

January 2025 report for the Thredling Division from Cllr Matthew Hicks

Suffolk commits to devolution fast track

Suffolk should be fast tracked for devolution and local government reorganisation, councillors have decided. Following an invitation from ministers, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet today agreed to recommend Suffolk for inclusion in the government's Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), which would see the creation of a directly elected Mayor (likely covering Suffolk and Norfolk) and the replacement of existing council structures with a streamlined unitary council being set up. The decision followed a debate and vote at a meeting of all county councillors. This marks the start of arguably one of the biggest decisions this council will take in its 50 plus-year history. We need to think what is best for the people and businesses of Suffolk to whom we have a duty to make the difficult decisions – even if that decision means the end of the council or councils on which we sit.”

The government's English Devolution White Paper outlines plans for broader and deeper devolution, coupled with a programme of coordinated local government reorganisation. Key to these proposals is the restructuring of councils in two-tier areas like Suffolk, shifting from district, borough, and county councils to unitary councils. The government argues that unitary councils can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested in public services. Alongside reorganisation, the government is also proposing to create new Mayoral Authorities – with a single directly elected Mayor covering larger geographies (such as Norfolk and Suffolk) and with powers over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, health improvement and blue light services. Changes of this scale create an opportunity to streamline local government, empower joined-up decision making, save taxpayers money and ensure councils are resistant to economic challenges. These are not ‘nice to haves’ or ‘aspirations’, they are fundamental pillars of the system delivering the best possible public services, with clarity, accountability and delivered in a financially sustainable way. These are the goals on which we must focus if we are to do the right thing for Suffolk. SCC has now written to the government expressing its desire to be at the front of the queue for devolution and local government reorganisation. A decision is expected by the end of the month.

If Suffolk is approved as part of the DPP, more detailed proposals, engagement and Government-led consultation would follow. To achieve remarkable things and seize significant opportunities, you must be willing to take on potential uncertainties. I want Suffolk to be at the front of the queue, setting the agenda on devolution – not following everyone else when identikit solutions are imposed. The proposal to join the DPP is not just a step forward; it is a leap towards a brighter, more prosperous future for Suffolk. Papers for the meetings can be viewed at <https://committeeminutes.suffolk.gov.uk>. They are also available to watch back on the council's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SuffolkCC>

Consumers warned by Trading Standards to look out for dangerous faulty goods

Suffolk Trading Standards is warning consumers to be on their guard over the festive period against unsafe products from abroad which find their way on to the UK marketplace. Thousands of goods have been intercepted at Port of Felixstowe by Suffolk Trading Standards Imports Team so far this year, and with Christmas approaching the demand for products rises seized. Since January this year 349,000 consumer goods were checked by Suffolk Trading Standards Imports Team at the Port of Felixstowe and were refused entry into the UK because they were unsafe or non-compliant, but some do still slip through the net. The Port of Felixstowe is a huge gateway to the UK and our officers work extremely hard to intercept these dangerous items before they reach the marketplace. However unsafe goods can still slip through and we urge the public to be on the lookout for them and to let us know as soon as they come across them.

Examples of products stopped include:

74,565 toys

104,983 electrical goods

62,815 lighting kits, of which approximately 45% were fairy or Christmas lights, including outdoor lighting

38,248 cosmetics

965 e-scooters

30,898 chargers and adaptors

2,900 unsafe telescopic ladders

Officers also detained 500 counterfeit 'Dyson' hair dryers. When testing was conducted the products were found to be an electrical shock and fire risk. The product overheated, did not cut off, started to smoke and both externally and internally the product started to melt. The plug was incorrectly rated and the fuse fitted did not meet the requirements of BS 1362. Other products that raised cause for concern were consignments of 300 unsafe air-fryers, 900 pet heating blankets, 3,000 fan heaters and 2,000 unsafe wall chargers. Many of these products were destined for sale by third-party sellers on online marketplaces. The work of Trading Standards in trying to keep us as consumers safe from dangerous and shoddily-made goods cannot be praised highly enough. The numbers of items intercepted reflects the need for people to be vigilant about what exactly they are buying, particularly online. When looking for dangerous goods, signs that a product is unsafe or dangerous, can include:

Faulty wiring in an electronic appliance

Misleading or poorly spelt labels

Unclear instructions and/or absence of safety markings

Safety risks for consumers to be aware of include:

Small magnets and button batteries that are easily accessed in toys and products that are appealing to children could cause choking and harmful side effects if swallowed

Danger of electric shock or fire risk from unsafe electrical products

Exploding lithium-ion batteries in unsafe e-bikes and scooters

Collapsing telescopic ladders presenting a serious risk of injuries

Banned ingredients found in cosmetic products, such as hydroquinone in illegal skin-lightening creams and non-compliant gel nail kits

Children's clothing that could present strangulation risks

Infant products that could cause suffocation

The Government department responsible for Product Safety, The Office for Product Safety and Standards provides the funding for Trading Standards officers to operate at UK ports and borders.

Anyone unsure about the safety of products in England and Wales can contact the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline on 0808 223 1133. For more information about the work of Trading Standards across the UK go to the Chartered Trading Standards Institute at <https://www.tradingstandards.uk/>

Suffolk's rural communities hit by loss of £3 million in Government funding

£3 million of vital public funding - designed to support rural communities in Suffolk - will be cut by the government next year, it has been revealed. The funding, known as the Rural Services Grant (RSG), was introduced in 2016/17 to support councils who serve rural communities and sparsely populated areas where it costs significant amounts of money to deliver public services. Suffolk County Council will, from April 2024, no longer receive the grant. The government announced that the funding will be redirected elsewhere – adversely impacting rural areas like Suffolk. It is deeply disappointing that the government has once again made a decision that disproportionately harms rural areas. Delivering essential services, like bus services, social care and road maintenance, is inherently more expensive in county areas like Suffolk due to our sparse population. The decision to scrap this grant compounds the challenges we are facing already with the rising costs of services like adult and children's care and home-to-school transport. Yet the government continues to overlook these realities, prioritising urban areas instead. It is becoming clear that any additional funding promised to support local authorities is to be undermined by cuts and additional costs elsewhere. This is a troubling pattern where supposed solutions offer no real relief and councils are faced with

great financial uncertainty. I am concerned that the government's response to rising local government costs is to shift the burden onto residents, forcing councils to impose steep Council Tax increases to balance the books. This approach is both unsustainable and unfair to those in rural communities. Nationally, the Rural Services Grant is worth £110 million a year to rural communities.

Challenging budget

This year, we are preparing to navigate another challenging budget. Demand for essential public services like adult and children's care continues to rise, but public funding has not kept pace. Balancing the books continues to require new approaches and tough choices. This year, Suffolk County Council has a budget of around £752 million and next year will exceed £800million. Of every pound we spend, 77 pence is dedicated to supporting people directly. This includes vital services such as adult and children's care and public health. These services are a lifeline for many, providing essential support to some of our most vulnerable residents. The remaining 23% of the budget is used to fund other critical areas such as fire and rescue, maintaining roads and pavements, climate initiatives, managing waste, and bus services. It also supports the infrastructure, staffing and technology needed to keep the council and its services running. As a council, we are legally required to deliver most of these services. This means we cannot choose to simply stop maintaining local roads, supporting vulnerable children and adults or disposing of Suffolk's waste. What we *can* do, and strive to do constantly, is find more efficient ways to deliver these services, ensuring every pound is spent as effectively as possible. We've also built up reserves to help during tough times, but these reserves are now being drawn down. This is not a long-term solution. We cannot keep doing it. Despite these challenges, we are on track to meet this year's budget, which includes £43million in savings. This is thanks to the hard work and dedication of our staff who have managed resources carefully and responsibly. However, financial pressures remain, particularly as we head into the winter months. This is a time when demand for adult social care increases, and our Highways teams work around the clock to keep roads safe in difficult conditions.

Your county needs you

Suffolk is seeking a new Armed Forces Commissioner. The successful candidate will play a key role in supporting the UK Armed Forces community in the county for a three-year period from mid-March 2025. This voluntary, non-political role includes chairing the Suffolk Armed Forces Covenant Board, set up by Suffolk County Council and partners to ensure that those who serve or who have served in the UK Armed Forces and their families, are treated fairly. Suffolk is home to Wattisham Flying Station, RAF Honington, Rock Barracks near Woodbridge, plus reservists based in Bury St Edmunds, Ipswich, RAF Honington and Lowestoft. There are an estimated 30,000 veterans in Suffolk of which around 10,000 are of working age. The Board's work includes help with wellbeing for veterans and families, encouraging GP practices to become 'Veteran Friendly' accredited, and providing additional educational and emotional support for children from service families. This is a fantastic opportunity for someone to provide independent leadership to Suffolk's military community, whilst also working closely with our council and other partners to drive organisational change that's of real benefit for our Armed Forces. Anyone wishing to apply must be able to volunteer 16 days (split into 32 half days) of their time in total each year, but it is not a prerequisite for a candidate to have directly served in the UK Armed Forces. They will, however, need to learn about issues affecting the local UK Armed Forces community – consisting of regular military, the reserves, service families, veterans, and cadets. Applications for the voluntary position will be accepted until 5pm on Friday 17th January 2025, to enable the successful candidate to start their three-year appointment in mid-March 2025. Further information on the vacancy, application process and Suffolk's Armed Forces Covenant can be found at: www.suffolkmilitarycovenant.org.uk

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