 0% interest, but in order to be eligible, properties must have an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) band below C. Increasing insulation and making homes more energy-efficient will not only save people money on their heating bills, it is also helping the environment as less fuel will be consumed to keep homes warm. Please signpost people to these schemes using the links below:

- For the Suffolk Loft Insulation Offers, residents should visit <https://highloft.co.uk/pages/suffolk-council-200-loft-insulation-contribution> and fill in the form to receive a discount code
- For the interest free loan scheme, homeowners can check to see if their property has an existing Energy Certificate with an EPC band and record of their property size at gov.uk/find-energy-certificate. They can apply for the vouchers by visiting suffolkenergyassessment.co.uk. This scheme started in November and vouchers are being distributed on a first-come, first-served basis.

Update on Flooding

Following the Storm Babet flooding in October 2023, the council announced it was investing an extra £1m in investigating the causes of flooding and taking action to prevent further floods. As the lead local flood authority, the council undertakes investigations into flooding in the county regularly, but the level of flooding in autumn 2023 meant that far more investigations would need to be made than in other years. A year later, in November 2024, the council announced it would be allocating a further £1.5m from its reserves to deal with recommendations made in the 10 investigation reports published so far. A further 38 investigation reports have been commissioned by the council relating to Storm Babet flooding. The council also announced it would be writing to the government to request £20m to protect Suffolk from flooding, given that extreme weather will become more likely due to the effects of climate change.

In October 2024, Cabinet agreed a £2m contribution from the council towards protecting the A12 from flooding at Benacre, south of Lowestoft. Erosion of the coast meant that road would likely be flooded at that location at nearly every high tide within a couple of years. The total cost of the works, which includes two new pumping stations, clay embankments and a new saltmarsh, will be many millions, with the Environment Agency committing over £30m and Sizewell C agreeing to fund the rest. Since then, it has been revealed that the cost may be higher than expected, and the council has agreed to allocate and put aside an additional £2.7m contribution in case it is needed later in the construction period.