**County Councillor Report**

**February 2025**

**LOCALITY BUDGET**

I have awarded my remaining budget of £733 for this financial year. This has been given to Trimley St Martin Parish Council towards set up costs for their summer fete. I look forward to this event and I have volunteered to help in any way on the day.

**COUNTY COUNCIL BUDGET 2025/26**

Again this year, Suffolk County Council have had a difficult task of setting a balanced budget. For all County Councils costs and demands on services are growing beyond rises in income. Suffolk is benefitting from prudent and sometimes difficult decisions made in the past.

The budget has been finalised and was examined at an all day Scrutiny on 14 January, which I attended. The budget will be presented for approval at Council on 13 February. For the next financial year the expenditure will rise from £752.8 million this year to £803.7 million, with Council Tax increasing by 4.99%. This is the maximum allowable increase in the County Council portion of Council Tax. District and Parish Councils of course set their own parts of Council Tax. Had we not taken the full amount, central Government would have penalised us in the grants which they give us.

The increase in spending may seem large, but the majority of this goes on two services – Adult social care and Children’s Services. These budgets are £370.7 million and £205.4 million respectively, making up 77% of the total ( when adjustments are made because of ring fenced grants ). The remaining money has to cover all other services – waste sites, fire service, coroners’ hearings, libraries, trading standards and highways ( including roads, paths, rights of way and street lighting ). In order to balance the budget, which is a legal requirement, next year’s amounts include £28.4 million of efficiency savings.

**DEVOLUTION**

There has been much discussion and speculation about this subject. Firstly, this is not a County Council initiative, but a proposal from the Government. Much of the detail and timetabling is still uncertain, but what we do know is that it will involve unitary local government for both Suffolk and Norfolk, and a single Mayor covering both Counties.

The Government invited County Councils to express an interest in joining a priority programme, where some areas could be part of a first tranche piloting this. We believe the intention is to introduce unitary ( combining the functions of County and District/ Borough Councils ) in all areas that do not currently have it. Suffolk voted on 09 January to submit this request. We believe it is advantageous to be part of the first wave, shaping how this will happen, rather than having it imposed later.

Personally, I have always supported unitary local government, and I spoke and voted in favour at the debate. The current 3 tier system is cumbersome, wasteful and confusing. Unitary will cut out duplication and excessive spending, and will provide clarity for all concerned, especially the public. The current boundaries are not contiguous, and so Councillors may represent different combinations of residents at each Council. The election dates are not co-terminous, and occur on different 4 year cycles. The functions of each Council are ludicrously complicated – the County deal with planning applications for schools, District for houses; the District collect rubbish, the County dispose of it; the District sweep the gutters, the County spray weeds in the gutter. Unitary will get rid of this unnecessary confusion and duplication, therefore saving money.

Much is still unknown. We are waiting for a decision on whether we will be accepted onto the priority programme. Many aspects are yet to be decided, but I think the following is most likely. I stress that this is speculative and not definite :

1. There will be one unitary council for Suffolk, not two or more. This is because the recommendation is that they should serve at least 500,000 residents – Suffolk’s population is 750,000.
2. The Mayor for both Counties will have powers and funding for devolved decision making on strategic issues like transport. Also, the Mayor may take responsibility for the fire service, and oversight of the Police ( currently the role of the Police Commissioner ).
3. The County Council election due this May will probably be postponed. We think that the election for Mayor may be in 2026, and for the Councillors on a new unitary council in 2027. All of this is yet to be determined.
4. The devolution of powers to a Mayor, and introduction of unitary councils, should have no effect on Parish or Town Councils.

COUNCILLOR STUART BIRD B.A.(HONS)

COUNTY COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE NORTH AND TRIMLEY DIVISION

TOWN COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE PORT WARD