

Cllr Matthew Hicks 2024 Annual Report for SCC on behalf of Cllr Peter Gould

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. 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. 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, which has focused on reducing demand for more expensive social care options by boosting people's independence and ability to stay well for longer through innovative methods including cutting edge care technology. This transformation programme has already saved £30.7 million over the last six years
- £140,000 of savings by centralising Suffolk Archives to The Hold and closing the branches in West and East Suffolk. In February 2023, the council committed £3.4m to relocate the West Suffolk Archives branch to the proposed Western Way development. Remaining at its current location would have required over £5 million to protect the historic records and meet modern archive standards. West Suffolk Council has since decided not to progress with the Western Way development, ending that opportunity. Centralising the three branches into one brings Suffolk in line with the majority of archive services across the country and is better value for taxpayers' money.
- £15.9 million of reserves will be used to balance the 2024/25 budget.

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.

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.

Councils unite against National Grid pylon proposals

In a [joint letter to National Grid](#), the leaders of the Suffolk, Norfolk and Essex County Councils address the extensive impact on landscapes and local communities that the scheme would bring. They also highlight that an offshore solution has not been sufficiently investigated, and the opportunities that this could bring to co-ordinate with other large-scale energy projects off the region's coast. The Norwich to Tilbury project would see 114 miles of electricity pylons weave their way through the three counties. Only a small percentage of this cabling would go underground, an issue which the councils also raise, stating that more would be needed particularly in the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and near Diss and the Waveney Valley. We have taken to writing at this time, as there is still the opportunity to explore all options and solutions for a development of this scale. We all support the collective effort to tackle climate change, work towards net zero and to create a secure future for the country's energy. But there are so many elements of this proposal which just do not go far enough. The impact that this scheme would have should not be underestimated, particularly on the region's unique, designated landscapes and the many communities that will be affected. We all agree that studies into an offshore solution have not been appropriately explored, this is a viable option which we feel has been dismissed too readily. Should proposals for the project progress, and further consultations take place, we would expect National Grid to invest a lot more time and effort in working with our local communities. These large schemes can be guilty of doing the minimum necessary when they should be working with local people and businesses as much as possible, who know the area and can help find the best solutions, should the project go ahead. We must be looking to a coordinated offshore centred approach to energy transmission in the UK. Given our long-term energy security goals and the infrastructure that will be required, simply installing more pylons, and digging trenches cannot be the only viable solution. We will continue to stand strong on behalf of all the communities who will be affected by these proposals. You can read more about the Norwich to Tilbury project and view a calendar of consultation events on the [National Grid website](#).

Formal opening of £1.3 million Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service training centre

The Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service Training Centre at Wattisham Flying Station near Stowmarket has recently undergone a £1.3 million upgrade. It now boasts a tactical firefighting facility, which uses real fire and an LPG-fired facility to simulate incidents firefighters may be faced with. The most recent addition is the modular office complex, which features additional classrooms and welfare facilities for all delegates and staff. The centre was formally declared open at the annual base families' day on Thursday August 24 by Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Jon Lacey of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, and Colonel Toby R Moore MBE, Station Commander, Wattisham Flying Station. This is an exciting new chapter for the training centre, which has been at Wattisham now for over a decade. Our new training centre provides additional classrooms and office space, supporting various aspects of fire and rescue training, such as incident command. It also provides improved welfare facilities, which was designed to bring everyone together in an atmosphere where they feel they belong. Similarly, the new training complexes allow us to give new firefighters the best training possible in a way that is realistic yet less harmful to the environment, through us not having to use as much carbon-based burning material as before. The work of the fire service is vital in protecting our community and often requires them to undertake hazardous work in extremely demanding conditions. Our firefighters deserve the best possible training to prepare them for such work and this facility will offer exactly that for many years to come. The fire service training centre has been at Wattisham since 2011 and occupies a 17-acre site that previously housed the Bloodhound missile system from the Cold War. The training centre is used throughout the year for a wide range of training requirements which include refresher and ongoing assessments by all staff.

SCC Adult Social Care service rated Good overall by Care Quality Commission

Suffolk County Council has been awarded an indicative overall rating of “Good” for the quality of its Adult Social Care services. Following a period of intense inspection by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), Suffolk County Council has become one of the first councils nationwide to achieve this standard. Earlier this year CQC announced that 5 local authorities with responsibility for adult social care, including Suffolk, had volunteered to be part of a Local Authority Assessment Pilot, to help CQC develop the new model of inspection to help assess councils against the requirements of the Care Act. This model would then be rolled out across the country with all 153 Local Authorities with responsibility for Adult Social Care being inspected by the commission. The assessment process began this summer with a request for information to each local authority taking part in the pilot. This collected the written evidence needed to allow CQC to understand how each council is delivering its adult social care services. Following on from this initial ask, the County Council was then required to arrange over 40 different meetings including 4 staff drop-in sessions, with over 150 people, including staff, partners, providers, carers, and people with lived experiences. These meetings allowed the CQC inspection team to meet people directly and ask questions to help further evidence the quality of social care services provided. CQC’s final report rated the overall quality of Suffolk County Council’s Adult Social Care services as “Good” and highlighted areas of strength including, the quality of its leadership, the culture of learning and support for staff, the range of digital care options available, the good relationships between social care and health colleagues and locality team knowledge and understanding of community needs. I am delighted, this is a fantastic result for Suffolk County Council, especially for those colleagues working within Adult Social Care. I am especially pleased to see areas like Safeguarding rated as good, this is a real acknowledgement of the hard work SCC and partners have put in place over the last few years to learn from every incident and work closely together as a system to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable in our community. I believe this rating is also a testament to the high levels of financial investment we as a council have consistently put into Adult Social Care over the years, especially during the dark days of the pandemic, and shows how through imagination and service transformation, we are delivering on our priority to put people’s health and wellbeing at the top of our agenda as a local authority. “Of course, there is always more that can be done with something as complex as Adult Social Care and we certainly won’t take this overall rating for granted. There are challenges ahead which this report touches upon, but what this rating ultimately should do is give us all confidence that we have the right people and processes in place to provide good quality Adult Social Care services for the people of Suffolk

Almost £1 million extra committed to investigating significant flooding following Babet

Suffolk County Council has committed almost £1 million of funds to bring in additional flood investigation specialists as the response to Storm Babet continues. Since the storm, targeted recovery work has been carried out across the county to ensure damaged highway infrastructure is repaired, those whose properties were flooded get help and that investigations can start which will identify how to reduce flood risk. As lead local flood authority, the county council has a duty to investigate significant flooding under Section 19 of the Flood and Water Management Act. These investigations help to establish the source of flooding, factors which may have caused or exacerbated the flooding, the impacts on people, services and infrastructure and any actions which could be taken to increase resilience to future storm events. In any usual year, Suffolk County Council carries out around three or four of these investigations. Following Babet, up to 100 look set to be needed. The impact of this truly unprecedented event is still being felt across the county and will continue to do so for months to come, so it is important that we recognise that and increase our resources appropriately. These investigations help us to work with communities to establish the cause of flooding in the worst hit areas and identify ways to manage the risk better in future.”

New Independent Chair appointed to drive forward SEND reform

SCC announces that Kathryn Boulton has been appointed as the new independent chair of the Local Area Partnership's SEND Improvement Board. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision is delivered by the Local Area Partnership in Suffolk, which includes SCC, NHS Suffolk and North-East Essex Integrated Care Board and NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board. The SEND Improvement Board was set up in response to the inspection of SEND services in Suffolk in November last year by Ofsted and CQC and is a requirement of the Improvement Notice that will be issued to Suffolk by the Department for Education. Made up of senior leaders from the council and NHS, board members will oversee the implementation and review of plans and services aimed at improving the way SEND services are delivered in Suffolk. It will also ensure the successful delivery of the Priority Action Plan, which was co-produced following the inspection and has been agreed by the Department for Education. The new chair of the board, Kathryn, has 37 years of experience across children's services. With an education background and success in several senior leadership roles, Kathryn has significant experience of transforming SEND services in local authorities and ensuring the voices and experiences of children and young people with SEND and their families are central to the design and delivery of SEND services. An independent chair is crucial in ensuring we stay on track and improve outcomes for our children and young people with SEND and their families. Kathryn will hold the partnership to account and will act as both a critical friend and a sounding board. The Improvement Board has an important job to do and we remain focused on providing the best provision for children and young people with SEND. In addition to Kathryn's appointment, the Local Area Partnership will receive an Improvement Notice from the Department for Education. This was an expected outcome after the Ofsted and CQC inspection. It means that advisors from the Department for Education and NHS England will work with the Local Area Partnership to support and monitor improvement plans until further notice. We welcome this. We already have a good relationship with the Department for Education, and the additional expertise and guidance of specialist advisors will further strengthen our improvement work. SCC Cabinet has also confirmed 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.

Highways Statistics

Since storm Babet in October 2023 there has been a substantial increase in the number of customer reports received by Suffolk Highways. When comparing the October to February period for 2022/23 and 2023/24 there has been a:

- 6,133 increase in pothole/road defect reports (105% increase)
- 6,791 increase in flooding/drainage reports (376% increase)

October to February	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	Difference
Potholes/Road Defects	3,097	5,843	11,976	105%
Flooding/Drainage	1,819	1,807	8,598	376%
Total Customer Reports	15,455	17,947	34,624	93%

In terms of the Emergency Response Service, Suffolk Highway recorded 2,185 highway emergencies since October 2023. This is an increase of 69% compared to the same period in 2022/23. During the period October to February, the average number of reactive gangs on the network is over 24 per day. For the same period during 2022/23, there were an average of 12.6 reactive gangs per day.

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