

County Council report, March 2023

More funds confirmed for children's services, adult care, and the environment

The £687.6m package was approved at a Full Council meeting on Thursday 9 February 2023, with a focus on children's services, adult care, and the environment.

In an online survey, Suffolk residents said that they would like to see more spent on adult services and children's services, and these areas will receive an additional £35.7m and £13.5m, respectively.

In addition, the council's net zero carbon budget, which had previously been approved by Cabinet, sits alongside the financial budget. It is a report on how the organisation is progressing to its ambitious target of being net zero by 2030, enabling the council to measure its carbon emissions, monitor its environmental impact, and identify actions and costs needed to reduce those emissions.

Your money, invested well

Column by Councillor Richard Rout, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment

Probably one of the least welcome bits of paper to land on doormats up and down the country is the annual Council Tax bill. A quick glance at social media around the time bills arrive is all the reminder we as Councillors need.

At Suffolk County Council, the Conservative administration only increases Council Tax when it's necessary.

This year, setting our budget was much more difficult. Like everyone at home, and businesses and organisations across Suffolk, we are having to pay more for the goods and services we use. We are not immune to the huge inflationary pressures that followed the pandemic and were made even worse by Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

In the Summer of last year, we feared a 'budget gap', this the difference between what we have and what we need, upwards of £50 million. Fortunately, in no small part due to the lobbying efforts of Suffolk's Conservative MPs, the money we received from the Government is more than expected. We still faced a gap, but it was not as large.

In our budget approved on Thursday 9th February, we made savings of £15 million. Many of these relate to changing the way we work, what we call transformation, while some related to staffing, including reducing the contribution we make to council staff's pensions. They won't see a reduction in pension but because our fund is well managed, we can pay in less. Importantly, none of these savings will reduce any of the services we provide.

In fact, we allocated more money to key services; an additional £36 million for Adult Social Care and another £13.5 million for Children's Services. Alongside this, was another £500,000 for Highways Maintenance, £110,000 for Tree Management, and £45,000 more per year for Suffolk's Citizen's Advice Bureaux. All of this, despite the challenges we face, contributed to a net increase of £62 million being spent on our services, taking our total budget to £688 million.

To achieve this, without reducing services, we needed to increase Council Tax. As Conservatives this is something we never do lightly. Our Budget Consultation, to which over 2,600 residents responded, told us how important Adult and Children's Care is to local people. It also told us that given the challenges we face - namely more people needing our help and rising costs - that many of you accepted Council Tax would need to increase.

Therefore, we took the difficult decision to increase the general part of Council Tax by 1.99% and the Adult Social Care element by 2%. This is below the maximum increase open to us and means that a Band B property, the most common type of property in Suffolk, will pay an extra 86p per week from April.

As Conservatives, we never forget that the money we collect in Council Tax is your money and we always ensure it is invested well. We know that Adult Care and Children's Care, particularly Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, are your priorities. They are ours too. Such is the need for these two areas that 75p in every £1 we spend now goes on people's services.

Everything else, from roads and pavements to Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service, Trading Standards, and our work to protect the environment comes out of the remaining 25p.

We know value for money is important too. We work hard to keep the amount of money we spend on staffing and administration down, in fact Suffolk is nearly the lowest spending County Council in this respect, so that we can ensure more money goes directly on the services we all use.

This year, for the third year in a row, the Green Party and Liberal Democrats tried to increase Council Tax bills by even more. However, for the third year in a row your Conservative led County Council rejected their attempts to hike bills even further.

We know that many people are struggling with rising bills and Council Tax is just another bill on that pile.

We will always invest where it's needed but our first instinct is never to reach for your pockets. We will continue to innovate, work differently, reduce overheads, and cut administrative costs so that the bills you pay are the best value possible.

New highways services arriving in Suffolk as multi-million-pound contract awarded

Milestone Infrastructure, part of M Group Services, has been awarded Suffolk's new highways services contract, which will begin on 1 October 2023.

Following an extensive procurement exercise, Suffolk County Council has confirmed Milestone will be its new contract partner for up to 20 years. The new partnership, which is worth in the region of £800 million - £1 billion, will be delivering highway projects and improvements across Suffolk, including but not limited to maintaining roads, pavements and rights of way, drainage, hedge trimming, construction of new road schemes, snow-clearing, and gritting.

When searching for its new highways partner, the county council worked with leading industry analysts to understand the different types of arrangements that other local authorities have in place, to look at which specialist providers are in the marketplace, and to find out what aspects of contract agreement may work best for Suffolk.

The council wanted the new contract to focus on delivering greater social value, utilising local skills and talent, giving young people the opportunity to work in the sector as well as building on the council's commitment to carbon reduction and protecting the environment.

A rigorous procurement exercise was carried out over many months, with various stages of discussions with service providers, to evolve their solutions to meet the various contractual requirements and deliver an effective and efficient highway service for Suffolk. Final submissions were evaluated and extensively moderated before the final winning contract was awarded.