

New approach to pothole repairs

A Highways Improvement and Innovations Board was established in June and has met three times. It has announced that Suffolk Highways will be piloting a new approach to prioritising pothole repairs over the winter, specifically for services coming out of the Ipswich Phoenix House depot.

The pilot aims to tackle more potholes at once, rather than later returning to the same area to repair nearby potholes and potholes down to 200mm width will be included. It will also aim to reduce the number of temporary repairs. This should reduce the travelling time of maintenance crews, and result in more potholes being filled. I have been asking for this for a considerable time so I hope to see an improvement at last.

The Board has also been looking into improving the coordination of road closures, reducing the number of roadworks which overrun, and exploring ways for Suffolk Highways to work closer with town and parish councils. A progress report from the Board is expected at Scrutiny in December.

Second Suffolk children's home judged "inadequate"

A children's home run by Suffolk County Council has been judged "inadequate" by Ofsted, following an inspection on 3 October 2018. This is the second council-run children's home to receive an inadequate rating in the past 2 months.

Ofsted expressed particular concern over unsafe behaviour management techniques used by staff in the home, and noted a significant increase in the number of physical interventions.

Council signs up to 100% nuclear energy deal

At the Council meeting on 18 October, members of my political group put forward a motion calling on the Council to recognise the benefits of renewable energy, commission a report into smart grids, and commit to ensuring at least 50% of the Council's energy comes from renewable sources by 2025. Unfortunately, the Conservative administration amended the motion to remove any clear actions or targets.

It was also revealed that the Council have recently signed off on a 100% nuclear energy deal for the next three years, to commence in March 2019. This represents a major step backwards for Suffolk County Council, whose current energy contract includes 18.7% renewables.

No funding to help end period poverty

The Labour Group proposed a motion to Council on 18 October, asking for a commitment of £15,000 in the budget to help tackle "period poverty". Many girls suffer and frequently miss school because they are unable to afford sanitary products. We asked the Council to fund free sanitary products for such girls in all local authority maintained schools in Suffolk, and to encourage academies to implement similar measures.

Unfortunately, the Conservative administration once again amended the motion, removing all funding commitments. It was claimed that this was because the level of funding in the original motion unfairly favoured girls at maintained schools. We amended the amendment to increase the funding commitment to include all schools in Suffolk, but it was again rejected. I guess £15k is a lot if your budget is only £500 M

New Home Care operating model

At Cabinet on 9 October a new Home Care operating model was agreed. It was acknowledged that the previous model had been a failure expecting smaller care providers to give up their contracts and residents receiving home care to change provider. We were assured that “lessons had been learned” and that greater care had been taken to develop the operating model in partnership with stakeholders.

A Labour call-in of the decision meant the processes that had been followed were examined by the Scrutiny Committee. The basic concern was that there was little evidence that providers agreed that the new model would function well at the funding levels proposed.

The funding will vary dependent on the availability of care in each parish in five steps from £16.49 to £ 22.24 per hour. That sounds quite reasonable but the county does not pay for travel time and providers frequently do together with a small allowance for travel expenses. With perhaps 15 to 30 minutes added to the time for a one hour visit the effective rate reduces rapidly. There is also a need to fund holidays and sickness absences.

The consultation with providers was certainly lengthy but evidence of feedback was limited.

However, the Conservative majority of the Scrutiny Committee voted to proceed with the new model rather than ask Cabinet to they needed to verify their decision was based on sufficient knowledge.

Budget consultation and reduction in overspend

Suffolk County Council is currently consulting on the 2019/20 budget and is asking the public to share their ideas for potential savings. The consultation runs until 5pm on Friday 16 November, and can be found at: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/consultations-petitions-and-elections/consultations/a-tough-call-to-make-budget-20192020/>. Scrutiny will get our first look at the 2019/20 budget proposals on Thursday 22 November by which time the impact of the budget will be clearer.

At the end of Quarter 1 the council was predicting an overspend on the 2018/19 net budget of £8.6m. This prediction has now reduced, at the end of Quarter 2, to a £7.5m overspend. Although an improvement, it is unlikely that the overspend will be reduced completely by the end of the financial year, and the council will still need to make use of reserves to cover the funding gap.

School admissions consultation

Suffolk County Council is consulting on its school admissions policy for 2020/21, available at: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/children-families-and-learning/schools/school-places/consultation-on-admissions-to-schools-in-suffolk-for-the-20202021-school-year/>. The consultation is open until 12 November 2018.

No significant changes are proposed for 2020/21. However, the council are also seeking views on potential future changes to the oversubscription criteria, in terms of the removal of catchment area priority. If they decide to progress with this change, there would be another consultation October 2019 and any changes would then apply from 2021/22.

Local Issues

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