

Parish Report March 2019

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2019/20 budget agreed

Suffolk County Council's 2019/20 budget was agreed on Thursday 14 February. This will see an increase in council tax of 3.99%, and savings across the council's directorates totalling £10.1m.

I am concerned by a number of the cuts, in particular:

- The decision to remove all grant funding from Citizens Advice. This will be phased over two years, with a 50% reduction in the 2019/20 budget (£0.184m);
- Reducing the amount spent on Housing Related Support, which supports those at risk of homelessness (£0.45m);
- Reduced funding for sponsored bus services (£0.34m) and cessation of the provision of roadside bus timetables (£0.1m);
- Reduction in highways maintenance, including no road sign cleaning (£0.1m), only maintaining mandatory road markings (£0.075m) and less frequent weed treatments in rural areas (£0.055m);
- Staffing reductions across all directorates, which may result in less efficient services (£2.968m).

CCGs to pick up CAB funding for 2019/20

As mentioned above, the budget includes a cut to the grant funding provided by Suffolk County Council to Citizens Advice. This grant will be cut by 50% in 2019/20 (£184,000) and removed entirely in the 2020/21 budget.

Thankfully, the CCGs have stepped in and agreed to provide Citizens Advice with £184,000 in funding this year, to make up for the 50% funding cut from Suffolk County Council. Although this means Citizens Advice will not lose funding this year, it does not address the longer-term problem of funding in the future. The CCGs have been clear that this funding is only available for 2019/20.

Reduction in 2018/19 predicted overspend

Suffolk County Council's latest budget monitoring report suggests the 2018/19 budget will be overspent by £5.9m. This is a reduction since quarter 2, when they were predicting an overspend of £7.5m.

The £5.9m overspend represents 1.2% of the net budget and is made up of £3.8m on base budget and £2.1m on Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) spend.

Although it is positive to hear the overspend is reducing, I am concerned by where these savings are being achieved. The majority are due to ongoing staff vacancies at the council, particularly in social work teams. This is clearly not a long-term solution and is a dangerous false economy. Without adequate staff, the county council will struggle to properly and efficiently provide services in Suffolk.

Respublica report into housing costs council £66,000

Last year Suffolk County Council commissioned the thinktank Respublica to undertake a study into housing growth in Suffolk at a cost of £66,000. The final report was published on 21 February. At just 14 pages long, it cost the authority almost £5000 per page and failed to discuss the issues in any great depth.

School Travel – opt-in for funded transport

Following changes to the school travel policy, which will take effect in September 2019, eligible families must now “opt-in” to receive free school transport – you will no longer be automatically signed up.

If your child is eligible for free transport, you will need to apply each year. The application window for this year is 1 March 2019 to 31 May 2019. There is more information available at www.suffolkonboard.com/optin.

New mental health strategies for Suffolk

Since Spring 2018, the Suffolk and Norfolk Clinical Commissioning Groups have been leading work on developing new mental health strategies for Suffolk.

The Strategies seek to describe the future vision for mental health and emotional wellbeing within the context of an integrated physical, mental and social care system and a departure from the way traditional services have been delivered. There is also a strong emphasis on prevention, wellbeing and expanding community/primary care mental health services.

The next phase of work will focus on designing delivery plans for the Strategies, including a programme of work and timetable for implementation. This will include a review of the existing structure and form of mental health provision and how this support or impedes the vision for the future.