

Parish Report February 2018

Councillor

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Cabinet confirms budget proposals

On 23 January, the Conservative Cabinet at Suffolk County Council confirmed the final budget proposals for 2018-19. These proposals will be debated at a Council meeting on 8 February, where all councillors will vote on them.

Along with the rest of the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group, I am very concerned by a number of the cuts proposed as part of the Conservative's savings plan. These are outlined below:

£12m cuts to Adult Care

The adult care budget is already very stretched, predicting a £3.47m overspend on their current 2017-18 budget. Adult social care is currently facing immense pressures, including increased demographic demand, changing customer expectations and a stressed care provider market. Despite this, the council is proposing cuts of £12m to the budget in 2018-19.

This is divided into an £11m cut from the care purchasing budget, and a £1m cut from the Sheltered Housing Grant.

£20,000 cut to Citizens Advice

Cutting the budget of the valuable Citizens Advice service is a short-sighted decision, that will likely cost the council more in the long term. An analysis of the impact of Citizens Advice services shows that, for every £1 invested in 2016/17, £1.96 in savings to government and public services were generated. By intervening in problems early on, Citizens Advice helps to reduce the need for public services such as health, housing and out-of-work benefits, whilst also improving the wellbeing, participation and productivity of the people they help.

The Council themselves acknowledge how important the Citizens Advice service in Suffolk is, stating "the return on investment for Citizens Advice is high and the service prevents demand reaching the County Council through its recognised contribution to mental health and wellbeing."

Furthermore, our Citizens Advice services are reporting an increase in the number of people requiring advice and support. Now is clearly not the time to be cutting their funding.

£15,000 cut to Greenways Countryside Project

The Greenways Countryside Project exists to protect and enhance the countryside in and around Ipswich, and relies on volunteers to complete its valuable conservation work. Many of these volunteers gain a strong sense of purpose from being involved in the project, and the project is a valuable resource for promoting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Greenways currently receives £15,000 funding from the County Council, which accounts for over 10% of the projects total expenditure. However, this funding will be removed entirely in the 2018-19 budget.

Rural transport cuts

£150,000 will be cut from the sponsored bus services budget, which will result in a reduced number of rural bus services. I am concerned that this will target some of our most vulnerable residents and increase rural isolation. There is currently no more information on which services could be affected by this cut. However, the Council has pledged to work with local councillors on this and I will keep you updated.

Increased hourly funding rate for childcare providers

On 11 January, the Schools Forum decided that the base hourly rate for providers should increase to £4.00 (previously £3.87), whilst the amount retained by Suffolk County Council should reduce to 3.8% (6.3%).

You may remember that, back in October 2017, my group supported a motion which called on Suffolk County Council to increase the amount of funding that was passed on to providers. We also criticised the lack of transparency over how the council was spending the £2m of funding that it retained centrally.

Unfortunately, the Conservative majority refused listen to the concerns of providers, campaigners and councillors, and voted against the motion in October. They made it very clear that an increase in funding was not an option.

This change therefore is a complete U-turn by the Council, and is a step in the right direction. However, childcare providers across the county have warned us that £4.00 an hour still is not enough to keep their businesses afloat and viable in the future. More will need to be done, by Suffolk County Council and central government, to support providers if the government's "30 hour free childcare" policy is to be a success.

SCC will be borrowing £21m to pay for road resurfacing

Suffolk County Council are planning to borrow an additional £21m over the next three years, to pay for road resurfacing. The plan is to resurface 1,000 miles of roads by March 2021. However, this accounts for only 25% of the road network in Suffolk, and so will only scratch the surface.

It is also worrying to see that the Council are planning to cut the highway maintenance budget in 2018-19. In particular, they are proposing a cut of £300,000 to the winter maintenance budget by reducing the amount of gritting carried out in the winter months. There is little point in borrowing £21m to resurface Suffolk roads, if the Council are not willing to invest the necessary funding for road maintenance.

Final few weeks of school transport consultation

The school transport consultation will end on 28 February 2018, and I would urge you all to respond – the consultation can be found here: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/schooltravel>. I am strongly against

the proposals, and I am very concerned by the lack of financial evidence in the consultation documentation. A change in policy will harm rural families, it will increase congestion and pollution, and it could destroy some of our county's best schools. Please make sure you take this opportunity to tell leaders at Suffolk County Council what you think.

There is also an online petition against the changes, which has received over 7500 signatures to date. It is one of the largest petitions received by the council, and it will be presented at a Council meeting on 8 February. If you have signed this petition, please also respond to the official consultation, as these are the only responses that Suffolk County Council will be analysing.

If you would like any further information, or want to discuss the implications of the new policy, please contact me by phone or email.

Planning approved for a new heritage centre in Ipswich

On 16 January, the Development Control Committee approved a scheme to build a new heritage centre near the Ipswich Waterfront. This will be known as "The Hold". It will house the bulk of Suffolk's archival collections, and will also include teaching spaces for the University of Suffolk.

The project is expected to cost £20m. Funding has been received from the county council, the University of Suffolk, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Wolfson Foundation.

However, it is not yet clear what impact this will have on the Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds Records Offices. There is concern that all records could be moved to The Hold in Ipswich, preventing easy access to archives for residents in other parts of the county.

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