

Parish Report – September 2020

Councillor
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Changes to Children's Centres challenged by opposition

On 25 August, the Cabinet agreed to reduce the number of Children's Centres in Suffolk from 38 to 17 full-time and 11 part-time Family Hubs. 8 centres will be repurposed for nurseries or SEND provision, whilst 2 will close permanently (Chatterbox in Ipswich and Caterpillar in Woodbridge).

The council has said that this is not a cost-saving exercise and that any savings will be used to fund additional staff for outreach work. However, I am very concerned that the loss of so many centres will have a detrimental effect on families, particularly those in rural areas who may now find it more difficult to access support.

My group worked with the Labour group to collectively challenge the Cabinet's decision. This challenge has been accepted as valid by the council's Monitoring Officer, and so the decision will be suspended until it has been looked at by the Scrutiny Committee on 11 September. The Scrutiny Committee will either confirm the Cabinet's decision or ask the Cabinet to reconsider the decision.

Update on school transport arrangements for September

Suffolk County Council has confirmed that it will initially not be offering spare seats on school transport. This is due to social distancing requirements, which have reduced the capacity on school buses. However, parents may be able to apply for a spare seat from October half term.

The council has also confirmed the arrangements for masks and social distancing on school transport. The rules vary depending on the type of transport used:

- Dedicated closed routes (vehicle only carries school children) – social distancing will not apply, face coverings are recommended for children aged 11+
- Shared routes (most passengers are pupils, but may be some members of the public) – pupils should observe social distancing guidelines with members of the public but they can sit next to members of their family or school, face coverings are mandatory unless a child is exempt from wearing one
- Public transport – social distancing will apply, face coverings are mandatory unless a child is exempt from wearing one

Cabinet agrees to £65m loan to cover costs of Lowestoft Third Crossing

The Cabinet has given final approval for the Lowestoft Lake Lothing Third Crossing, and revealed that the name of the new bridge will be "Gull Wing Lowestoft".

However, the cost of the bridge is now much higher than originally estimated. The report prepared for Cabinet estimated that the total cost of delivering the bridge is £126.75m, with an additional £19m allocated as a contingency for any unforeseen risks. The original estimate was £91.73m.

To fund the building of the bridge, Suffolk County Council will spend £6.9m of its own money, receive £73.39m of funding from the Department of Transport and borrow up to £64.96m.

It is expected that construction work will begin in Spring 2021.

Infrastructure Board established to oversee costs of large projects

It has emerged that Suffolk County Council established an Infrastructure Board in November 2019 to oversee large infrastructure projects and ensure they remain within budget. This is in response to a number of recent projects where costs have increased dramatically, including the Upper Orwell Crossings which was eventually abandoned after costs increased by £43m.

The board is currently only made up of officers.

Locality Fund Grants

If you know of any organisation that would appreciate a grant from my "Locality Fund" please ask them to contact me as I will be unable to carry any over to next financial year due to the local elections in 2021.