

A Report for Little Cornard Parish Council Meeting on 21st January 2025 From James Finch – County Councillor for the Stour Valley

Tel: 01206 262993 (change) Mobile 07545 423796 Email: james.finch@suffolk.gov.uk

➤ **Suffolk County Council to consider Devolution and Council Reorganisation**

Suffolk County Council held an extraordinary meeting of councillors, and a meeting of its Cabinet, to debate and decide on whether or not to put Suffolk forward for the government's new devolution and reorganisation programme. The government has required that formal notice be given if Suffolk wishes to be part of the **Devolution Priority Programme by 10 January 2025**. Therefore, the meetings, saw all 75 Councillors debate and vote on a proposal to recommend Suffolk is at the front of the queue. Following the Full Council meeting, the Cabinet made the final decision.

Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council, said: *"The government has set out its devolution and reorganisation proposals and has asked that Suffolk County Council submit an expression of interest by 10 January if we wish to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme. As a result, we must hold these extraordinary meetings. On 9 January, all Suffolk County Councillors will be given an opportunity to have their say before a final decision is made by Cabinet."*

"Changes of this scale create an opportunity to streamline local government, empower joined-up decision making, save taxpayers money and ensure councils are resistant to economic challenges. "I welcome the positive engagement of Suffolk's district and borough councils. This is a significant decision and one that will not be taken lightly."

On 16 December, the Government published its much-anticipated English Devolution White Paper, outlining plans for broader and deeper devolution coupled with a programme of coordinated local government reorganisation.

Key to the proposals is a reorganisation of council structures, particularly in two-tier areas like Suffolk, with a shift away from district, borough and county councils towards unitary councils. The government argues that unitary councils can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested in public services. For most areas, the government says that this means creating councils serving populations of 500,000 or more, with exceptions where they make practical sense.

Alongside reorganisation, the government is also proposing to create new Mayoral Authorities – with a single directly elected Mayor covering larger geographies (for example Norfolk and Suffolk) and with powers over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, health improvement and blue light services. At this stage, no decisions have been made about what will happen in Suffolk.

Papers for the meetings can be viewed at <https://committeeminutes.suffolk.gov.uk>

➤ **Suffolk's rural communities hit by loss of £3 million in Government funding**

£3 million of vital public funding - designed to support rural communities in Suffolk - will be cut by the government next year, it has been revealed.

The funding, known as the Rural Services Grant (RSG), was introduced in 2016/17 to support councils who serve rural communities and sparsely populated areas where it costs significant amounts of money to deliver public services. Suffolk County Council will, from April 2024, no longer receive the grant. The government announced last week that the funding will be redirected elsewhere – adversely impacting rural areas like Suffolk.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Economic Development and Skills, said:

"It is deeply disappointing that the government has once again made a decision that disproportionately harms rural areas. Delivering essential services, like bus services, social care and road maintenance, is inherently more expensive in county areas like Suffolk due to our sparse population. The decision to scrap this grant compounds the challenges we are facing already with the rising costs of services like adult and children's care and home-to-school transport. Yet the government continues to overlook these realities, prioritising urban areas instead."

“It is becoming clear that any additional funding promised to support local authorities is to be undermined by cuts and additional costs elsewhere. This is a troubling pattern where supposed solutions offer no real relief and councils are faced with great financial uncertainty.

“I am concerned that the government's response to rising local government costs is to shift the burden onto residents, forcing councils to impose steep Council Tax increases to balance the books. **This approach is unsustainable and unfair to those in rural communities.**”

Nationally, the Rural Services Grant is worth £110 million a year to rural communities. Other counties, including Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Northumberland have also spoken out about the removal of the rural grant.

➤ **Suffolk celebrates as local organisations are awarded the King's Award for Voluntary Service**

It has been announced that five voluntary organisations in Suffolk have been awarded the King's award for Voluntary Service. Created in 2002 to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee and previously known as The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service (QAVS), the Award has been shining a light on the fantastic work of voluntary groups from all across the UK for many years.

Equivalent to an MBE, the King's award for voluntary service (KAVS) is the highest Award given to local voluntary groups in the UK, and they are awarded for life.

The local organisations are:

- **Ipswich Outreach:** Supporting the homeless people of Ipswich to improve their health, wellbeing and life opportunities.
- **Let's Talk Reading:** Working to improve literacy of children and adults in Ipswich.
- **Still Good Food:** Rescuing surplus food, reducing waste and redistributing it to the needy.
- **Tattingstone Good Neighbour Scheme**
Providing vital support, promoting social interaction and community integration in Tattingstone.
- **The Caribbean and African Community Health Support Forum**
Promoting a community legacy of health and wellbeing in Suffolk.

➤ **Stronger Families Partnership keeps children out of care.**

The Stronger Families Partnership which delivers innovative family therapy has as of 30th September supported 584 children at risk of being taken into care, or who have returned to their families from care, to remain safely with their families.

The Partnership – made up of Bridges Outcomes Partnerships, Norfolk County Council, Suffolk County Council, and Family Psychology Mutual – has cumulatively saved the equivalent of 1,000 years of days in care. Keeping these families together is directly linked to cost reductions for the local authorities in both care costs avoided (where children are on a trajectory to care) and immediate cost savings (where children have been reunified with their families). *During the initial 18-month tracking period, the delivery saves between £39,000 and £88,000 per family that successfully completes the intervention, in relation to the estimated cost of supporting a child in care – amounting to a total net savings to date of at least £29.4m.* When compared to pay-for-inputs approaches, outcomes-based family therapy delivers an average 25% better outcomes for 80% more families at 20%-50% lower cost per family, keeping more children safely out of care.

Of the service, one young person reflected: **“The therapist helped us understand each other. Thank you so much for your help, I appreciate it millions. [I] don't know what we'd [have] done without you.”**

➤ **Department for Education welcomes SEND improvements and evidence of impact, but recognises there are still challenges to overcome.**

The Department for Education (DfE) met with senior leaders from Suffolk County Council and the NHS to review the impact of wide-ranging improvement plans for special educational needs and disabilities services (SEND). Following the meeting, a letter was sent from the DfE outlining the extent of progress made within SEND services across Suffolk over the past six months.

In summary, it *‘welcomes the improvements and the evidence of impact’ and recognises ‘the considerable challenges that remain to reach the required targets’.*

Key achievements listed within the letter include

- improvements in the timeliness and quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs);

- outstanding academic progress for children participating in the Raising Achievement – Delivering Better Value academic interventions;
- better coproduction between partners; and a significant reduction of permanent exclusions in primary schools and for children with EHCPs.

The Department for Education also outlined key areas for development including

- governance and use of data;
- ensuring that improvement work continues at pace, specifically with regard to timeliness and quality of EHCPs;
- achieving consistency across all families so that improvement is felt by all;
- and that the voice of children and young families continue to be heard at the heart of decision making.

➤ **New Deputy Chief Fire Office for Suffolk is appointed**

Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service has appointed Henry Griffin as its new Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

Henry is currently Area Manager for People & Resources at SFRS, with which he has served for 20 years, and will take up his position in the New Year. He has led initiatives such as introducing electric vehicles to the fire service fleet, implementing cultural improvement programmes, and managing major incident responses including for the summer fires of 2022. His expertise includes strategic planning, workforce planning, and operational training.

Henry, succeeds Deputy Chief Fire Officer Dan Fearn, who has retired.

➤ **Virtual Fostering and Adoption Sessions for the Stour Valley**

Fostering is a flexible role with options for short term care from a weekend a month to longer term opportunities, all providing life-changing support for local children. If you want to find out more about what it's like to foster or adopt with us, please call a member of the team on 01473 264800

My Priorities

Education - Supporting Vulnerable People - Jobs and Growth - Localism and the Stour Valley - Building on Suffolk's Strength all underpinned by strong financial management and fair council tax.