

County Councillor Report

March 2025

DEVOLUTION AND UNITARY LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Suffolk County Council have decided upon the preferred model for the reorganisation of local government on a unitary basis. This will be presented in our business case to Central Government, forming the next stage in the negotiations.

We believe Suffolk will be best served with one unitary Council, serving all of Suffolk. The 4 key benefits to be derived from this unitary process are better clarity for the public we serve, more efficient decision making, precise accountability (who is responsible for what), and reduced administration costs freeing up more money for front line services. These objectives will be best met with one Council. Under unitary the functions carried out by the Borough and four District Councils will be brought together. If we do not create one single unitary authority, the functions currently carried out by the County Council will be fragmented. Vital services like social care, schools and transport will be undermined if moved from being dealt with by one cross Suffolk Council, to two or three unitary bodies, which was the alternative model.

Furthermore, the Government guidance is that unitary Councils should serve at least 500,000 people. With a population of 770,000 Suffolk would not meet this threshold if two or three unitary Councils are created.

PARKING AT ST MARTIN PRIMARY SCHOOL

I have been aware for some time of potential problems caused by parking at St Martin Primary School. Concerns have been raised by the Parish Council, residents, and parents of pupils attending the school. These concerns were also raised with my colleague, Councillor Patti Mulcahy, who represents the peninsula villages beyond Trimley, including Kirton where many of the pupils live.

We have had an initial meeting with the Head Teacher of the school. This was to explore what has been done and what measures could be considered to ensure that parking outside the school is safe for everyone, and does not cause any hazards or inconvenience. I will provide updates as we hopefully make progress and decisions on the way forward.

SUFFOLK LIBRARIES

On Monday 24 February a decision was made concerning the future of Suffolk's libraries. The following details are taken from the press release which was issued. This explains the decision and the background which led to the decision to bring the service in house :

Suffolk's 45 libraries will remain open, see no change to opening hours and have new mobile libraries and computers as part of a plan to bring the service back into Suffolk County Council.

Subject to a formal Cabinet decision on 18 March 2025, staff running Suffolk's library service – along with their years of experience and love for libraries - will transition to the direct employment of the council on 1 June 2025.

The county council will invest £200,000 in replacing Suffolk's aging mobile libraries, with a further £157,000 for new books and to replace public computers in libraries across Suffolk. This is in addition to the £6.6 million a year budget available for Suffolk's libraries.

It follows an attempt to secure an external provider for a new six-year contract (with the option to extend for up to a further six years) which had to be abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.

Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1 June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

ACTIVE TRAVEL (CYCLING AND WALKING) STRATEGY

A number of schemes are being explored and consulted on throughout Suffolk, aimed at improving the experiences for cyclists and pedestrians. My Division includes the Walton part of Felixstowe, and one scheme involves a number of improvements and alterations in the Maidstone Road / Grange Road area. Whilst some proposals are acceptable, a proposal to reduce residential parking to only one side of Maidstone Road I considered to be wholly inappropriate, potentially depriving residents without off road parking of facilities to park vehicles.

I have sought and received confirmation from the relevant Cabinet Member at County Council that a scheme will not receive approval if it involves reduction in residential parking provision.

COUNCILLOR STUART BIRD B.A.(HONS)

COUNTY COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE NORTH AND TRIMLEY DIVISION

TOWN COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE PORT WARD