

February 2024 Parish Report
East Suffolk Council GLI Group – Councillor Update

From Councillor Dan Clery

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East Suffolk Council announces spending plans for 2024-25

East Suffolk Council will spend nearly £100million in 2024/25 delivering critical services for its communities, and projects to improve the district, as part of an ambitious four-year-plan.

At a Full Council meeting on 21 February, the Council confirmed a balanced budget for the year and committed to a net spend of £46 million for services such as planning and coastal management, environmental services, leisure, waste collection and parking.

In addition, a further £50 million will be invested in assets, services, housing and infrastructure in 2024/25 as part of the General Fund and Housing Capital Programmes.

Having formed a new Administration in May 2023, the Green, Liberal Democrat and Independent Group (GLI) led by Cllr Caroline Topping, developed 'Our Direction 2028' – a four-year plan which presents the Council's key ambitions. It is driven by four main priorities (Environmental Impact, Sustainable Housing, Tackling Inequalities & Thriving Economy) and Cllr Topping believes this budget shows that the Council is making important funding decisions based on these clear principles.

She said: "The GLI administration at East Suffolk Council has a clear and bold plan to promote a bright, green, open, free, and fair future for all - and our budget for 2024/25 reflects that. We know that many people are facing difficulties, and our services can make a real difference.

"We are focusing on the inequalities that people face in East Suffolk, with a range of services dedicated to providing support for those most in need. We are raising funding for Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) organisations, providing more money for Citizens Advice East Suffolk, and to Community Hubs which offer practical advice and support for a range of vulnerable residents.

"Improved housing is also a key priority and, along with the Housing Revenue Account, our budget commits to supporting safe, suitable and sustainable homes, delivering affordable and sustainable housing as opportunities arise.

"Naturally, we are committed to delivering positive climate, nature and environmental impacts – which will also benefit and enhance our long-term financial stability. This includes a commitment to fund a range of different initiatives such as our Cycling and Walking Strategy and ongoing financial support for the delivery of the Council's commitment to net zero by 2030.

“This budget also looks to ensure that our economic development and regeneration activity enables residents of East Suffolk to benefit from and contribute to a thriving economy but with a sustainable approach at its heart.”

Around 40% of East Suffolk’s critical services are funded by Council Tax and the total amount paid specifically to East Suffolk by each household will increase by 2.98%. However the Council only receives around 8.8% of each Council Tax bill, with the remainder going to Suffolk County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Suffolk and Town & Parish Councils.

Cllr Topping continued: “If we are to set a balanced budget, while delivering such a wide range of vital services which benefit all our communities and businesses, Council Tax is a critically important element. It funds a large proportion of our net budget requirements, and with rising costs, set against a limited funding provision from central government, a rise is unavoidable.

“However, the proportion of total Council Tax which we receive for the services we deliver remains very small. For a Band D property, the proposed increase equates to an increase of just £5.40 per household for the entire year – and yet, it will help generate a fraction under half a million pounds of additional income for East Suffolk, which will be invested into the services that matter most to our communities.”

Council hosts first-ever ‘Model District Council’ for schools

More than 50 young delegates from seven East Suffolk schools took over the Council Chamber as youth ‘councillors’ for the day.

Pupils from schools from across the district were invited to take their seats for a first-ever simulation of East Suffolk Council, and to debate a motion on intergenerational political equality in East Suffolk.

The Chair of Council, Cllr Dr Anthony Specca, developed and oversaw the ‘Model District Council’ event as a centrepiece of his Chairship. He was joined on the day by Vice-Chair Cllr John Fisher, Leader of the Council Cllr Caroline Topping, and Leader of the Labour Group Cllr Peter Byatt.

A total of 52 pupils from Benjamin Britten Academy, Bungay High School, Castle EAST School, East Coast College, Pakefield High School, The Ashley School and Thomas Mills High School took part in the Model District Council, which was an all-day educational event.

Pupils were each assigned a ward and political party, and they were offered an experience that mirrored the real Council as closely as possible.

Supported by officers from Democratic Services and Communities teams, they first met in their political groups to consider the issue of how best to ensure that the youth voice is heard in East Suffolk. They then came together for a formal ‘Full Council’ meeting, with the Green, Liberal Democrat and Independent (GLI) group proposing a substantive motion, just like in the real Council.

Following robust debate and well-considered amendments from pupils in all the political groups, the youth 'councillors' then unanimously approved a motion to establish a permanent East Suffolk Youth Council.

Cllr Dr Speca said:

"As Chair of Council, and as an educator, I believe it's vital to engage youth in politics.

"The better future that we're trying to help shape here at East Suffolk Council belongs especially to the youth of our District. It's only fair that we listen to them, and our democracy will be stronger for it. It's now up to us to respond to the call for a permanent East Suffolk Youth Council, and I for one am keen to get to work on it."

The Model District Council also included a keynote speech by Rhammel Afflick BEM, Head of Advocacy and Communications for the British Youth Council, public-speaking tips from Beth Derks, founder of the 'Future Leaders' programme at the University of East Anglia, a 'marketplace' event featuring information about careers and apprenticeships with East Suffolk Council, and an 'Any Questions?'-style Q&A session with Group Leaders Cllrs Topping and Byatt.

Local Council Leaders warn of 'catastrophic effect' of Suffolk County Council Budget plans

The Leaders of Suffolk's district and borough councils have warned of "a catastrophic effect on hundreds of Suffolk's most vulnerable residents" should proposals contained within Suffolk County Council's Budget for 2024/25 be agreed.

Cllr John Ward (Babergh), Cllr Caroline Topping (East Suffolk), Cllr Neil MacDonald (Ipswich), Cllr Andrew Mellen (Mid Suffolk) and Cllr Cliff Waterman (West Suffolk) have written to the County Council, expressing their grave concern with the proposed changes to Housing Related Support (HRS); a temporary housing scheme which assists people in the care of Suffolk's Social and Children's Services. HRS is a model which helps individuals learn the skills needed to live independently prior to rehousing by district and borough councils, and it is a vital part of the pathway to prevent or relieve homelessness. However, Suffolk County Council now intends to remove all funding, and decommission the scheme by March 2025, having signed a five-year contract with support providers only just over a year ago.

In the letter sent to Suffolk County Council, the Leaders have urged the authority to work with district and boroughs, and to reverse this decision, which they believe does not consider the longer-term impacts - not just on the county's most vulnerable people, but on the budgets that this approach will supposedly relieve. They wrote:

"The Housing Related Support service provides over 700 accommodation places, delivered through multiple specialist providers. These specialist providers, many of whom are charities, provide support to tenants to help them live independently. This service is not available via any other route, and we understand that there is a waiting list of around 400 people.

“The client groups for Housing Related Support are amongst the most vulnerable in Suffolk. They include 16- and 17-year-olds who have no family with whom to live, 18-year-old care-leavers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. They also include young people who are also parents. Without your supported accommodation, many of these children and young people will add further pressure to your Children and Young People Services budget.

“Clients also include adults with mental health conditions or learning disabilities, a history of drug or alcohol dependency, or those being released from prison. It’s likely that the lack of supported housing for these individuals will place additional pressure on your other Adult and Community Services budgets.

“If people who previously qualified for Housing Related Support, are left without accommodation then rough sleeping will increase. We know that this will impact on these vulnerable people’s health, that they are more likely to begin or continue substance misuse, and to suffer from mental health issues. The impact of this will increase demand on other County Council services which are already stretched.

“We recognise that times are tough and that difficult decisions need to be made. But we believe that a decision to end Housing Related Support is short-sighted and will haunt Suffolk County Council in years to come as the implications come to fruition.”

Statement on proposals for Suffolk arts and heritage funding

A statement from Cllr Sarah Whitelock and Cllr Katie Graham; East Suffolk's cabinet member and deputy cabinet member for Communities, Leisure and Tourism, regarding Suffolk County Council's proposals for arts and heritage funding in the county.

“At East Suffolk Council, we remain alarmed by the regressive proposals for arts and heritage funding at Suffolk County Council, affecting much-loved arts organisations and residents in our district.

“Following a public and media outcry over a proposed total cut to the arts and heritage sector, providing a savings of only 0.58% to the council’s finances, a further announcement of additional government funding led to suggestions that the council could now make a U-turn. On closer inspection, however, there is no U-turn but a renewed commitment from the council to remove core funding of arts and heritage from its budget. A smaller pot of money, as yet for 2025-2026 only, has now been allocated to the sector for which organisations need to compete against each other for individual projects that ‘meet the council’s priorities.’

“This is not a good situation for our museums and arts organisations which contribute so much to our residents. As many have attested, the financial security that the council’s core funding provides is essential to their operation. To remove this funding is to remove a financial security that allows them to plan ahead, and in many cases, means they are at risk of scaling back on projects that offer enormous value to those within our community.

“The council’s statement that this model opens up the funding stream to organisations that might otherwise have been overlooked is one that communicates a lack of confidence in the organisations that were already being supported. A further pot of money to attract fledgling

initiatives would be a sound investment; removing existing funding to do this is only damaging.

"Art and culture play a vital role in our communities, especially when times are hard. We believe it is the responsibility of any government to uphold their value not just in words but actions. We appeal to the county council to consider not only the practical harm brought about by this removal of core funding, but the broader and longer-term damage that such a lack of commitment communicates to our residents."

Ease the Squeeze on cost of living

Are you, or someone you know, worried about the increasing cost of living?

We understand the pressures faced by many people today and we are working closely with key partners to ensure support is available to help ease the squeeze for households in East Suffolk.

To make it as easy as possible for you to access the services and support available, locally and nationally, we have gathered information about them in one place:

www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/community/squeeze/

For the most up to date information regarding East Suffolk Council, please visit:

www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk