

County Council report – February 2025

Council's budget prioritises vulnerable residents and essential services

Suffolk County Council has unveiled its proposed budget for 2025/26, with a strong focus on supporting vulnerable residents across the county.

Under the proposals, the council's net budget would rise by 6.7%, from £752.9 million in 2024/25 to £803.7 million in 2025/26. Key allocations include:

- £18.1 million extra for children's services, ensuring continued support for young people and families in need
- £35.2 million extra for adult care, aimed at addressing the growing demand for social care services.

To help fund these essential services, the council is proposing a 4.99% rise in Council Tax. This would consist of a 2.99% increase in general Council Tax and an additional 2% specifically for adult care services.

This means the costs for a household would be:

- **Band B property:** £24.67 per week, a £1.17 increase from 2024-25 (Band B properties are the most common in Suffolk)
- **Band D property:** £31.72 per week, a £1.51 increase from 2024-25.

The council will also receive £12.1 million of the additional £880 million allocated by the government for adult and children's social care. It also expects to receive £2.2 million of the £263 million earmarked for a new Children's Services Prevention Grant.

To balance the books, the council has also identified £10.9 million in additional savings, building on the £17.5 million approved last year. This brings the total savings to £28.4 million for the 2025/26 financial year.

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

"We remain committed to supporting vulnerable children and adults in Suffolk. Despite the financial challenges posed by increasing demand and broader economic pressures, we are proposing a balanced budget without drawing on unallocated reserves.

"It is deeply disappointing that, despite our significant deprivation levels, Suffolk will receive nothing from the government's new £600 million Recovery Grant. Further, the scrapping of the Services Grant and Rural Services Delivery Grant will see £3.7 million struck from our budget.

“Nevertheless, we understand the pressures facing families and businesses in Suffolk, and that is why we will continue to ensure every pound we spend delivers the best value for our residents.”

The final budget will be debated and voted on at a Full Council meeting on Thursday, 13 February 2025.

Unique landscape to be changed forever by pylons

A large area of landscape on the Norfolk/Suffolk border with uniqueness, rivalling those of other nationally protected landscapes, is set to be decimated by pylons as part of National Grid’s Norwich to Tilbury project.

In a letter to both Norfolk County Council and Suffolk County Council, and other local leaders, National Grid has outlined that it has decided to install overhead lines through the Waveney Valley, rather than running cables underground, as they had set out in their previous consultation.

This is a significant blow to local communities and the natural environment, especially following last year’s report jointly commissioned by Norfolk County Council and Suffolk County Council.

The report concluded that “the length of the Waveney Valley expresses many special qualities, and in the context of Suffolk and Norfolk, it is a valued landscape. Conserving and enhancing the special qualities articulated in this report is a key aspiration of existing planning policy.”

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council’s Deputy Cabinet Member for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, said:

“This decision not to underground any of the proposed pylons through the Waveney Valley, is nothing short of contemptible. The study we commissioned saw the area recognised as a valued landscape and National Grid’s plans will wreak untold damage on it. There was a clear alternative to this, and they’ve chosen not to take it.

“What I find particularly flagrant - if this what National Grid will press ahead with - is a lack of any suggestion of mitigation or compensation package for the local area.

“This council has engaged fully with discussions and consultations on Norwich to Tilbury, providing additional evidence to help protect the affected communities and environment in the Waveney Valley. We have worked closely and in good faith with National Grid, and yet they have not delivered a fair deal for the local area. There is nothing on the table from them, or Ofgem, to soften this blow.

“Yet again, I see this as more evidence of the government’s short-sighted and rushed mission to decarbonise the grid by 2030. Their influence is pushing through the cheapest and fastest options, with no consideration for residents, businesses or the environment – we are still to see any progress from them on community benefit schemes, to support situations just like this.

“As a council, we still maintain that the opportunity to underground the whole pylon run between Norwich and Tilbury, using HVDC cables, has not been properly explored. Revisiting the 2030 decarbonisation target and pausing the project would allow that to happen.”

The council will now look to take up their concerns with National Grid and discuss the issue further.

Suffolk commits to devolution fast track

Following an invitation from ministers, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet agreed to recommend Suffolk for inclusion in the government's Devolution Priority Programme (DPP), which would see the creation of a directly elected Mayor (likely covering Suffolk and Norfolk) and the replacement of existing council structures with a streamlined unitary council being set up.

The decision followed a debate and vote at a meeting of all county councillors.

Speaking following the debate, Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council, said:

“Today marks the start of arguably one of the biggest decisions this council will take in its 50 plus-year history.

“We need to think what is best for the people and businesses of Suffolk to whom we have a duty to make the difficult decisions – even if that decision means the end of the council or councils on which we sit.”

The government's English Devolution White Paper outlines a plan for broader and deeper devolution, coupled with a programme of coordinated local government reorganisation.

Key to these proposals is the restructuring of councils in two-tier areas like Suffolk, shifting from district, borough, and county councils to unitary councils. The government argues that unitary councils can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested in public services.

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

Cllr Hicks continued:

“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.

“These are not ‘nice to haves’ or ‘aspirations, they are fundamental pillars of the system delivering the best possible public services, with clarity, accountability and delivered in a financially sustainable way.

“These are the goals on which we must focus if we are to do the right thing for Suffolk.”

Suffolk County Council has now written to the government expressing its desire to be at the front of the queue for devolution and local government reorganisation.

If Suffolk is approved as part of the DPP, more detailed proposals, engagement and Government-led consultation would follow.

Cllr Hicks continued:

“To achieve remarkable things and seize significant opportunities, you must be willing to take on potential uncertainties. I want Suffolk to be at the front of the queue, setting the agenda on devolution – not following everyone else when identikit solutions are imposed.

“The proposal to join the DPP is not just a step forward; it is a leap towards a brighter, more prosperous future for Suffolk.”

Latest changes to Sea Link plans are not enough

Suffolk County Council continues to object to proposed plans for National Grid’s Sea Link project, despite recent changes to the scheme.

The council still has concerns regarding significant issues, including:

- Permanent access to the converter station site, resulting in the potential for construction traffic seven days a week
- Core working hours at the site of 7am to 5pm on Sundays and Bank Holidays, giving no respite to residents and businesses
- The unsuitability of Benhall Railway Bridge as an access route, including the potential for dangerous queuing of traffic on the A12 during construction
- A survey of the Benhall Railway Bridge, commissioned by Suffolk Highways has highlighted significant concerns regarding its capacity to accommodate abnormal loads
- Plans to relocate of the Fromus Crossing bridge further north, with a still-expected height of up to 6 metres, are likely to result in notable impacts to heritage assets

The council believes that a coordinated and integrated access solution between the major energy infrastructure projects affecting the county, including Sizewell C and National Grid, would considerably reduce many of these specific issues and community impacts.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council’s Deputy Cabinet Member for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, said:

“We have no option but to continue to object to National Grid’s plans which would not only have stark environmental impact but remain wholly unacceptable to residents and businesses.

“The lack of any movement from National Grid is frustrating as we continue to press the case for a coordinated access solution between the major energy infrastructure projects in the area, should they go ahead.

“As an example on the Sea Link project, we have repeatedly engaged with National Grid to propose alternatives to the Fromus Crossing – the plans to move the crossing, 40m to the north, will result in a greater visual impact on the key views from the south of the conservation area, the Grade II Church of St John the Baptist, and the Grade II listed Hurts Hall.

“The council also has significant concerns regarding the capacity of Benhall Bridge to accommodate the huge abnormal loads that National Grid propose. Taking this route not only risks huge delays to other traffic but the required improvements, if indeed they are possible to deliver, risk disruption on a key rail route that, as well as serving residents, will play an important role in the construction of Sizewell C.

“We have always acknowledged the need to increase domestic energy generation and deliver energy security to the UK. But this must not happen without due consideration for our local communities.”

The council has also noted significant public interest in the design process of the converter station site. It urges National Grid to publish the findings of the Design Review Panel to help all concerned to understand the design approach to the converter station site.

National Grid expects to submit its application for development consent in early 2025.

Detailed report provides blueprint for changes to Suffolk’s SEND services

A report has been published that provides the most detailed assessment of need for SEND services in Suffolk and will be used as a blueprint for immediate change.

The forensic 177-page document delves into current arrangements, future anticipated need and looks at gaps and challenges in SEND provision. This assessment highlights the increasing demand for SEND services, the challenges faced by families and professionals, and the importance of improving service provision to ensure equitable outcomes for all.

As a result of this analysis, a series of recommendations have been made to further shape improvements to SEND services. Known as the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Needs Assessment, the report will be discussed at the Health and Wellbeing Board on Thursday 16 January.

Some of the key findings and recommendations in the report include:

- A significant rise in demand for SEND services, with projections suggesting further increases in the coming years
- The importance of early intervention, timely diagnoses, and accessible services to address complex and multiple needs
- Strategic priorities emphasising communication, transition support, and whole system improvements to meet evolving demands.

The report also captures the voices of children and young people, parents, and practitioners to ensure lived experiences inform future strategies. The Suffolk Parent Carer Forum was involved in collating the report.

Council making net zero gains, but still work to do

Suffolk County Council continues to bring down its carbon emissions, with significant reductions from council-owned street lighting, vehicles and buildings, but there is still work to do to reach its ambitious target of net zero by 2030.

A report reviews progress since the declaration of a Climate Emergency in 2019. The report finds that emissions across the areas within the council's direct control, such as energy consumption in council buildings and vehicles (categorised as Scope 1 & 2 emissions), have fallen by a further 8% over the past year, contributing to a 43% drop since 2019. When taking account of the council's switch to a renewable electricity tariff, this becomes a 75% reduction.

However, when calculating its overall net zero progress, the council also reports on many emissions where it has influence but less direct control. These are known as Scope 3 emissions. These include things like home to school transport, homeworking, and staff commuting and travel for work in their own vehicles.

These make up 65% of the council's reported emissions, which the council is currently projecting will reduce by 48% by 2030 showing the scale of the remaining challenge.

Since 2019, when it declared a climate emergency, the council's carbon reduction successes include:

- Street and traffic lights down by 57%
- Diesel and petrol vehicles down by 50%
- Gas and oil use in buildings down by 37%
- Staff commuting down by 30%
- Electricity use in buildings down by 25%

Nationally, the council is making impressive strides with its own estate, standing out as one of the three leading county councils in England for reductions on Scope 1 & 2 emissions, according to analysis of published reports.