

Report for Nedging PC by Robert Lindsay, Suffolk County Councillor 12.3.24

Floods, drainage and potholes

Storm Babet, followed by extreme rainfall – including the fifth wettest February on record, combined with spells of freezing weather, and the fact that Highways changed its contractor at the start of October, have created a perfect storm. The number of reports of action needed on the reporting tool rose by 82% in the current financial year, while drainage and flooding issues increased by 364% in the past five months compared to a year ago. Emergency incidents rose by 64% to 2,117 over the same timeframe. I'm pleased to say that locally, a long running flooding of the road at Kettlebaston has been eased greatly because I was able to get Highways to push on a local landowner to get the ditch dug and highways also jetted out gulleys there.

County Council budget

Cuts to this year's budget, passed by the council in February, were probably the deepest on record. The council is taking heavily from its reserves to meet the growing demand for social care for adults and children, and council tax is due to rise by £74 annually for Band D properties from April this year. There will also be cuts to Family Hubs (children's centres) and Housing Related Support, which supports vulnerable people like care leavers to find accommodation. Funding for arts and museums will be maintained for 2024-25 only and subject to a bidding process for grants after that. The Bury St Edmunds local archives will be moved to The Hold in Ipswich, which like the arts funding cuts has been controversial locally.

My group's (Green, LibDem and independent) proposed amendment to save funding for arts and museums and young people not in education or training was voted down as was the Labour amendment which also proposed to reverse some of the planned cuts.

Bus improvement money – no Suffolk plan

A number of bids by parish councils for some extra funding on bus improvements were made in my Cosford division. Unfortunately, the county council did not take up Hticham and Bildeston PC's suggestion of daily bus links to Stowmarket. But they also approved extra services on the 753 route between Sudbury and Bury St Edmunds and they agreed to consider an application by Monks Eleigh PC for a "digibus" demand responsive service.

The exercise highlighted for me the fact that the county council has no adequate strategy to prioritise and identify where sporadic and randomly available government funding for buses should be invested.

Suffolk Devolution expected 2025

More details of the devolution deal signed last year between the Government and the leader of Suffolk County Council have been settled. The government is offering the county council a bit more freedom on decisions and funding for transport, skills and adult education, regenerating brownfield sites and retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient. It will go to consultation with the public later this month. If the deal is approved, the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk - every four years. The first election would take place in May 2025 alongside county council elections. For more information, see <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution>

This deal ought to help with bus planning because, as part of it, the government will agree the level of transport funding for Suffolk for several years ahead rather than just one year at a time as currently. However, it increases the urgency for Suffolk to draw up a proper investment plan based on proper evidence.

Safer Speed Limits – Bildeston, Lavenham, Semer, Kersey

Bildeston's 20mph limit has finally been installed with a 30mph buffer zone. I am told Milestone will return in mid April – subject to weather - to complete the work. Lavenham gained approval for a 20mph limit a year ago, after protracted discussion with Lavenham parish council the design is now going to a formal consultation.

In addition, during the year, the council approved my application to reduce the speed limit on A1140 at Semer from 60mph to 40mph. Semer PC and Kersey PC will provide half the funding with the remaining half coming from my locality budget. It coincides with an approved change from 40mph to 30mph on the Stone Street section of the road leading onto the Hadleigh bypass.

SEND failure again– “Priority Action Plan”

Suffolk's special educational needs services failed its Ofsted inspection this autumn for the third time. The county must now produce a Priority Action Plan with its NHS partners which must be submitted by 7th March. It will be spending £4.4 million extra in the next financial year to enable this action plan to be delivered. New staff will be hired to, amongst other things, enable care plans to be produced more promptly as well as extra training. The failure came despite the council last year saying it had adopted all recommendations made by an independent consultant following a failure in 2021.