

County Councillor Report for 2023/2024 for Stowupland Annual Parish Meeting April 2024

It has been an honour to represent the residents of Stowmarket North and Stowupland Division for the last year. My current term will end in May 2025, coinciding with boundary changes which will see Stowupland become part of a larger rural ward including Mendlesham, Haughley, Old Newton etc.

I have listed below the most significant topics, which have taken up much of Councillors' time. For me, the needs of local residents are of key importance and much of my time has been spent on local issues, often dealing with individual's concerns. I welcome contact from residents, by telephone or email; and I'm always prepared to meet with anyone who feels that I can assist them.

<p>Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs)</p>	<p>NSIPs are major infrastructure projects of national importance, and the majority of Suffolk's NSIPs are associated with the generation or transmission of electricity. The decision to allow an NSIP to proceed is made by the relevant Secretary of State, not councils, although the county council is a statutory consultee for many projects. There are a high number of projects in Suffolk currently, with more in the pipeline:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drax – a gas power plant on the former Eye Airfield • East Anglia Three offshore windfarm is under construction • Two new offshore windfarms, East Anglia One North and East Anglia Two, were approved by the Secretary of State in March 2022 • EDF began construction of Sizewell C nuclear power station in January 2024 • National Grid are proposing grid reinforcement works from Bramford to Twinstead, with a decision expected later this year • National Grid's Norwich to Tilbury stretch of the 'Great Grid Upgrade' programme, a controversial pylon route through the middle of the county • SeaLink proposals for an undersea cabling route between Suffolk and Kent is due to see significant onshore infrastructure at Friston, near Aldeburgh • LionLink (previously known as Eurolink) proposes undersea cabling to link the UK with the Netherlands, with landfall proposed either above or below the Blyth estuary • Sunnica Solar Farm, a 2,500 acre proposed solar development for Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk, has still not been approved by the government, with a decision due in April • A new 750 acre solar farm, White Elm, has been proposed for Mendlesham in Mid Suffolk, with consultation due to begin in the autumn
<p>Flooding in Suffolk</p>	<p>From end of October 2023, Suffolk suffered an autumn and winter of repeated flooding, most notably Storm Babet, when Debenham, Framlingham and Needham Market were particularly badly affected. The A1120 in Stowupland was also affected, and impassable near Freeman School for a number of days.</p> <p>Suffolk's total rainfall during October 2023 was 117.9mm (4.5in) which the Met Office report as being 90% more than the average expected rainfall for the month. The drainage systems in the county were unable to cope with the volume of water. Suffolk County Council have committed an extra £1m for flood investigations to try and prevent future incidents; where usually there are only three or four such investigations each year, for 2023 the number is likely to be near 100 investigations.</p> <p>The government offered funding to household affected by flooding, with many also able to access further money for preventative works.</p>
<p>Condition of School Buildings</p>	<p>In September the council held a scrutiny session on the condition of school buildings, which was very timely as the news spread of an increasing number of schools with structural problems caused by the deterioration of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete or RAAC as it is commonly known. RAAC is a lightweight building material, cheaper than standard reinforced concrete, which was used extensively in buildings between 1950 and 1990 but has a lifespan of 30 years. Nine schools in Suffolk reported they had RAAC onsite, out of around 230 nationally. Stowupland High School has been very badly affected with some buildings closed, necessitating a large number of temporary classrooms, which are currently being made ready for use.</p>
<p>New Suffolk Fire and Rescue Control Centre</p>	<p>The Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) are leaving the current control centre partnership with Peterborough and Cambridgeshire councils due to a number of operational difficulties, especially concerns over the provision of a new IT system, which has been severely delayed. A</p>

	<p>new control centre for Suffolk is planned to be ready by the end of 2024. This will incur additional cost but is considered essential for the continued safety of Suffolk residents.</p>
New Highways Contract	<p>From 1 October 2023, Suffolk County Council entered into a new highways contract with Milestone, ending the previous contract with Kier. The new contract promises better communication with councillors and Suffolk residents. It contains incentives for the new contractor to work efficiently – for example, undertaking other works needed in the same geographical area when they are called out. The performance of the contract will be scrutinised after 12 months to assess Milestone’s performance and is for an initial period of 10 years, with the option to increase it for a further 10 years.</p> <p>At the same time, SCC entered into a new contract for street lighting, signal controls and illuminated signs.</p>
Budget Meeting	<p>The Conservative administration proposed a 2024/25 budget requiring an increase in council tax of the maximum 4.99%, which breaks down into a 2% rise for the Social Care Precept and a 2.99% increase in general council tax. In 2023/24, services were forced to deal with another year of spiralling demand and additional cost pressures, and the council’s administration have had to draw £16m from council reserves to balance their budget.</p> <p>The proposed budget included a 100% cut to arts and museums funding, with a temporary fund set up for 2024-25 using the remaining Covid funding from the government to allow some time for these organizations to adapt and find other sources of income.</p> <p>It also proposed that all local archives and records be centralised to The Hold in Ipswich, a decision which has been vigorously opposed in both Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds, where communities want to keep their record office buildings in the area.</p> <p>Proposed cuts to services supporting vulnerable families and helping young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) to access training and jobs were vigorously opposed. Our group acknowledged the difficulty of the council’s financial position and proposed a minor amendment – reinstating funding for arts and museums and providing funds for NEET services.</p>
Ofsted/CQC Inspection of Suffolk SEND Provision	<p>Suffolk County Council and its NHS partners who provide SEND services (the ‘Local Area Partnership’) were inspected by Ofsted and CQC in November 2023, with the inspection report being published on 30 January 2024. The inspection found ‘widespread and/or systematic failings’ in the county’s SEND provision and is the second poor inspection result since SEND inspections were introduced in 2016 (the previous inspection being in November 2016). The Local Area Partnership was required to submit a priority action plan to Ofsted and CQC by 7 March 2024 detailing how they would address the systemic problems rapidly, including improving the quality and timeliness of Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP) and annual reviews, improving communication with families and reducing school exclusions for young people with special educational needs.</p> <p>Following the inspection, two senior officers left SCC and the two Cabinet Members for children’s services and education at the council stood down. Two new Cabinet Members have been appointed to these roles. A new full time and permanent Director for Children’s Services (DCS) has also recently been appointed, and will take up her position at SCC in July.</p>
Suffolk Devolution Deal	<p>After much talk of devolution in the last few years, it looks like this may now happen in Suffolk. Devolution is a process by which regions or cities in the UK can have greater control over decisions in their areas. The government agrees a deal with the area which gives them more freedom to make local decisions about how to spend government funding. This is due to happen in Suffolk from 2025 in areas such as transport and adult education. There will also be a £16m annual investment fund for economic growth, a £5.8m lump sum to regenerate brownfield sites across the county, and a £3m one off investment in retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient.</p> <p>The devolution deal also means the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk, so every four years residents will have two votes, one to elect their local county councillor and one to elect the leader of the county council. The first election for the directly elected leader will be in May 2025, to coincide with the next county council election. There could be problems with having an elected leader if they are from a different political group to most of the other councillors; the leader can choose a Cabinet and control the council’s agenda, but without the votes in the council chamber they might find it difficult to get things done.</p>

	<p>There is a consultation being held about the deal right now, and you can find out more about it and fill out the survey here: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution</p>
Libraries Consultation	<p>On Tuesday 25 March, Cabinet reviewed the results of the recent consultation about the Suffolk library service, which is due to go out to procurement in the summer. Broadly, the members of the public who responded to the survey agreed with what libraries currently provided, including community and digital services, and the mobile library and home library services for people who were housebound. Recent pop-up libraries in village halls did not score highly in the consultation and it is unlikely these will form part of the service in future. It is also likely that mobile libraries will run from smaller vehicles in future. The successful bidder for the new libraries contract is likely to be announced in November, with the new contract starting from June 2025. The contract will be for six years with an option to renew for a further six years.</p>
Sizewell C Construction Begins	<p>In January 2024, construction work officially began for Sizewell C nuclear power station on the coast near Leiston. EDF are building a two-reactor nuclear power station that will generate 3.2 gigawatts (GW) of electricity that could power the equivalent of six million homes. The development is highly controversial, not only for those opposed to nuclear power, but also to those in the local communities opposed to the upheaval and impact of the construction on the natural environment, the beauty of the coastline and the effect on tourism and transport routes during the construction period. The construction is projected to take between nine and 12 years, but in practice nuclear power stations often take far longer than planned to build – for example, Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, which began construction in 2017, is now predicted to be operational in 2036, 11 years after it was supposed to be finished. The government and EDF still need to raise an extra £20bn for the project from private investors which they claim will be in place by the end of 2024.</p>
Motions to Council	<p>One of the ways that opposition groups can influence policy is by way of motions to meetings of the full council. The group are permitted one motion per meeting. During the year one of our motions was approved without amendment – requiring SCC to work with its partners to better signpost members of the public to benefits they may be entitled to. This motion was raised as a result of reports that over £15bn of means tested benefits are going unclaimed because people were not always aware of the support available and how to access help, even in times when costs of living are putting serious pressures on families all over the country. Other motions the group had been unable to bring forward or were voted down by the Conservative administration included solar power ‘Roofs before Rural’, to ask the council to commit to prioritise solar panels on buildings and brownfield sites over solar farms on good quality agricultural land, and to lobby the government to reduce barriers to community energy projects. Community energy projects enable local people to produce electricity (for example, by solar panels on schools) to reduce bills, with any extra electricity sold to the grid, making a profit which can be reinvested locally.</p> <p>In July our group proposed a motion to make it easier for communities to reduce speed limits on rural roads where the safe speed for driving is clearly lower than the current National Speed Limit. The motion suggested that on these roads, a speed limit of below 60mph would encourage many drivers to slow to a more appropriate, safer speed, thereby reducing accidents and making roads safer for all users. This motion was voted down by the Conservative administration.</p> <p>We also tabled a motion on flooding in December, which, among other things, proposed an increase in the frequency of clearing drains and gullies around the county, and better coordination with road sweeping operations. However, the Conservatives proposed an amendment removing this recommendation and passed a weaker motion which did not include any changes to the usual schedule of drainage works.</p>
Local Highways Issues	<p>I have lost count of the number of highways complaints I have made and the issues I have reported. Within Stowupland, I am continuing to push for drainage improvements on A1120 near Freeman School and a re-assessment of the drainage from the Trinity Meadows estate. This will include checks of the balancing ponds and the rate of flow of water from them. Officers are aware of the blockage of the drainage system in Church Road which results in water flowing down past the village hall.</p> <p>Another year has passed with no further progress on the Safer Route To School Scheme. We are currently awaiting a submission by the school to SCC for footpath diversions. When these</p>

	are approved the section of the route from The Green to the school car park can be constructed.
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