

County Council report – January 2025

Suffolk's rural communities hit by loss of £3 million in Government funding

£3 million of vital public funding - designed to support rural communities in Suffolk - will be cut by the government next year, it has been revealed.

The funding, known as the Rural Services Grant (RSG), was introduced in 2016/17 to support councils who serve rural communities and sparsely populated areas where it costs significant amounts of money to deliver public services. Suffolk County Council will, from April 2024, no longer receive the grant. [The government announced last week that the funding will be redirected elsewhere](#) – adversely impacting rural areas like Suffolk.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Economic Development and Skills, said:

“It is deeply disappointing that the government has once again decided that disproportionately harms rural areas.

“Delivering essential services, like bus services, social care and road maintenance, is inherently more expensive in county areas like Suffolk due to our sparse population. The decision to scrap this grant compounds the challenges we are facing already with the rising costs of services like adult and children's care and home-to-school transport.

“Yet the government continues to overlook these realities, prioritising urban areas instead.

“It is becoming clear that any additional funding promised to support local authorities is to be undermined by cuts and additional costs elsewhere. This is a troubling pattern where supposed solutions offer no real relief and councils are faced with great financial uncertainty.

“I am concerned that the government's response to rising local government costs is to shift the burden onto residents, forcing councils to impose steep Council Tax increases to balance the books. This approach is both unsustainable and unfair to those in rural communities.”

Nationally, the Rural Services Grant is worth £110 million a year to rural communities. Other counties, including Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Northumberland have also spoken out about the removal of the rural grant.

Cabinet approves bold new vision for Suffolk's future

Suffolk County Council's Cabinet has approved ambitious new plans to position Suffolk as a national leader in sustainable growth and innovation.

Suffolk's Economic Strategy, also known as a Local Growth Plan, has been developed by the Suffolk Business Board in collaboration with businesses, partners and stakeholders across the county.

It seeks to harness Suffolk's unique strengths, including its thriving renewable energy sector and innovative, collaborative business environment, to transform the region into a hub for clean technology, long-term economic prosperity and competitiveness.

By 2045, the strategy sets out to achieve:

- An additional £14billion contribution to the economy, surpassing the average growth rate in England
- 45,000 more people qualified to Level 3 or higher
- 35,000 more people participating in the workforce
- A significant increase in average wages across the region.

At its core is EPIC Suffolk, a framework to guide investments and funding priorities built on four key pillars: **E**conomic wellbeing, **P**roductivity, **I**nclusivity, and **C**lean growth.

- **High Growth sectors:** Suffolk is already a national leader in clean energy, with offshore wind and nuclear projects at the forefront. The county's agri-food and drink sector are set to grow through sustainable practices and agri-tech innovation, while the county's ports and logistics sector is a critical gateway for UK trade.
- **Emerging and Value Growth sectors:** Suffolk's technology sector also shows strong potential for growth, in areas such as ICT, digital creative industries, life sciences and financial services. Elsewhere, there are opportunities to further improve productivity and job quality in advanced manufacturing, construction, health and social care, and the visitor economy.
- **Tech Convergence:** Suffolk has the potential to become a leader in Tech Convergence, where technologies such as digital, AI, clean tech, robotics and satellite applications intersect and integrate with existing industries, creating an environment ripe for innovation and growth.

To support Suffolk's continued growth, the strategy places a strong emphasis on workforce development and infrastructure. Investments in skills, housing, digital connectivity, and road and rail networks will be critical to meeting the demands of a growing economy and ensuring that the region remains competitive in the global marketplace.

The strategy is underpinned by a comprehensive investment plan which aims to attract £4 of private investment for every £1 of government economic funding, including a multimillion-pound pipeline of projects to boost productivity, create jobs and attract new companies to Suffolk.

Council calls on government to prevent scrapping of influential department

The CAA is intending to close its Airfield Advisory Team.

Through its work on major infrastructure projects, officers at Suffolk County Council have learned that the team will not be available to provide advice to planning officers or planning inspectors after March 2025.

Suffolk County Council has written to Mike Kane MP, Minister of State for Aviation, to review the proposal.

The Airfield Advisory Team has been instrumental in helping to shape improvements to infrastructure projects and informing planning across Suffolk. This includes the proposed Norwich to Tilbury pylon project, as part of National Grid's 'Great Grid Upgrade' and other proposed energy projects such as solar farms and wind turbines.

Without this team, it is anticipated that there will be no robust and effective advice to support the design and delivery of new infrastructure projects, and that this will compromise scrutiny of their design and delivery.

The impact of obstructions such as where pylons are placed or the glare from solar farms may also limit the commercial, strategic, and recreational operation of airfields across Suffolk and the rest of the country.

In July 2024, Suffolk County Council raised its concerns about the proposed Norwich to Tilbury pylon project when it formally objected to plans, published at the time.

Amongst a few fears, it cited that there would be "serious implications on nine airfields" with pylons close to runways which, in some cases, could possibly stop flying all together.

Suffolk County Council's letter to Mike Kane MP, Minister of State for Aviation, can be read on [suffolk.gov.uk](https://www.suffolk.gov.uk)

Suffolk and East of England councils seek fairness in the face of energy projects

Suffolk County Council is joining with other local authorities in the region to challenge National Grid and the government on energy projects, demanding fairness for their communities and environment.

The county councils from Suffolk, Essex, Norfolk and Lincolnshire all face similar challenges with Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) being planned for their counties.

These are typically related to energy projects, including solar farms, wind turbines, pylons and the infrastructure associated offshore wind farms, such as substations and cabling.

Two of Suffolk County Council's main concerns, shared with the other counties, are:

- The uncoordinated approach to NSIPs - this is creating significant challenges for Suffolk's rural communities under the current planning policy as applied by the planning inspectorate and Secretary of State
- The government's 2030 target for decarbonising the electricity grid – this is too hasty, making it impossible to deliver alternative solutions to pylon projects like Norwich to Tilbury

Suffolk County Council has had a longstanding position to support the need for low carbon energy to provide energy security for the country, and the progress to net zero – but not at any cost.

Suffolk councillors to consider devolution and council reorganisation

Suffolk County Council will hold an extraordinary meeting of councillors, and a meeting of its Cabinet, to debate and then decide on whether to put Suffolk forward for the government's new devolution and reorganisation programme.

The government has required that formal notice be given if Suffolk wishes to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme by 10 January 2025. Therefore, the meetings, both to be held on 9 January 2025, will see all 75 councillors debate and vote on a proposal to recommend Suffolk is at the front of the queue. Following the Full Council meeting, the Cabinet will make a final decision.

Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council, said:

“The government has set out its devolution and reorganisation proposals and has asked that Suffolk County Council submit an expression of interest by 10 January if we wish to be part of the Devolution Priority Programme. As a result, we must hold these extraordinary meetings. On 9 January, all Suffolk County Councillors will be given an opportunity to have their say before a final decision is made by Cabinet.

“Changes of this scale create an opportunity to streamline local government, empower joined-up decision making, save taxpayers money and ensure councils are resistant to economic challenges.

“I welcome the positive engagement of Suffolk's district and borough councils. This is a significant decision and one that will not be taken lightly.”

On 16 December, the Government published its much-anticipated [English Devolution White Paper](#), outlining plans for broader and deeper devolution coupled with a programme of coordinated local government reorganisation.

Key to the proposals is a reorganisation of council structures, particularly in two-tier areas like Suffolk, with a shift away from district, borough and county councils towards unitary councils. The government argues that unitary councils can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested in public services.

For most areas, the government says that this means creating councils serving populations of 500,000 or more, with exceptions where they make practical sense.

Alongside reorganisation, the government is also proposing to create new Mayoral Authorities – with a single directly elected Mayor covering larger geographies (for example Norfolk and Suffolk) and with powers over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, health improvement and blue light services.

At this stage, no decisions have been made about what will happen in Suffolk.

The meetings will be held consecutively from 2pm in the King Edmund Chamber at Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich, IP1 2BX. The meetings will be live streamed on the council's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/SuffolkCC>