

February 2024 Town and Parish Newsletter

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Contents

[Page 4 – Public consultation on Suffolk County Council’s proposed devolution deal starts on 18th March](#)

A 10-week public consultation on our proposed devolution deal with the Government will start on 18th March and run through until 26th May.

[Page 4 - New Cabinet structure will strengthen SEND reform](#)

A column by Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council.

[Page 5 - Dragon Patcher lands in Suffolk to bolster response to rural potholes](#)

The inevitable increase in potholes on Suffolk’s roads this winter are set to be repaired quicker following innovative dragon patching technology being trialled in the county.

[Page 6 - Councils’ loft insulation offer for Suffolk homes](#)

Funding is available to help Suffolk residents make their homes warmer and save money on their energy bills.

[Page 7 - County Council Leader responds to District and Borough Councils letter regarding Housing Related Support](#)

Leader of Suffolk County Council’s response to a letter received from the Leaders of the District and Borough Councils regarding the County Council’s proposed budget changes relating to Housing Related Support.

[Page 11 - Have your say on Suffolk’s local transport plan](#)

Residents are invited to share their views on how they travel to help inform Suffolk’s Local Transport Plan.

[Page 12 - Your Suffolk Wedding website launched](#)

Suffolk Registration Service has launched a new website for couples looking to book weddings or Civil Partnerships in the county.

[Page 13 - Council budget approved with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable](#)

Suffolk County Council has confirmed its financial budget for 2024-25.

[Page 14- Local working parties to help advise on the future location of Suffolk’s local collections](#)

Suffolk County Council has confirmed that it will be inviting community representatives from both Lowestoft and Bury St Edmund's to form two new Working Parties.

[Page 15- See off the cowboys with Suffolk Trusted Trader scheme](#)

Residents and businesses are being encouraged to use the Suffolk Trusted Trader scheme.

[Page 16 - Chelmondiston couple sentenced following large social care payment fraud](#)

A couple who denied stealing over £200,000 worth of social care payments meant for their disabled son, were sentenced to a 2-year custodial sentence which was suspended for 2 years at Ipswich Crown Court today.

[Page 18 - More of Suffolk’s tree cover and orchards to be restored](#)

1,877 new trees are being planted across the county by Suffolk's councils, with a focus on re-establishing orchards.

Page 19 - Council to review weed control for roads and pavements

Suffolk County Council's Cabinet will reconsider how Suffolk Highways uses chemicals to control weed growth.

Page 20 - Former Suffolk Children's Home worker sentenced for dishonestly working a second job when on sick leave

A former Youth Support Practitioner employed by Suffolk County Council to work in one of its Children's Homes, has today been sentenced for dishonestly working a second job with a private care agency whilst on full sick pay from the Council, benefitting from £10,565.25 in sick pay and employer contributions.

Page 21 - £4.4 million to be spent on additional staff to strengthen SEND reform

Suffolk County Council's Cabinet confirmed today that 60 new members of staff will be recruited to drive forward important reform to the way special educational needs and disability (SEND) services are delivered in Suffolk.

Page 22 - Suffolk's wettest ever winter breaks highway response records

After months of extreme and sustained downpours, highways teams in Suffolk are breaking response and repair records whilst battling their most challenging operational period ever.

Page 23 - Applications open for new Suffolk Business Board

Suffolk County Council is inviting applications for a new Suffolk Business Board which aims to drive economic growth in the county.

Public consultation on Suffolk County Council's proposed devolution deal starts on 18th March

A 10-week public consultation on our proposed devolution deal with the Government will start on 18th March and run through until 26th May. The consultation will be in two main parts – an open survey, hosted by Suffolk County Council, that any residents can complete and a sample survey of 1000 Suffolk residents conducted independently by Ipsos Mori. The consultation will be available through our website www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution and social media. There will also be media coverage highlighting the consultation.

New Cabinet structure will strengthen SEND reform

A column by Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council.

In recent weeks, readers will no doubt have seen a lot of news stories about SEND services in Suffolk, following the latest inspection report published by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). This week I have taken decisive action to strengthen my cabinet in a reshuffle – including creating a much greater focus on improving SEND.

Experienced cabinet member Cllr Andrew Reid will take the role of cabinet member for SEND and education. The role previously included oversight of skills, but to enable more political focus and accountability on urgent improvements on SEND services, this has now been moved to Cllr Richard Smith to sit alongside his existing responsibilities for economic development, transport strategy and waste. Cllr Debbie Richards will support Cllr Reid as deputy cabinet member for SEND. Working with the DfE, we are also establishing a new SEND Improvement Board, with an independent chair. This is a requirement following the Ofsted/CQC inspection.

Continuing the changes to children and young people (CYP) leadership, serving cabinet member Cllr Bobby Bennett has been appointed as cabinet member for CYP services. Two deputy cabinet members have been promoted to cabinet roles – Cllr Philip Faircloth-Mutton is now cabinet member for equality and communities and Cllr Craig Rivett is cabinet member for public health and public protection.

Alongside these changes, further new faces come in as deputy cabinet members. Cllr Nadia Cenci becomes deputy cabinet member for property and county farms, Cllr David Roach becomes deputy cabinet member for fostering and adoption and Cllr Heike Sowa joins as deputy cabinet member for transformation.

I am confident in the determination and tenacity of both Andrew and Debbie to help council officers drive those improvements forward. As a cabinet, we have a collective mission - we must see real and lasting improvement in SEND services and deliver on the wider ambitions of this council. The people of Suffolk deserve nothing less.

Separately, there has also been change at a senior officer level within SEND services, with two senior leaders having left the organisation late last year and interim leadership in place.

A new executive director of children and young people is in the process of being recruited. The application window closed last week. This will be a key executive role and we are specifically looking for someone who understands SEND, knows what success looks like and who can deliver the much-needed cultural change that is needed and that Suffolk children and their families deserve.

I am sorry and deeply disappointed that the speed of change has been too slow and am determined to deliver improvements through leadership change, investments and culture change. Most importantly, I want the experience of children and families to be far better, emotionally sensitive and timely.

Getting this right for the children and young people in Suffolk is my top priority – a commitment shared by councillors and senior leadership team. This is not an empty pledge. We remain steadfast and resolved to go further and faster with our reforms.

Driving forward SEND reform will be paramount. Our job will be to build on the good work that is already underway, including investing more than £55 million to create more than 1,250 additional places in specialist and mainstream schools and the creation of specialist SEND support teams and training for all Suffolk schools to support them to meet the additional needs of children in mainstream schools. If approved by councillors next week, we are also proposing the additional investment of £4.4m in 2024/25 and £3.4m in 2025/26 to expand our statutory SEND teams and secure sufficient educational psychology resource to improve the quality and timeliness of Education Health and Care assessments and reviews. This investment comes at a time when Suffolk County Council is facing its most challenging budget.

Despite this challenge, it is right that we continue to invest in those who need it most and improve our service for the children, young people, and families in Suffolk.

Dragon Patcher lands in Suffolk to bolster response to rural potholes

Suffolk Highways has welcomed the new pothole-repairing machine to help fix the growing number of potholes experienced nationally during the winter season, with a trial set to initially target defects in rural Suffolk.

The Dragon Patcher is a machine that releases compressed air which cleans the surface of the road, before heating the surface to a temperature that enables repair material to bond effectively with the road surface, allowing the pothole to be repaired with an aggregate and hot bitumen material.

Compared with the traditional approach of repairing potholes, the Dragon Patcher can work five times faster. This trial is in addition to the potholes being repaired around the clock as part of our routine repair programme, during the past two months Suffolk Highways has repaired 2,851 potholes across Suffolk.

Fuelled by the biodiesel, HVO (hydrotreated vegetable oil), the patcher reduces raw material use and creates zero waste and has shown to provide significant carbon savings when compared to traditional patching techniques.

Councillor Paul West, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways, and Flooding, said:

"The recent cold and wet weather has expectedly brought a huge spike in the number of potholes appearing across our roads and we are working around the clock to tackle the current levels we are seeing.

"The arrival of the Dragon Patcher in Suffolk will help bolster our efforts in getting these defects repaired, especially focusing on rural roads where we can repair higher numbers, in a fraction of the time.

"This new piece of kit is one way in which our new highways contract strives to provide better value for Suffolk's taxpayers and works to reduce impact on the environment."

Once the trial ends in Suffolk, a decision will be taken on whether to roll out the technology across the county.

Councils' loft insulation offer for Suffolk homes

Suffolk's Public Sector Leaders have launched a Suffolk Loft Insulation offer, teaming up with builders' merchant Travis Perkins to offer Suffolk residents a significant reduction on loft insulation.

There are four product options available, and residents will receive a 50% discount off their purchase (up to £200), with free delivery.

According to The Energy Saving Trust, it is estimated that an uninsulated home loses a quarter of its heat through its roof. An effective way to reduce this heat loss, and heating bills, is to insulate your loft, attic or flat roof. Correctly installed insulation should pay for itself many times over in its 40-year lifetime.

Councillor Gerald Kelly, Chair of the Suffolk Environment Cabinet Members group, said:

"Good insulation is a simple addition to immediately improve the warmth and comfort of your home. This should mean you have to put the heating on less, which will save you money and also be making a positive contribution to climate change.

"Suffolk Public Sector Leaders are continually looking for ways like the Loft Insulation Grant to support Suffolk residents to have more energy efficient homes, and drive down the county's carbon emissions for a more sustainable future."

Andrew Hunt, Account Manager at Travis Perkins has said:

“Travis Perkins is thrilled to be working with Suffolk’s councils to offer this fantastic support for Suffolk residents. With energy prices still high and an ambition to reduce Suffolk’s carbon emissions, we’re delighted to offer a discount which will benefit and reach many.”

The offer is open to anyone and will close once the allocated funding has been spent. To find out more visit www.greensuffolk.org/at-home/grants/. Simply fill out the [online order form](#) and Travis Perkins will be in touch to arrange payment and delivery.

The Loft Insulation Grant is being funded by Suffolk’s Public Sector Leaders and Travis Perkins and will help contribute to Suffolk’s Climate Emergency Plan and our vision for Suffolk to become Carbon Neutral by 2030.

County Council Leader responds to District and Borough Councils letter regarding Housing Related Support

In response to a letter received from the Leaders of the District and Borough Councils regarding the County Council’s proposed budget changes relating to Housing Related Support, the Leader of Suffolk County Council, Cllr. Matthew Hicks, with support from Cllr. Becky Hopfensperger as Cabinet Member for Adult Care, have issued the following reply:

Dear Councillors,

Thank you for your letter dated 12th February regarding the County Council’s budget proposals, specifically in relation to the proposed changes around the funding of Housing Related Support.

Before setting out the reasons behind the difficult decisions the County Council is having to take, I wanted to correct some inaccuracies within your letter.

1. There is a suggestion that these proposals were a complete surprise to District and Borough Councils and that we had agreed with you to maintain HRS services whilst plotting “behind the scenes” to end funding. We have been warning the public, your officers, and councillors since autumn last year of the financial challenges the County Council faces. These conversations have included multiple references to HRS, and the fact that ongoing funding would come under greater pressure as a non-statutory service. Details of budget plans, including HRS, were published on the 3rd of January ahead of the Scrutiny Committee’s budget meeting on the 11th of January 2024. Any suggestion you were unaware of this as a potential outcome is disingenuous in my view.
2. You state that Suffolk County Council is reneging on contracts; this is not the case. All contracts have specific clauses relating to termination. At this stage, no contracts have been ended early, although I accept that this will be the case. We are already working with providers to understand current provision, and in accordance with the published proposals, we are looking to phase these changes out gradually to allow providers more time to discuss with us how to achieve a managed exit from the service.

3. You state that HRS provides over 700 accommodation places; that is not entirely accurate. HRS is the provision of support services, not the accommodation itself. Suffolk County Council does not procure housing for people; any costs in relation to the housing itself are met, in the main, by a person's housing benefit claim. What we commission is 5 hours of 1 to 1 support per week to people, to help them with maintaining that home. This support varies considerably from person to person and can be as simple as helping someone complete a tenancy agreement or help them get to the local job centre to more intensive support. As we have clearly outlined, we are committed to working with providers and D&BCs to support the retention of accommodation from which HRS is provided from wherever possible. We appreciate that this may not always be feasible, but we will endeavour to work with partners to try to achieve this through phasing changes.
4. You state that over the two years £3 million will be saved; to clarify, as per the published proposals, whilst £3m will be saved through these proposed changes we will be retaining £1.5 million of the overall HRS budget to help mitigate the impact of these changes and this will include ensuring we appropriately support those we have a statutory duty towards.
5. You state the council has "reintroduced" bidding for arts funding – to be clear this decision was not a reintroduction of anything, as the core funding currently provided for non-statutory services such as supporting the arts will end as planned. What we have done is to use government provided funding to support the arts and other heritage organisations with project funding, which will benefit of all of Suffolk, not just nine organisations.

Unprecedented Financial Challenges

In your letter, you state that you all "recognise" the budget pressures that the County Council faces. I'm afraid that just simply recognising those pressures without also accepting what impact those pressures create, is simplistic and meaningless.

The demand for our key services is increasing at such a rate that our funding isn't keeping pace. Over the last year alone, what we need to spend on children's services has increased by 28% and on adult care by 14%. The scale of these increases represents an enormous challenge to this authority (and other County Councils nationally) has put considerable pressure on the delivery of the County Council's statutory services.

In response to these unprecedented increases in demand, we are proposing over the next two years to put £74 million towards caring for adults and families who need support. This is not money we currently have but, due to this being statutory demand, it is money we **must** find.

To achieve this, the authority must make savings of £65 million and to do this will require us to take some incredibly difficult decisions. Already we are proposing £11 million of staff savings, extensive service transformations, as well as increasing Council Tax (and the Adult Social Care Precept) to the maximum allowed for residents across Suffolk.

Even with the welcome additional monies received from Central Government last month, which I and other County Council Leaders lobbied successfully for, we will still not have the money we need to pay for this increase in care budgets. As a result, Suffolk County Council is going to have to spend £8.7 million from its dwindling reserves to balance its budget this year.

This situation is not sustainable – If the County Council is forced to continue to fund its statutory services from our reserves at the levels experienced currently, then the authority's reserves will have run out completely by 2026/27. What then for the statutory services residents rely upon, what then for the care and support people need?

I will not allow this to happen.

Suffolk County Council's renewed focus on statutory services

Due to the financial challenges, Suffolk County Council is prioritising its statutory services over non-statutory services, in the same way that District and Borough Councils already do.

In our proposals, when we talk about rebalancing the roles and responsibilities of HRS, we mean where statutory need is identified, the applicable local authority will meet and fund that need. Where it isn't met other options will be explored and assistance provided where possible, but for the avoidance of doubt, the status quo cannot continue - that Suffolk County Council will be expected to fund non-statutory services, which are then used by other councils to help them meet their own statutory priorities and needs.

In your letter you say:

“Our statutory responsibilities as housing authorities is to provide accommodation to eligible people who are homeless. For the avoidance of doubt not everyone who doesn't have a home is eligible for accommodation under our statutory duties. This means there is a significant possibility of rough sleeping numbers increasing significantly over the next 12 months as a result of your proposal – if you see it through.”

I think this is a remarkable statement to make in a letter admonishing Suffolk County Council for having no choice but to focus its limited resources on providing its statutory core services when you are content to do exactly the same thing in relation to homelessness. Why the double standard? Why is it acceptable for the District and Borough Councils to only provide a statutory minimum with something as important as homelessness, but a “Catastrophe” when the County Council announces it has no choice but to do the same in relation to 5 hours of non-statutory support a week?

I believe the reason for the double standard is that District and Borough Councils have put themselves in the position where they are relying on Suffolk County Council funded services to deliver key elements of both their housing and homelessness strategies, as evidenced where councils like East Suffolk have built a proportion of their Rough Sleeper provision on the back of HRS services commissioned by the County Council and linked premises. I appreciate entirely that those strategies are now at risk if the provision is removed due to

SCC having to stop our funding for HRS, but that is not something the County Council is responsible for.

I'm sorry, but Suffolk County Council does not have enough money to fund its own statutory services without using its reserves – so it certainly doesn't have the funds to help deliver yours too.

We will always prioritise vulnerable people and care leavers.

Looking after the health and wellbeing of the people of Suffolk is a vital role for the County Council – and is at the heart of our ambitions.

As I have already said, if the budget proposals are agreed, Suffolk County Council will be investing an additional £74 million over two years in supporting the statutory care and support needs of people in Suffolk. That will result in a total spend within Adult Social Care of £351.8 million over the upcoming year and £189 million for Children's services.

That means that should the budget be agreed for next year, £77 out of every £100 spent by the County Council will be used supporting the most vulnerable in our communities. I think that more than demonstrates the level of commitment this authority has towards supporting vulnerable adults, families, and children in our county.

Your letter specifically mentioned Care Leavers, so to avoid any unnecessary scaremongering or misunderstandings, I want to restate that Suffolk County Council takes its statutory responsibilities as a corporate parent incredibly seriously. To clarify, there is specific support we already have in place for care leavers, and this will not change with the ending of HRS. Part of the £1.5m of HRS funding we are holding back will be used for this purpose.

- The leaving care service in Suffolk has a comprehensive offer for care leavers, which includes support to live independently and source accommodation. Each care leaver has an allocated personal advisor whose role it is offer advice, support and information to help young people get ready to leave care and live independently.
- We have a project in place – Skills 4 Life, which is commencing across Suffolk to ensure that, working with partners, we support young people to obtain advice to be tenancy ready and manage their money and wellbeing.
- Young people who leave residential care and supported accommodation as a care leaver also receive support from our Staying Close team, who will continue to work with that young person to ensure they make a successful transition to adulthood.
- The Leaving Care Service also offers homeless prevention advice for young people and is working with colleagues to offer housing surgeries to upskill staff.

Working together

Whilst much may have changed since May 2023, I agree with your comments about working together, and the collective ability we have in Suffolk to tackle difficult issues, I very much hope that this will remain to be the case.

I would stress that should the budget proposal be ratified we will continue to be committed to working closely with partners, including District and Borough Councils, who have statutory responsibilities to provide accommodation to eligible people who are homeless and, providers to help mitigate any increase in homelessness which may occur should demand increase or, there is a reduction in accommodation options.

In the spirit of collaboration, and as HRS is something that helps you to deliver your strategies and priorities around both temporary housing and homelessness, perhaps each of you would agree to contribute £600,000 to the County Council to fund HRS until the end of 2026? I understand that for some of you this would represent a considerable saving when compared to the actual cost of the provision you are using. Your contribution would also give officers the time you feel they need to plan how you are going to provide these services going forward.

In any event, I am more than happy to ask officers here at the County Council to arrange further meetings with District and Borough colleagues, because as you know, these meetings regarding HRS have already been happening.

What will not happen, however, is Suffolk County Council continuing to pay for non-statutory services it can no longer afford to fund.

Yours Sincerely

Cllr. Matthew Hicks
Leader of Suffolk County Council

Cllr. Beccy Hopfensperger
Cabinet Member for Adult Care

Have your say on Suffolk's local transport plan

Residents are invited to share their views on how they travel to help inform Suffolk's Local Transport Plan.

The plan sets out a long-term vision for transport in Suffolk and covers key themes such as decarbonisation of transport, strengthening the local economy, promoting health, wellbeing and social inclusion, and creating better-connected places that encourage a range of transport choices.

Suffolk County Council is asking for feedback on the key themes proposed for the fourth version of the plan, which will cover the period until 2040 and respond to long-term transport opportunities and challenges facing Suffolk and the UK as a whole.

A link to the survey can be found at <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/ltp4>. The consultation will run for eight weeks until 8 April 2024.

Feedback from the consultation will be collated and inform the production of the draft local transport plan. The full draft document will then be subject to further consultation later in the year.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Skills, Transport Strategy and Waste, said:

“A lot has changed since we wrote our last Local Transport Plan. Many people’s travel habits have changed permanently since the pandemic and so it is important that we hear from residents to take this into account.

“This consultation has been designed to seek your feedback at an early stage and to help us to develop a transport plan that reflects the needs and aspirations of as much of the local community as possible.”

Your Suffolk Wedding website launched

Suffolk Registration Service has launched a new website for couples looking to book weddings or Civil Partnerships in the county.

The website is designed to help couples plan their perfect day, whether they are looking for a small and intimate ceremony at a Register Office, a bespoke ceremony at one of over 130 approved wedding venues or a bespoke ceremony at their own home or at an unlicensed venue.

Featuring a comprehensive guide to the different wedding options, the website also addresses the legal requirements and fees and includes a step-by-step guide on how to organise a wedding, if couples are unsure where to start.

The website showcases the more than 130 venues licensed by the Registration Service, where couples can get legally married, as well as the Register Service’s own ceremony rooms.

Cllr Philip Faircloth-Mutton, Cabinet Member for Equality and Communities, said:

“We are delighted to launch our new website, which is a one-stop shop for everything related to weddings and Civil Partnerships in Suffolk. “We want to make it easy and convenient for couples to find the information they need and to book their wedding with us. The website highlights our different wedding options for every budget and preference, and really showcases Suffolk as a wedding destination.”

Couples interested in booking a wedding can visit the website, www.weddings.suffolk.gov.uk and fill out an online enquiry form.

Alternatively, contact the Registration Service by phone or email:

Bury St Edmunds

0345 607 2060

bury.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich	0345 607 2050	ipswich.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk
Lowestoft	0345 607 2070	lowestoft.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk
Sudbury	0345 607 2080	stowmarketsudbury.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk
Stowmarket	0345 607 2080	stowmarketsudbury.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk
Woodbridge	0345 607 2090	woodbridge.registrars@suffolk.gov.uk

Council budget approved with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable

Suffolk County Council has confirmed its financial budget for 2024-25.

The £752.8m package was approved at the Full Council meeting on Thursday 15 February 2024, with the priority to protect vulnerable adults and children across the county.

Despite the recently announced uplift in government funding and asking residents for the maximum Council Tax contribution, it is still not sufficient to cover the rising costs imposed by inflation, or the increasing levels of demand for services - in particular children's care, special educational needs, and disabilities (SEND) and home to school transport.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, said:

Focusing on those children who have extremely demanding needs and no-one else to turn to, is the right thing to do. The same is true of adults who we want to help lead independent lives, or to have the best quality of life possible.

However, as a direct result of the government's recent intervention to provide further funding, the following proposals were approved:

- £500,000 of project funding will be made available to all arts and heritage organisations in Suffolk from April 2025 – it is intended that this funding will be available every year going forward
- £528,000 of core funding to nine arts and heritage organisations in Suffolk will end in March 2025
- £45,000 will be reinstated to support the County Music Service from April 2024
- £9 million of reserves will be used to balance the 2024-25 budget

To provide care and services for vulnerable children and adults, the next two years will see an additional £42.7 million allocated to children's services, and an additional £29.9 million for adult services. However this means £64.7 million of savings needs to be found at the same time.

These significant savings over the next two years include:

- £11 million of staffing costs through changing the way services are delivered and restructuring across the council

- £30.6 million of additional savings from an extension of the council's hugely successful Adult Social Care Transformation programme

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, said:

"Balancing this budget has been incredibly tough. But by prioritising our spending on those in greatest need, they will hopefully not find life incredibly tough.

"Focusing on those children who have extremely demanding needs and no-one else to turn to, is the right thing to do. The same is true of adults who we want to help lead independent lives, or to have the best quality of life possible.

"These are very expensive services to provide. It does not leave us with as much money as we would like to invest in every other service that we are required to deliver. We have just 23p in every £1 to maintain highways and footpaths, fund libraries, run a fire and rescue service, tackle climate change, and so much more.

"Approving the budget today is not the end of this piece of work. In many ways it is just the beginning, as we must deliver on the millions of pounds of savings we've identified over the next two years."

The council's budget will increase by 8.6% (from £693.0 million to £752.8 million), some of which is generated by a 4.99% increase in the council's share of Council Tax, and additional Government funding.

The increase of 4.99% to Council Tax is made up of a 2.99% increase in general Council Tax and a 2.00% increase dedicated to funding adult care. This will see the council's share of a Band B property's bill rise by £1.12 per week, compared to last year.

Local working parties to help advise on the future location of Suffolk's local collections

Following the full council decision on 15 February, Suffolk County Council has confirmed that it will be inviting community representatives from both Lowestoft and Bury St Edmund's to form two new Working Parties to consider local access to historical material.

The County Council has made clear it is committed to working with local stakeholders and depositors to develop alternative options, which could allow relevant collections to remain in the local area.

Any proposals will need to be locally funded, but the County Council will offer important practical support by advising on technical issues such as storage conditions, insurance, security, and public access.

Councillor Philip Faircloth-Mutton, Cabinet Member for Communities & Equalities said:

“Since my appointment, I have been clear that I want to work with local residents and organisations to investigate which local collections may be able to remain in the area, rather than being moved to Suffolk's flagship storage facility ‘The Hold’ in Ipswich. For example, we have already begun discussions on how the Bury Psalter could remain in Bury St Edmunds.

“The working parties will provide an environment for us to work with local depositors and develop local solutions together.”

Relevant stakeholder groups will be contacted by the end of the month with further details and proposed dates for the first meetings.

Any local depositors who would like the arrangements for their collections to be considered by the new Working Parties should contact SuffolkArchivesEngagement@suffolk.gov.uk in the first instance.

Following the approval of the County Council's budget proposals the majority of the records are still planned to move to The Hold and the North-East and West Suffolk branches of the archive service will close.

Centralising the three branches into one brings Suffolk in line with the majority of archive services across the country and will enable the Council to deliver a service that is better value for tax-payers money.

See off the cowboys with Suffolk Trusted Trader scheme

Suffolk Trading Standards is urging people to protect themselves from unscrupulous doorstep operators by only using businesses approved by the Trusted Trader scheme.

Suffolk Trusted Trader is a business partnership scheme where participants have completed a full vetting process and agree to trade fairly under a Code of Practice.

This covers transparent quoting and carrying out work, only charging a fair and reasonable price, and dealing with complaints promptly.

The advice comes following recent incidents involving residents and businesses across the county where rogue traders have ripped them off.

- In Lowestoft an elderly woman was approached at the door by men who offered to clean her gutters for £15. She agreed but the traders then claimed the roof was leaking and tiles had moved and charged her £1,250. They insisted on cash and advised her to visit multiple cash points to be able to withdraw a greater sum of money. It was only when the woman's daughter learned what had happened that she was able to intervene and the traders returned £750.
- A gang offering to patch up potholes in business car parks is known to have claimed at least two victims. One company boss near Bury St Edmunds who agreed to the work found the traders tarmacking the whole car park. When approached, the trader became aggressive, threatened the boss and demanded £10,000 in cash.

Fearful of the threats the businessman agreed to pay £6,500 in cash. Another business, a pub near Sudbury, was told they had been sent by the brewery and the landlord agreed to them starting work, but they also started tarmacking the whole car park. When challenged the traders became aggressive, demanding £1,600 in cash. The landlord refused to pay but has since received intimidating telephone calls, with threats to return to dig up the car park.

- In Newmarket residents were approached at the door by an individual leafleting for a roofing company. At one property the trader advised it would cost £280 to clean and seal the driveway, but then dropped the price to £180 when the resident declined. At another property, the trader advised that it would cost £250, but then dropped the price to £150.

Graham Crisp, Head of Suffolk Trading Standards, said:

“We strongly advise householders and companies to use Trusted Trader.

“It is a scheme that is all about giving consumers confidence in the work that is being done and in the businesses carrying it out.

“Invariably rogue traders are just out to make a quick buck at the expense of their customers and, sadly, we have seen cases where they become aggressive when confronted. Please report them to us.”

Councillor Craig Rivett, Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection, said:

“Traders must go through a strict procedure to join this scheme, so householders can be assured that the people they are hiring meet high standards.

“I would encourage people to use the scheme and for businesses to apply to join it.

“Members not only get support from the Council but are also able to highlight their involvement though using the official logo on their marketing materials, giving potential customers the assurance that they are reputable and dependable.”

It costs companies £252 including VAT a year for membership of the scheme, which is refundable if applicants fail to meet vetting requirements.

To become a Suffolk Trusted Trader businesses must have a minimum of six months clean trading history, then fill in an online application form at <https://trustedtrader.team/Suffolk/signup>

Anyone contacted by traders on the doorstep should report them to Trading Standards via 0808 223 1133.

Chelmondiston couple sentenced following large social care payment fraud

A couple who denied stealing over £200,000 worth of social care payments meant for their disabled son, were sentenced to a 2-year custodial sentence which was suspended for 2 years at Ipswich Crown Court today.

They were also handed an order to complete 20 days of rehabilitation. Simon Toloui was also sentenced to 200 hours of unpaid community service. This followed a successful prosecution by Suffolk County Council in what is believed to be one of the largest direct payment frauds.

Rebecca and Simon Toloui of Main Road, Chelmondiston pleaded not guilty in February 2021 to charges of fraud by abuse of position between June 2015 to March 2019 in respect of dishonestly and thereby intending to make a gain for themselves, abusing their position as recipients of direct payment social care funds for their disabled son. A trial commenced in November 2023 lasting 5 weeks with the Jury unanimously finding both defendants guilty in early December 2023.

The Tolouis were responsible for managing their son's direct payment from the Council that was meant to be used to pay employed carers and for activities as agreed in his care and support plan. The money was paid by the Council into a holding account run by Suffolk Independent Living who would be instructed by the Tolouis what payments to be made and also ran a payroll service for the carers the Tolouis employed.

Over time, their son's needs became more complex, and the care package and payments increased, eventually moving to his own accommodation and assessed as needing 2 carers, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week which the Council funded through the direct payment.

Following a review of how the direct payment was being used, concerns were raised, and an investigation began. This found that between July 2015 to March 2019, invoices totalling £188,850.40 were sent by the Tolouis to Suffolk Independent Living from a business allegedly providing carers to their son. The business in fact was their own and no such carers had looked after their son. The payments were either kept in their business account or transferred to their personal accounts and was spent on their own lifestyle.

Furthermore, the investigation found that between July 2015 to August 2016, the Tolouis sent requests to Suffolk Independent Living totalling £18,800 to be reimbursed for paying respite carers, when no such carers existed.

Throughout the investigation the Tolouis created further false documents to show alleged hours provided by carers through their business and came up with a number of explanations which were found to be untrue.

During the investigation, the direct payment to the Tolouis ceased and the Council worked with an experienced care provider to transition care arrangements and ensure their son was receiving the assessed level of care he needed.

Suffolk County Council will now be pursuing a Proceeds of Crime Hearing, with the aim of recouping stolen funds.

Speaking after the sentencing Cllr. Beccy Hopfensperger, Cabinet Member for Adult Care said:

"The fact these people deliberately arranged less care hours for a disabled person and pocketed the remaining balance to fund their own extravagant lifestyle, is one thing. The fact that person was their own son is shocking and appalling to me.

This fraud was entirely deliberate and involved careful planning by lying to social care practitioners, finance staff and to the carers they employed to look after their son. Throughout the investigation they sought to deceive investigators with further lies and this continued during the Crown Court trial.

I am pleased the Jury saw through this.

I want to thank the Counter-Fraud Team and Legal Services for their hard work in successfully prosecuting this case. I hope this outcome serves as a clear warning to others who may be thinking of trying to defraud social care. Suffolk County Council will always vigorously pursue and prosecute people who steal from the taxpayer."

More of Suffolk's tree cover and orchards to be restored

Suffolk County Council has secured funding of £201,213 from the government's Local Authority Treescapes Fund on behalf of Babergh District Council, East Suffolk Council, Mid Suffolk District Council, Ipswich Borough Council and West Suffolk Council.

The funding will go towards the planting of the trees, many of which are 'standards' around six feet in height when planted. The funding also covers three years of maintenance to help the trees become established.

The Fund aims to restore tree cover in non-woodland areas which may have been impacted by issues such as disease, habitat degradation or ageing tree stock. Many of the proposed projects will involve their local community and pupils from local schools.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, said:

"We have now made three successful bids to the Local Authority Treescapes Fund on behalf of local councils, bringing in around half a million pounds to plant and maintain 7,604 trees in recent years.

"We are re-introducing tree cover where it has been lost. Successful tree-planting doesn't have to cover many acres of land – small residential plantings can have an equally significant impact on local residents and wildlife.

"Access to a green space helps improve our health and wellbeing, and can be havens for insects and support wildlife. It's crucial that we continue to protect and enhance our local environment, and help reverse the decline in Suffolk's biodiversity."

Creating more orchards is one of the themes across the planting projects. Nationally, there has been a decline in the number of orchards because of commercial pressures and increased imports.

This loss of orchards has impacts on the species they support, with less blossom and fruit for food, and less shelter and shading. It also means we are losing some of our heritage varieties and reducing genetic diversity.

One example of this is the creation of a community orchard in Woods Meadow Country Park, near Lowestoft. Local varieties of apple, plum, gage and cherry trees will be sourced from the Suffolk & Apples & Orchards Project. The trees will be cared for by wardens, the Woods Meadow volunteer group, the local primary school, and local residents. The fruit will be available for the local visitors to the park to pick and eat, but also a good source of food for birds and wildlife.

Council to review weed control for roads and pavements

In February 2022, the council agreed to stop using glyphosate in its routine weed treatment programmes, to find more natural alternatives to help protect the local environment.

However, the alternative products proved unable to meet requirements, which was further exacerbated by exceptional growing conditions. Multiple applications were sometimes needed which could introduce other negative environmental impacts.

It has proved a challenge to reduce high performing treatments, whilst significantly mitigating the environmental impact. Other local authorities locally have experienced a similar situation.

Councillor Paul West, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Ipswich, operational highways and flooding, said:

"It is important that we trial different methods to maintain weeds on our highway network, and strike a balance between spending taxpayers' money carefully, protecting the environment and considering public safety on our roads and pavements.

"Part of that balance is making sure that whatever treatment we apply, it is effective – and that includes looking to reintroduce glyphosate to some of our operations for the best possible performance.

"We've monitored the work that we've done since moving away from glyphosate on our roads and pavements and listened to feedback from residents. Some were pleased that we were using less chemicals, but others thought that weeds had thrived too much. We agree that the different treatments haven't worked as well as we'd hoped."

Regular weed treatment on our highway network will continue using a variety of methods, with plans for glyphosate being considered only when appropriate – the ambition still remains to reduce the use of glyphosate as far as possible.

Teams will continue to monitor and research the different approaches being used to remove weeds on our roads and pavements. Where needed, glyphosate would be used responsibly as it is one of the most cost-effective and long-lasting solutions.

Former Suffolk Children's Home worker sentenced for dishonestly working a second job when on sick leave

A former Youth Support Practitioner employed by Suffolk County Council to work in one of its Children's Homes, has today been sentenced for dishonestly working a second job with a private care agency whilst on full sick pay from the Council, benefitting from £10,565.25 in sick pay and employer contributions.

Samantha Harris, of Pott Hall Road, Bury St Edmunds, was sentenced today to 6 months custody suspended for 2 years and 15 days of rehabilitation activity. She was also ordered to pay the Council compensation and investigatory and legal costs, totalling £17,051.41 and a victim surcharge of £154.

She pleaded guilty on 15 January 2024 at Ipswich Magistrates to one charge of fraud over the period December 2022 to May 2023; namely dishonesty making false representations to Council staff concerning her health with the intention of making a gain.

Speaking after the sentencing, Cllr. Bobby Bennett, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services, said:

"Today sends a very strong message to anyone thinking of defrauding the public purse to think again. The behaviour of this individual was unacceptable and the vast majority of officers would never act in this way. I thank our counter fraud service and our Legal Team for their hard work and professionalism in pursuing this case to a successful conclusion. We will not tolerate fraud and we will rigorously investigate all allegations of fraud."

Concerns were raised with the Council's Counter Fraud Service by the Children's Home Management Team, who had been contacted by a known care agency enquiring if HARRIS was on sick leave as she was currently working for them. Separate disciplinary and criminal investigations were launched and ran in parallel.

The investigation found that Harris had five separate sickness absences, with the longest one being two months, working for a private care agency during each absence. Whilst legitimate GP sick notes had been provided by Harris to her manager, it was found that she had exaggerated the extent of her illness compared to the work she was able to undertake for the care agency which was very similar and physically demanding in some instances.

Harris dishonestly messaged management and colleagues at the Children's Home about how unwell she was during times she was on shift with the private care agency; and even shared a picture of a COVID-19 positive lateral flow test stating how bad her symptoms were, when in fact she worked shifts in her second job during this period.

£4.4 million to be spent on additional staff to strengthen SEND reform

Suffolk County Council's Cabinet confirmed today that 60 new members of staff will be recruited to drive forward important reform to the way special educational needs and disability (SEND) services are delivered in Suffolk.

New Cabinet Member for Education and SEND, Andrew Reid, today reaffirmed Suffolk County Council's commitment to ensuring improvements to the SEND service go further and faster. This includes an increase in permanent SEND staff of nearly 15%.

These new posts will support the improvement of the quality and timeliness of assessments, plans, reviews, and communications with families.

Councillor Andrew Reid, Cabinet Member for Education and SEND, said:

"We must continue to invest in this service to bring about wide scale improvement. This includes investing in staff resources, so we have the capacity to deliver change. We continue to focus on this priority – we owe it to Suffolk's children and young people."

In January, a report by Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) found significant concerns with the way SEND services are delivered by the NHS and Suffolk County Council. In response to this, the Local Area Partnership, made up of Suffolk County Council, the NHS Suffolk and Northeast Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB) and NHS Norfolk and Waveney ICB, must submit a Priority Action Plan by March 7 outlining the improvement programme.

In order to support this improvement programme, an additional £4.4million was signed off during the budget discussions at Full Council on February 15. Of this, £3.4million will provide 46 new full-time posts – a increase of 14.76% in current staffing levels. An additional £1million will be spent in 2024/25 to fund 14 temporary posts.

Cabinet today agreed to delegate authority to approve the priority action plan to be submitted to Ofsted and CQC on March 7 to the statutory director of children's services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Education and SEND. The priority action plan is also being approved at the Suffolk and North-East Essex ICB Executive and the Norfolk and Waveney ICB Executive on 4 March 2024.

Suffolk's wettest ever winter breaks highway response records

Storm Babet saw nearly two months' worth of rain fall in 24 hours, the subsequent storms and severe weather events saw more sustained rainfall, leading up to what Met Office described as the fifth wettest February on record since 1836 with several days still to go.

As a result of the extreme weather, Suffolk Highways has seen an 82% increase in requests for action on the highway - 18,000 additional customers reports so far during the 2023/24 financial year.

The number of drainage and flooding issues have increased by a staggering 364% in the last five months when compared to the same period in 2022/23. Suffolk Highways has also responded to 2,117 emergency incidents in the same period, which represents a 64% increase on last year.

The increased wet weather coupled with occasional freezing temperatures this time of year results in a sharp rise in pothole breakouts. Despite these challenges, highways has completed 34% more repairs to potholes in 2023/24 when compared with the previous year.

To help keep up with this unparalleled increase in demand, Suffolk County Council is investing more resource and trialing new ways of working, including:

- Increased highway funding allocated to fix potholes, resurface roads and repair drainage
- 70% increase in highway crews to maintain and repair the roads
- Launching a trial of new 'Dragon Patcher' equipment – a pothole-repairing machine which can repair potholes up to five times faster than traditional methods
- Trailing a 'Road Mender' – a patching machine used in urban areas which will help boost productivity and present more environmental benefits

Councillor Paul West, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Ipswich, operational highways and flooding, said:

"The extremes of weather we have witnessed across the county since October is like nothing we have experienced before. The rainfall has been heavy, relentless and unforgiving.

"Much like other local authorities up and down the country, this weather has presented us with some unprecedented challenges, especially when it comes to maintaining the highway network – despite this, Suffolk is rising to the challenge.

"It is clear from the statistics that highways teams are doing more than ever before, working harder and faster, resulting in more pothole repairs and more drainage issues resolved. Unfortunately, the demand outweighs the progress we are making so there continues to be much to do.

"I want to reassure Suffolk's residents that we are doing everything we can to ensure the highway network is being maintained to a safe standard, however during this time I ask that residents take extra care when travelling and report any issues you spot to us. I also want to thank residents for their patience and understanding during this time."

Applications open for new Suffolk Business Board

Inspirational and influential local businesspeople are sought to form the board, which will represent the local business community and will help steer the local economic strategy to create a stronger and higher-skilled economy for Suffolk.

The board will meet 4-6 times a year to help shape economic strategy and priorities for Suffolk, to oversee delivery of funded programmes such as business support and skills training for Suffolk, and to work closely with partners such as District councils, neighbouring counties, and national economic and trade bodies.

The county council is seeking candidates who represent the diversity of Suffolk's people and economy, whether that be sector, geography, or business type.

Expressions of interest should be emailed to businessboard@suffolk.gov.uk by Friday 22 March, with a short biography or CV and a brief cover letter outlining your interest in the opportunity and what area(s) of expertise you feel you could bring.

Board membership is a voluntary position and terms are for up to three years from the date of appointment. The Business Board will be supported by a dedicated team of council officers.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Skills, Transport Strategy and Waste, said:

"The new Suffolk Business Board will be a forum for business, education and local political leaders to shape a compelling economic strategy and identity for Suffolk, attract new investment and act as an advocate for Suffolk's economy at a national level."

"Successful candidates will be the voice of business in Suffolk, and their knowledge and experience will be invaluable in creating a stronger economy and better jobs for our county."

The establishment of the Business Board follows the Government's announcement in 2023 that Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) would be integrated into upper tier local authorities. The Suffolk Business Board will succeed the existing New Anglia LEP Board which ceases on 31 March 2024.