

Suffolk County Council Report 2013/14

I make no apology for starting with finance as I believe the cost of the Council tax is what concerns everyone.

This year I have been more involved as I was asked to Chair a Group that has been giving a more in depth look at the Council's Budget and next year will take a line by line approach to the Council's business. This will not be just about making savings but also growing other businesses to deliver a better offer to the residents of the County.

County Finance

SCC's portion of council tax will be frozen at its 2010/11 level for the fourth year in a row, after the council voted through its budget proposals for 2014/15 in February this year.

The council will be saving £38.6million over the next year to meet a budget gap caused by on-going reductions in government grant and increased demand for services. This is the first part of plans to save £156million over four years. Despite the tough financial climate, the council will be pushing ahead with important projects, such as 'Raising the Bar (driving up attainment levels in education), the roll-out of super-fast broadband across the whole of Suffolk, investing in apprenticeships, and supporting the development of 10 new, state-of-the-art care homes for older people. At the same time, the road maintenance budget – used for fixing potholes - has been protected from cuts. With plans to freeze council tax each year up to 2017, this will mean seven years with no increase.

Raising the Bar in education

A report which produced a series of recommendations aimed at driving up educational standards in Suffolk was endorsed by the county council in July last year.

The report was produced by the RSA, under the auspices of the county council's 'Raising the Bar' initiative. Raising the Bar was launched last year, as a major project to improve attainment levels and build a stronger aspirational culture around education in Suffolk. The RSA's report, 'No School is an Island', contained 20 recommendations. Among these was the idea that small rural schools with fewer than 100 pupils should enter a federation with others to maximise resources. Other suggestions included: for Suffolk to form a partnership with a London Borough with a record of improvement in educational standards, to learn from the huge progress they have made; for every school to establish a Parents' Council to ensure voices are heard, and also for all Suffolk schools to join together to form a new county-wide, school-led Suffolk Partnership for Excellence in Learning.

GCSE results move Suffolk up five places in league table

December's publication of the national league tables for schools, based on the most recent GCSE results, saw Suffolk move up to 137th out of 151 local authority areas.

This is a five-place improvement on last year. It also means Suffolk is climbing nearer to the national average. 54.6% of Suffolk pupils gained five or more GCSEs graded between A* to C, putting Suffolk 6.4% off the national average of 61%. This compares with the previous year's results, when Suffolk was 8.5% off the national average of 59%. The results are a reflection of the hard work put in by young people and all those individuals in the Suffolk education system who have been relentless in pursuit of improved standards in the county.

There is still work to be done to get Suffolk further up the league tables and performing above the national average.

In February this year, SCC gave their support to the proposed changes to schools in the Bury St Edmunds area, following an extensive public consultation which showed support for a move to two-tier education. This follows on from a public consultation, in which 54% of respondents to a questionnaire said they agreed with the move to two-tier education in Bury St Edmunds; 34% disagreed. There had been a call-in which was rejected by Scrutiny Committee so that means the changes can still be made in time for completion in September 2016.

Campaign to drop plans for A14 toll

In June, the government confirmed that funding will be available to upgrade the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon.

The work to upgrade the A14 will go ahead at a cost estimated at being close to £1.5 billion. It was originally proposed that this would be funded in part by local authority contributions, together with tolling of the road when completed. However, following a concerted campaign by Suffolk businesses, residents, media, councillors and MPs, the plans for tolling were dropped. The improvements planned for the A14 are much-needed, for the Suffolk economy, particularly with regard to the ports and the through-put of freight. SCC's cabinet agreed to commit around £1 million to the project over a 25-year period.

New apprenticeships across Suffolk

The County has given the go-ahead to the investment of £1.5 million to establish a local Apprenticeship service for Suffolk.

The County is working with other local councils, the Anglian LEP and the Government on a deal which will bring in investment to cut youth unemployment. The idea is that by developing local skills and working with businesses this will help them create new jobs. There is a three-year plan to increase apprenticeships across Suffolk. The plan involves three key programmes of activity: Making apprenticeships more accessible to employers, particularly to small and medium-sized businesses; raising the profile of apprenticeships in schools and supporting young people to participate; and finally, community-based marketing and communications to raise awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships. Any business that has fewer than 1,000 employees and hasn't had an apprentice within the last 12 months could be eligible for a grant. So for young people between the ages of 16-24 are eligible for the scheme and if you want to make contact with the Apprenticeship Team on 01473 260922 or email at apprenticeships@suffolk.gov.uk

Topping-out ceremony in Bury St Edmunds marks first year of care-home partnership

In December, the first anniversary of the partnership between Suffolk County Council and Care UK - which is building state-of-the-art care homes across the county - was marked with a topping-out ceremony.

Yesterday, representatives from SCC, Care UK, and its development partner on the project Castleoak, placed a fir tree on the roof of the under-construction new Davers Court care home in Bury St Edmunds. This new care home and wellbeing centre, at the site of the former Davers Court in Shakers Lane, is part of a £60 million three-year plan for 10 similar

new developments. In December last year Care UK began operating SCC's 16 care homes and eight wellbeing centres. One year on, construction of seven of the 10 new developments is under way as part of the phased modernisation programme.

Suffolk's broadband roll-out reaches 13,000 properties

Suffolk is being given an extra £5million from the government to help make high-speed fibre broadband available to the hardest-to-reach communities.

The news comes as Suffolk's Better Broadband programme passes the 13,000 property mark. Last month's announcement about new funding means that the Better Broadband for Suffolk programme, currently working to make superfast speeds (24 megabits per second (mbps) or more) available to 85% of the county, can start working towards a higher coverage target of up to 95%. At present, all properties in Suffolk have been promised speeds of at least 2 mbps by the end of 2015. In January 2014, SCC announced that it was inviting potential suppliers to discuss how they could deliver the additional work. A 'mini-competition' - separate to the current Better Broadband for Suffolk contract with BT - is now underway to identify a suitable supplier. The aim will be to complete the tendering process by the summer of 2014, and for works to start by the end of 2014 - in parallel with the ongoing Better Broadband for Suffolk programme. Every three months between now and the end of the project, a further 10,000 properties should receive access to broadband.

In Hawstead

Well Highways hasn't been easy, at least the pot holes are at last being repaired properly now!!! I have this problem as high as I can and as the Cabinet Member Graham Newman says he isn't happy either. I believe the message has at last got across and more resources have been put in to deal with the recognised backlog.

VAS (Vehicle Activated Signs), I have been pushing for more of these as I know Parishes like them so do the police as they work and slow down traffic. At last the County has agreed that Parishes can buy them as there isn't enough to go round and do the job. I have asked if I can use part of my highways budget for this and have got agreement from the Cabinet Member Graham Newman that I can.

I have forwarded details of VAS under separate email.

Terry Clements