

Parish Report March 2018

Councillor

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Budget for 2018-19 confirmed

On Thursday 8 February, the Council met to debate the budget proposals for 2018-19. As I explained in my previous report, the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group were concerned by a number of the proposed cuts. These included a £12m cut to adult care, funding reductions for Citizens Advice and Trading Standards, and cuts to rural bus services. Therefore, we were unable to support the budget.

An amendment by the Labour group, which focused on reversing minor cuts, was voted down by the Conservative administration. The budget proposals were subsequently passed in full, but were not supported by any opposition councillors.

The budget for 2018-19 includes a 4.99% increase in council tax.

Concerns raised over accountability and transparency of Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Board

The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Board (SPSLB) is made up of council leaders and chief executives from across Suffolk, as well as the PCC, chief fire officer and representatives from Suffolk's Clinical Commissioning Groups. The SPSLB controls a large pot of money, made up of £7.447m from the Suffolk business rates pool and £3.23m of central government funding received as part of the Transformation Challenge Award.

The Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group are very concerned about the accountability and transparency of the SPSLB. Their meetings are held in private with no minutes and neither residents nor councillors are made aware of the group's decisions, financial or otherwise. Given the vast amount of money they control, this secrecy is very concerning.

At the end of January, we met with the Interim Chief Executive at Suffolk County Council to query why there is so little accountability within the SPSLB. I have been informed that, on the basis of our queries, the SPSLB will be reconsidering its governance arrangements. I will keep you informed of any further updates.

Next phase of "Raising the Bar" strategy announced

The Cabinet has approved the Raising the Bar 2018-20 strategy. This is the third phase of the programme, which began in 2012 and is focused on improving educational standards throughout Suffolk. The new strategy will focus on three priorities:

1. Exceptional leadership and governance across the education sector
2. Excellence in teaching and learning, driven by system led improvement and innovation
3. The best opportunities for every child and young person

The strategy also includes the very ambitious goal to place the education system in Suffolk among the top 25% nationally. No other “shire” authority has achieved this, and the report acknowledges that it would likely take several years to reach this goal.

I am concerned that no new funding has been allocated to this phase of the Raising the Bar programme. The goals of the strategy are ambitious and will not be achievable without adequate investment, and so I question whether the Cabinet are fully committed to improving educational outcomes in Suffolk.

Suffolk to set up an outcomes-based contract to support adolescents on the edge of care

Suffolk’s Cabinet has agreed to set up a new outcomes-based contract, to provide intensive therapeutic support for adolescents at the edge of care via a private service provider. The idea is to reduce the need for and costs of adolescents coming into the care of Suffolk County Council, by providing intervention services that seek to keep children safely with their families. Payments will only be made if children are not taken into care, or are returned to their families.

The contract will be funded by a Social Impact Bond: this means that private investors will provide the start-up capital and running costs for the service, and will receive a return on investment if the service is successful at keeping children out of care. A similar contract and service exists in Essex, and a small number of local authorities across the UK are beginning to implement similar contracts

I am concerned about the use of a payment by results contract when vulnerable children are involved, given the risk of putting profit ahead of the wellbeing of these children. Suffolk County Council have assured me that the authority’s team of social workers will oversee the service and prevent this from happening, but the administrative costs of doing this properly could be substantial.

The contract is due to be awarded in Summer 2018, with contract mobilisation from Autumn 2018.

New drone technology for managing blue light service incidents

On 15 February, it was announced that emergency services across Suffolk would have access to two Small Unmanned Surveillance Aircrafts. The technology, commonly referred to as drones, has been developed and funded by Suffolk Resilience Forum for use across the county.

As part of a multi-agency Air Support Unit, the drones will be used by Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service, Suffolk Constabulary, Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Lowland Search and Rescue and Norfolk & Suffolk 4x4 Response. The drones will provide a range of aerial surveillance options to support these emergency services and voluntary organisations.

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