

County Council report January 2024

An article by Councillor Paul West, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Ipswich, Operational Highways and Flooding.

As temperatures plummet, highways teams have now switched their focus to ensuring the county's roads are treated and kept free from snow and ice. Despite experiencing mild temperatures in the autumn, our highways teams have been carefully planning our winter gritting operation for months to ensure we are prepared for whatever the weather throws our way.

The gritting treatment of our roads in Suffolk is vital to ensure people can continue to travel and do so safely during winter. During the 2022/23 winter season, Suffolk used around 12,989 tonnes of salt to treat a total distance of 177,983 miles – which equates to travelling the circumference of Earth over seven times! Suffolk Highways currently has a stock of around 17,000 tonnes of salt across the county for the season ahead and is well prepared for any further drop in temperatures.

Our highway teams are responsible for gritting 36 Priority 1 (P1) routes, which amounts to around 1,259 miles, including all A and B roads, roads to fire stations, hospitals, main bus routes and rail stations. They also have 34 Priority 2 (P2) routes, which amounts to around 843 miles of the network, this includes other bus routes, roads leading to rural villages and access to schools. The P1 routes are completed when road surface temperatures are forecast to drop below 1°C and P2 routes are carried out when the forecast predicts there to be a longer period of cold weather conditions.

This entire operation requires extremely careful pre-planning and running throughout, every single decision to grit or not is based upon forecasted road surface temperatures, whilst also considering the impact of other factors, such as wind and heavy rain.

But gritting the priority network isn't all that the teams do to prepare our county for wintry weather; Suffolk Highways has also refilled 2,100 grit bins across the county at registered locations, such as the bottom of hills, or on junctions of minor roads. Grit bins are owned by [parish and town councils](#) and to ensure that the contents of grit bins are used to make roads safer, our communities are encouraged to monitor how and where the grit is used and if more is required to report it via the reporting tool.

Suffolk's residents can also do their part to support us with our gritting efforts by parking considerately and leaving enough room so that our vehicles can grit the road – if we can't fit, we can't grit!

Anyone who would like to know when and where we are gritting over the coming months, all gritting activities will be posted to Suffolk Highways' X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook and Instagram accounts – so I encourage you to give us a follow and keep abreast of all our team's movements this winter season.

More information on gritting can be found on the county council website, and details of which roads are gritted can be found on [one.network](#), by selecting the 3 lines on the search box, then data layers, driver information then winter gritting routes.

Suffolk Highways' winter gritting efforts form part of the county council's wider 'Winter Matters' campaign, which launched last week, and offers advice to help Suffolk residents stay warm, safe and well this winter.

From stopping the spread of winter illnesses, to heating your home for less, residents can find advice at www.suffolk.gov.uk/wintermatters to help you and your loved ones look after your money, health, wellbeing and safety during the colder months. Information will be regularly shared on the council's social media channels throughout winter, follow Suffolk County Council on Facebook or @SuffolkCC on X, using the hashtag #WinterMatters.

More public money for adult and children's care, but difficult decisions are needed to balance the books

In the next two years, Suffolk County Council needs to pump almost £74 million extra into protecting the county's most vulnerable residents.

- £74 million extra needed to protect most vulnerable over two years
- £64.7 million savings to be made over two years
- Council set to reduce workforce, services and use savings

As part of financial plans to prioritise those in greatest need, an additional £42.7 million for children's services and £29.9 million for adult care are being proposed.

Along with local authorities up and down the country, the council has been hit hard by inflation and rising demand for services such as children's care, special educational needs and disabilities and home-to-school transport. It means having to make difficult decisions about the services it provides, including £64.7 million of savings in 2024/25 and 2025/26.

The two-year savings proposals, which have been published on the council's website, include:

- £11 million of staffing costs through changing the way services are delivered and restructuring across the council.
- £30.6 million of additional savings from an extension of the council's hugely successful Adult Social Care Transformation programme, which has focused on reducing demand for more expensive social care options by boosting people's independence and ability to stay well for longer through innovative methods including cutting edge care technology. This transformation programme has already saved £30.7 million over the last six years
- £0.5 million of savings by stopping core funding to Art and Museum sector organisations. To assist with the transition, £528,000 of COVID recovery money will be made available to Arts and Museum sector organisations for 2024/25 which will fully cover the funding reduction for one year.
- £140,000 of savings by centralising Suffolk Archives to The Hold and closing the branches in West and East Suffolk. In February 2023, the council committed £3.4m to relocate the West Suffolk Archives branch to the proposed Western Way development. Remaining at its current location would have required over £5 million to protect the historic records and meet modern archive standards. West Suffolk Council has since decided not to progress with the Western Way development, ending that opportunity. Centralising the three branches into one brings Suffolk in line with most archive services across the country and is better value for taxpayers' money.

- £15.9 million of reserves will be used to balance the 2024/25 budget.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, said:

"This is the most challenging budget-setting process the council has faced for many years. But once again, we are putting adult and children's care at the heart of our plans.

"However, to ensure appropriate levels of funding for these key services, and those most in need in Suffolk, we must make difficult decisions about all the other services we deliver, and how we deliver them.

"This is necessary because the demand on council services for those most in need in Suffolk is at an all-time high. The cost of providing many of those services is significant, but the funding that we need is not keeping up. Across the country, councils are having to make similar tough choices.

"Our proposed budget next year will be around £752 million, of which £105m alone is down to these cost pressures from inflation and increased demand.

"We are a well-run council and over the last five years, we have saved £66 million by working smarter and leaner. But we now need to go even further.

"We have spent months scrutinising all the council's spending. There is competition for every pound across all our services, and I understand that each service means something to someone."

Following the recent funding announcement from the Government, Suffolk County Council will not receive enough funding to keep pace with inflation or the level of demand for services. The council has joined national calls for additional funding and lobbied the Chancellor of the Exchequer direct.

Full details of Suffolk County Council's financial plans for 2024/25 will be presented to its Scrutiny Committee meeting on 11 January.

The proposals would give the council a budget of around £752 million for 2024/25, made up of funding coming from Government, business rates, charges for services and council tax. The proposed budget would require a 4.99% increase in council tax in next year. This would be made up of a 2.99% increase in general council tax and a 2% increase dedicated to funding adult care.

This means the costs for a household would be:

- Band B property: £23.50 per week (£1.12 per week increase from 2023/24)
(Band B properties are the most common in Suffolk)
- Band D property: £30.21 per week (£1.43 per week increase from 2023/24)

Cllr Rout continues:

"We understand the financial pressure facing the Government with public services everywhere asking for more money. This is money that simply isn't available now, especially after the vital financial support made available during and following the pandemic. This means it is up to local authorities like us to find savings to balance the books.

"I would like to thank the record number of people who completed our online budget consultation, and those who took part in our focus groups.

“Although most people said that they would rather not see council tax being increased next year, I hope they can understand why - for the first time in years - we must ask for the maximum amount possible to help support those most in need.

“Our commitment to make the best possible use of every pound of public money made available to us is absolute.”

The budget proposals will be discussed at the council’s Scrutiny Committee and then presented at the Cabinet meeting on 30 January. At the Full Council meeting on 15 February, the proposals will be debated, with a vote taking place on the budget for 2024/25 – the first year of the two-year budget proposals.

The Scrutiny Committee meeting will be available to stream on Suffolk County Council’s YouTube channel, and public questions can be submitted in advance, details are available at www.suffolk.gov.uk.