

## **County Councillor Beccy Hopfensperger's Report for Lackford Parish Council Meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2025**

### **LGR/Devolution**

In December last year the government invited SCC to enter discussions on how Local Government Reform looked like in Suffolk and whether SCC was interested in being put forward for the Devolution Priority Programme which would fast track those areas who are successful with regards to local government reorganisation. The government made it clear that there will no longer be any two-tier local government structures in the country such as we have in Suffolk and that unitary councils with mayoral combined authorities overseen by a mayor will be the way forward. SCC voted to express an interest on being included in the DPP and the government confirmed in January that Suffolk was successful in its interest.

SCC was then asked to submit an interim business case on what local government structure in Suffolk could look like by 21st March. The government also wrote to the other councils in two tier authorities asking them to submit similar business cases. The minister will then look at the business cases and then decide the direction of travel and a final business case will be submitted by September.

The elections for SCC were delayed in 2025 to allow the tight timescales for business cases to be met and the next elections for a directly elected mayor will take place in 2026.

SCC have come forward with a preferred option of one unitary for the whole of Suffolk and here is the reasoning behind that:-

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 today.

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 for 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.

**Cllr Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council’s cabinet member for devolution, local government reform and NSIPs, said:**

“The financial benefits of unitary local government are clear. By cutting unnecessary bureaucracy, the new council – whoever may serve on it – will have more money to invest in frontline public services, ensuring better value for taxpayers.

“But reorganisation must go beyond financial savings. It must also deliver greater accountability, speed up decision-making and lead to better outcomes for local communities. There is huge opportunity in pulling together services currently separated across the district, borough and county councils – such as housing and social care.

“If the government is serious about delivering savings, efficiencies, better outcomes for residents and financially sustainable local government, then there is only one answer - one council for Suffolk. Moreover, it is the only model that meets their criteria of serving over 500,000 people.

“One council for Suffolk will provide clear leadership, simplify access to services and eliminate the confusion of navigating multiple councils. Carving the county in two or three – as has been suggested - would defeat the purpose.”

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.

### **Library Services**

You will have seen in the press and social media that SCC have made the decision to take the library service back in house from the Suffolk Library services which has run the service since 2012. Please see below the reasons for this:-

**Suffolk’s 45 libraries to remain open and see new investment as Suffolk County Council plans to take service back in house**

- Business as usual as 45 libraries to remain open
- Opening hours maintained
- New mobile library vehicles and library computers across sites
- Important community asset protected

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 18 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 1

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 budget available for 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 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.

Councillor Philip Faircloth-Mutton, Suffolk County Council's cabinet member for environment, communities and equality, said:

"The future of Suffolk's 45 libraries will be in safe hands as part of our plans to protect and enhance the service.

"With these proposals, there will be no library closures, no reduction in library opening hours, and certainty and security for our most important asset - library staff and volunteers.

"Additionally, we propose new investment to buy new mobile library vehicles and upgrade computers across library sites.

"We know how important library services are to residents, particularly those who rely on them for education, access to information, support and, of course, books.

"A 30% cut to opening hours and the current management costs are unacceptable to Suffolk County Council. This is why we're taking action. We are responsible for libraries in Suffolk and this is the right thing to do to protect them and the services they provide to residents."

Suffolk County Council today published two open letters explaining its proposal, one to Suffolk residents and the other to Suffolk Libraries staff, volunteers and supporters. They are available to read on [www.suffolk.gov.uk](http://www.suffolk.gov.uk)

## **Background**

- Suffolk's library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on 31 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.
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