

Report to Henley

September 2018

Suffolk County Council's budget challenge

Last week, the council released the following:

The scale of the financial challenge facing Suffolk County Council has been revealed today, with the authority currently projecting that it will overspend by £8.6 million this year. Based on spending on council services in the first quarter of the 2018/19 financial year, the county council is forecast to overspend its £501 million budget by 1.7%. This is unless the council is successful in reducing costs and making savings between now and 31 March 2019.

The overspend is mainly driven by rising demand for services and increased costs in Children and Young People's Services, accounting for almost £5 million of the projected overspend. This includes services for looked-after children, specialist social care for children and home-to-school transport. There are also smaller, but significant, overspends in other council departments, including Adult Care and Corporate Services.

Richard Smith , the cabinet member for finance stated: "There are going to be some tough calls to make in the weeks and months ahead, but they are calls we are going to have to make to keep Suffolk County Council within budget. At all times we will work to protect the most vulnerable people that rely on us for support and care.

Work is in progress to reduce spending and find new sources of income, including:

- Adult and Community Services is strengthening its contract management to get better value for money
- The Children and Young People department is cutting budgets that have historically underspent
- The council's passenger transport team is optimising routes and renegotiating transport contracts for hundreds of children to reduce the costs of transporting them to school
- Line-by-line reviews of budgets are taking place in Corporate Services
- Suffolk's ten Transformation Programmes are continuing to develop and identify savings through reducing demand and changing the way we work
- Suffolk Fire and Rescue has begun a project to improve levels of staff absence
- The council's major projects programme is being reviewed
- The council continues to lobby Central Government for more funding as part of its Fairer Funding Review.

Many of these actions are good responses to this year's challenge and a number reflect issues we have examined in Scrutiny and recommended for action. The crucial issue will be as always to produce real increases in efficiency not just service cuts to the most vulnerable particularly where cuts produce increases in the budgets of other public bodies, such as the health service.

The review of major programmes must ensure that any which are just vanity projects cease but those that will produce improvements in efficiency or the economy are not harmed.

"Staying Close" scheme launched to support care leavers

Suffolk County Council have been awarded funding by the Department of Education for a three-year pilot scheme to support young people leaving care in Suffolk. The "Staying Close" scheme was launched on Thursday 9 August.

The aim of the scheme is to help young people from the age of 15 start planning for independent living with the assistance and support of residential care workers. This planning often only occurs close to the time a young person is due to move out, causing unnecessary anxiety and distress. Early intervention and detailed planning from a younger age should help to alleviate this.

Young people will also continue to receive emotional and practical support from their children's home and residential workers after they have moved out and started living independently.

The pilot scheme is being delivered in partnership with The Ryes Children's Home in Sudbury, to test how this move-on care can be provided for young people who want to remain living close to their home. It is a little surprising that after years of providing care we don't have the answers already but progress is welcome.

Review into the Upper Orwell Crossings

On 1 August, Cllr Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council, launched a review into the cost of building the Upper Orwell Crossings in Ipswich.

The project is still in the planning stages, but an internal review of costs has forecast that the total cost of completing the Crossings could be significantly higher than the original calculation of £97m. The Department for Transport committed to fund approximately three-quarters of the original cost, but if the total cost increases it is unlikely that they will provide any more funding. The additional funding would therefore need to come from local sources.

Work on the project has been temporarily suspended whilst the review is undertaken, with an outcome expected by the end of 2018. It has been my view for some time that this project has been receiving a level of attention that indicated it was destined to cease so I await the outcome with interest.

Reduction in recycling rates harm "Greenest County" ambitions

Recycling rates in Suffolk have dropped over the past 4 years, from 51% in 2013 to just 47% in 2017. Meanwhile, over 50% of waste in Suffolk is incinerated – much higher than the national average of 38%.

Although incineration may be a better option than landfill, it is still less environmentally-friendly than other methods of waste disposal. Furthermore, there are concerns that the level of harmful particles released by incinerators could pose a serious threat to public health.

The Suffolk Waste Partnership, as part of the Greenest County Partnership, set a target of recycling at least 60% of municipal waste by 2020. These latest figures suggest we are moving further away from this target. If Suffolk County Council truly wants Suffolk to be the "greenest county", we need to start focusing on environmentally-friendly methods of waste disposal and ways to increase recycling levels.

Local Roads

The Bramford Road in Great Blakenham produced the predicted disruption as any of you who drive that way or look at the Claydon, Barham, Henley & Gt. Blakenham Notice Board on Facebook will know only too well. There was a great deal of poor communication and confusion and for some reason Anglian Water were allowed to re-start work in Claydon before the Bramford Road work was complete. I hope that Mary Evans review of highways processes will improve these issues and she will be visiting Great Blakenham Parish Council to be informed of their views directly.

Barham Development

The scoping document that Highways gave to the contractors for the traffic surveys associated with the Barham Church Lane development proposals is still elusive. However, I have a letter from the county to MSDC pointing out County reservation about the cumulative effect of development in the area and proposing a meeting involving the county council, the applicants and Mid Suffolk to discuss options.

If you have queries, please phone me on 01473 831306 or 07545423808 or email me at:
john.field@suffolk.gov.uk

I have been asking for months for a professional attempt to propose actions that would address the problems we all believe the development would cause. This is a small element of progress that needs a democratic input.

Ashbocking Road at the School

I have escalated the issue around the lack of a response to the need for work at Henley Primary to reduce hazards by providing areas where parking is prohibited and vehicles can pull in to allow traffic in the opposite direction to pass without conflict. I am just not getting a response via the intended communication paths.

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