

County Council report March 2024

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

£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.

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 7 March 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 trialling 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.