

Parish Report February 2019

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Update on 2019/20 budget

On Tuesday 29 January, the 2019/20 budget proposals were approved by Cabinet. These will now be taken to a full Council meeting on 14 February, when all councillors will vote on the final 2019/20 budget.

In summary, the headline figures in the proposals are:

- Council Tax is due to rise by a total of 3.99% - this will be made up of a 2.99% increase in general council tax and a final 1% increase for the Social Care Precept;
- The budget includes a savings requirement of £10.1m, divided as follows:
 - o Adult and Community Services - £1.1m
 - o Health, Wellbeing and Children's Services - £2.683m
 - o Growth, Highways and Infrastructure - £4.151m
 - o Fire and Public Safety - £0.507m
 - o Corporate Services - £1.522m
 - o Central Resources - £0.1m

I am concerned by a number of the cuts, in particular:

- The decision to remove all grant funding from Citizens Advice. This will be phased over two years, with a 50% reduction in the 2019/20 budget (£0.184m);
- Reducing the amount spent on Housing Related Support, which supports those at risk of homelessness (£0.45m);
- Reduced funding for sponsored bus services (£0.34m) and cessation of the provision of roadside bus timetables (£0.1m);
- Reduction in highways maintenance, including no road sign cleaning (£0.1m), only maintaining mandatory road markings (£0.075m) and less frequent weed treatments in rural areas (£0.055m);
- Staffing reductions across all directorates, which may result in less efficient services (£2.968m).

Cuts to Citizens Advice get Cabinet approval

As mentioned above, the budget includes a cut to the grant funding provided by Suffolk County Council to Citizens Advice. This grant will be cut by 50% in 2019/20 (£184,000) and removed entirely in the 2020/21 budget.

A consultation was held over the Christmas period to assess the impact these cuts may have, and an Equality Impact Assessment was drawn up. However, neither documents were available prior to the Cabinet meeting, and so the Cabinet decided to recommend this saving before fully understanding the impact it may have. I will be raising my concerns at the Council meeting.

Upper Orwell Crossings project cancelled

The Upper Orwell Crossings project in Ipswich has finally been cancelled, after concerns were raised last summer that the project was likely to go well over the original budget. The Cabinet agreed in October to try and find additional funding but were unsuccessful. This means that the DfT funding allocated to the project will be reallocated to other national projects and will not be spent in Ipswich.

However, Suffolk County Council has still spent over £8m on the project to date, most of which was on consultants' fees.

The Cabinet has decided to consider undertaking a smaller project and complete the smaller Crossings B and C, which will provide links to the island site. The Cabinet has agreed to underwrite a maximum of £10.8m (the balance of their previous commitment) and will require other significant local contributions to enable crossings B and C to go ahead.

Potential £45.1m investment for Special Educational Needs

A cross-party Policy Development Panel has recommended that Suffolk County Council needs to invest £45.1m to develop new SEND schools and specialist units within Suffolk. This investment would create an additional 828 specialist education places in Suffolk, which are desperately needed. Currently, many children struggle to access appropriate provision and are forced to travel to out-of-county schools in order to access the educational support they need.

The Cabinet agreed in principle to the PDP's recommendations. The capital investment programme will need to undergo a full investment appraisal before the Cabinet will commit to a firm £45.1m investment. This is expected in early 2019.

New Director of Highways appointed

After a long search, a new Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure has been appointed. Mark Ash will be joining Suffolk County Council in February. He is currently the Director of Waste and Environment at Essex County Council.