

Annual Report - April 2019

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2019-20 Budget and Cuts

Suffolk County Council's 2019-20 budget was agreed on Thursday 14 February. This will see an increase in council tax of 3.99%, and savings across the council's directorates totalling £10.1m.

A particularly concerning cut was 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). Fortunately, the CCGs stepped in and agreed to provide Citizens Advice with £184,000 in funding this year, to make up for the 50% funding cut from Suffolk County Council. Although this means Citizens Advice will not lose funding in 2019-20, it does not address the longer-term problem of funding in the future. The CCGs have been clear that this funding is only available for the 2019-20 financial year.

The budget also proposes staffing reductions across all directorates, totalling almost £3m. We do not currently have details of how these cuts will be distributed and which staff will be affected, but I am very concerned that this will result in less efficient services and an increase in stress amongst the remaining staff.

New Council Leader and Chief Executive

In May, the Conservative group leadership changed and Cllr Matthew Hicks became the new Leader of Suffolk County Council. Cllr Hicks brought with him a number of new Cabinet members and established cross party "Policy Development Panels" (time-limited groups tasked with looking at a particular issue or policy). There have been a number of these PDPs to date, and it has been a good opportunity for backbench and opposition councillors to be involved in policy decisions.

Towards the beginning of the municipal year Suffolk County Council also appointed a new Chief Executive. Nicola Beach joined the council from Essex County Council, where she was Executive Director of Infrastructure and Environment.

Changes to School Transport Policy

Since September 2017, I and my group have been fighting against changes to the council's School Transport Policy that would see numerous children losing free school transport. Despite two successful call-in attempts by my group and a lengthy delay to the policy change, it was finally agreed by Cabinet in July 2018.

The changes to the policy will be implemented in September 2019, and will see free school transport restricted to children who attend their nearest school only. Currently, children are also

able to receive free school transport to their catchment schools, but this will no longer be an option under the new policy.

Although it is deeply disappointing that this change was made, I am glad that, through our consistent opposition to the policy, we were able to reduce the severity of the final policy change. The final policy that was agreed in July 2018 was much less damaging than the original proposal in September 2017. In particular, we were able to ensure that children who are currently attending a school will continue to receive free school transport until the end of their time at that school – thus reducing the upheaval and ensuring no child is forced to move schools in the middle of their education.

OFSTED rates Suffolk SEND service inadequate after second inspection

Inspectors from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) returned to Suffolk in January to see how SEND services had progressed since their inspection in December 2016 and subsequent improvement notice issued in January 2017. Following their visit, they ruled Suffolk had not made sufficient progress to improve the serious weaknesses identified at the initial inspection and was not effectively meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.

I am very concerned that the council's SEND service needs to be dramatically and quickly improved. Along with the Labour group, we have called for an independent review to determine what needs to be done.

We have received assurances from the Cabinet member for Children's Services that an oversight board will be set up imminently, made up of councillors from all parties, as well as CCG staff and user organisations.

Review into abandoned Upper Orwell Crossings project

The Upper Orwell Crossings project in Ipswich was abandoned in January due to rising costs and fears the project would go well over the original budget. The county council attempted to find additional funding for the project but were unsuccessful.

Despite no building work having started, Suffolk County Council still spent over £8m on the project before it was abandoned, most of which was on consultants' fees.

Nicola Beach (Chief Executive of Suffolk County Council) has confirmed that she will be undertaking a review of the project to determine what went wrong.

Highways – new Cabinet member and Director appointed

After a long search, Mark Ash was appointed as the new Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure in January. He joined Suffolk County Council in February, having previously been the Director of Waste and Environment at Essex County Council.

In addition, Cllr Mary Evans took over as Cabinet member for Highways in May 2018. Response times for pothole repairs do seem to have improved, and a new policy for repairing potholes has been implemented that should improve efficiency.

Motions from the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group

My political group proposed a number of successful motions to council during the year. These included:

- Developing a strategic, costed five-year cycling plan to improve investment in cycling infrastructure in the county;
- Committing to reducing single-use plastic waste in Suffolk;
- Declaring a climate emergency and pledging to make Suffolk carbon neutral by 2030.