

## County Council report – March 2025

### Suffolk prepares for another significant solar farm proposal

Suffolk County Council is preparing to respond to another large solar farm proposal, set to cover around 1,500 acres, near Eye.

EcoPower Suffolk is putting forward plans to build a solar farm and battery storage facility, which would impact Yaxley, Brome, Gislingham, Mellis, Eye and Occold, with connections made at the existing substation to the north of Yaxley.

The project aims to deliver around 250 megawatts of renewable energy. At that size, it will be classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), requiring planning approval from the Secretary of State, rather than the local authority.

#### **Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs, said:**

“Another NSIP is looking to land in Suffolk and for many of the communities impacted by EcoPower Suffolk's plans, this comes hot on the heels of discussing the Norwich to Tilbury pylon proposals. So, I can fully understand how local communities are wearily bracing themselves for a time-consuming and uncertain road ahead.

“It does feel like a case of ‘here we go again’, but I am expecting regular, productive engagement with EcoPower Suffolk – not just with the council, but with residents and parishes.

“I trust that their opening words on their website are sincere – they talk about collaboration, and a commitment to community engagement and understanding local challenges and aspirations.”

Several consultations, beginning in March 2025, will be held by EcoPower Suffolk as it shapes its final planning application.

The county council will be contributing to these, to support and represent residents, businesses, agriculture, our landscape and ecology.

#### **CIlr Rout continues:**

“Suffolk County Council has previously been clear in setting out its views that solar farms in Suffolk should not take our best quality farmland out of food production and that, broadly speaking, solar installations should be rooftop before rural.

“Moreover, the council has the highest possible expectations that any solar developer fully rules out any possible links to forced labour in China or elsewhere in the world.”

“Ultimately, any decision to approve or refuse this scheme will be made by the government. The worst-case scenario is that we will suffer a similar farce to the Sunnica project: an incredibly poor proposal, seemingly rushed through on a whim by the

Secretary of State, with no interest in the welfare of local communities or the environment. All because the government is hastily chasing an unrealistic target of decarbonising the Grid by 2030.”

EcoPower Suffolk hopes that the project will connect to the Grid in 2030.

More information can be found at [www.ecopowersuffolk.com](http://www.ecopowersuffolk.com)

## OPINION: Devolution is a win, but myths must be tackled

Column by Cllr Richard Rout, Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs.

On Monday, I was appointed as Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. This is a new and important role and one that will require hard work to ensure everyone in Suffolk feels they can help shape the future of local government in our county should they wish.

In case you missed it, Suffolk is one of only a handful of areas on the government’s new fast-track Devolution Priority Programme. What this means in practice is that Suffolk’s 50-year-old two-tier council structure is set to change with the government proposing to abolish all six of Suffolk’s district, borough and county councils and replace them with just one authority providing all councils services in an area. It is argued that unitary councils (as they’re known) can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested into public services. They also bring clarity for residents – when I’m out in Bury St Edmunds, local people talk about ‘the council’, often not knowing or caring which council delivers a given service. Nor, really, should they. Like me, they just want their bins emptied on time, their roads fixed, for support to be there if they or their family need it and for their council tax to be well spent.

The government also intends to create a mayor (covering Suffolk and Norfolk) who would take control over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, economic development, health improvement and blue light services – along with devolved government funding to deliver positive change. The mayor will be elected in May 2026.

There are a lot of myths buzzing around about the council restructuring elements of this programme. There is, for example, absolutely no truth whatsoever in the claim that a single remote council will govern all of Norfolk and Suffolk or that all public services in Suffolk would be governed by a new mayor. The mayor would have set responsibilities for strategic areas like transport infrastructure and economic development. Emptying your bins, deciding on planning applications, filling potholes and caring for vulnerable adults and children – these are all services that will remain the responsibility of your local council.

The government is clear that it wants to see unitary councils and has indicated these should represent a minimum population of 500,000 residents or more – unless there is a good reason for smaller councils.

I want our proposal to be evidence-based and focused on the best outcomes for Suffolk's residents and businesses and the best value for money for local taxpayers. This shouldn't be an emotional or ideological decision. I am already checking and testing my own assumptions and encourage everyone else to do the same. This decision is too important for a snap judgement, and this is why the county council will spend the next few weeks assessing the options and evidence before announcing our preferred model ahead of 21 March. A final business case will be submitted in September 2025.

Some people are concerned that larger councils are intrinsically distant from the communities they serve. This can be the case with any sized councils but I for one want this whole reorganisation process to fundamentally improve those connections – whether that's through elected councillors, better community engagement or transparency.

I fear I might have to spend a lot of time dispelling myths in the coming weeks and months, but if that is the case then so be it because residents deserve the facts.

Devolution and local government organisation is a once in several generations opportunity to make positive changes for Suffolk. Our local government structure has been in place for over half a century, and few will disagree that it could be more efficient, simpler and cost effective. This opportunity hasn't happened before in my lifetime and is unlikely to again. It's a chance to improve outcomes, improve services, reduce costs and duplication.

I've been asked several times how people can be part of the decision-making. The government will lead on public engagement and consultation with number opportunities coming forward in the next few months. However, from our perspective, I want residents, businesses, community organisations and public sector partners to be part of this journey and help to shape the future of local government in Suffolk. Everyone has a role to play, and the input of all sectors is vital.

Being on the government's fast-track is a major win for Suffolk and one that will be welcomed by those who want to see efficiency, accountability and streamlined delivery of council services. It is an opportunity to improve our county for everyone in it and move forward with renewed ambition and optimism. The decisions ahead of us as we shape this future may be difficult, conflicting arguments may be put forward, but it is incumbent on all of us to park our emotions and personal ambition and base our proposals firmly in evidence and on outcomes for Suffolk's residents.

## Funding made available for safer, healthier and accessible travel around Suffolk

Suffolk County Council has been awarded £3.7 million to continue to encourage cycling, walking and active travel across the county, and making journeys more accessible.

Government has awarded the county council £0.9 million from the Round 5 of the Active Travel Fund, and £2.8 million from the Consolidated Active Travel Fund.

Funds are available to be spent on projects such as:

- Better footpaths and crossing points
- Maintenance of existing walking and cycling infrastructure
- Improved cycle routes
- Traffic calming measures
- Improvements to the Public Rights of Way network
- Rail station access improvements

## Suffolk County Council confirms 2025/26 budget

Suffolk County Council has confirmed how it will spend its money in the forthcoming financial year - an £803.7 million plan focused on protecting essential services and supporting the county's most vulnerable residents.

The council's budget for 2025/26 was approved at a meeting of all councillors on Thursday 13 February, with an emphasis on meeting rising demand for children's and adult care services.

For every £1 the council spends in the next financial year, 77 pence will go directly toward services that support the health and wellbeing of people in Suffolk.

The remaining 23 pence will fund other critical areas such as fire and rescue, highway maintenance, climate initiatives, waste management and bus services, as well as the infrastructure, staff, and technology required to keep services running efficiently.

The council's budget will increase by 6.7%, from £752.9 million in 2024/25 to £803.7 million in 2025/26.

Despite a slight uplift in Government funding for local authorities, rising costs and growing demand have required the council to set significant savings targets to balance the books.

The council has approved £10.9 million in new savings, which will focus on restructuring and transforming how services are delivered. This follows £17.5 million in savings approved in the previous year, bringing total savings for the 2025/26 financial year to £28.4 million.

Suffolk County Council's share of Council Tax will rise by 4.99% next year, which includes a 2.99% general increase and a further 2% dedicated wholly to helping meet the rising costs of social care.

This means households will see the following changes in their weekly Council Tax payments:

- 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.

### Suffolk's 45 libraries to remain open and see new investment as Suffolk County Council plans to take service back in house

Suffolk's 45 libraries would remain open, see no change to opening hours and have new mobile libraries and computers as part of a plan to bring the service back into Suffolk County Council.

Subject to a formal Cabinet decision on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2025, staff running Suffolk's library service – along with their years of experience and love for libraries - will transition to the direct employment of the council on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025.

The county council would invest £200,000 in replacing Suffolk's aging mobile libraries with a further £157,000 for new books and to replace public computers in libraries across Suffolk. This is in addition to the £6.6 million a year budget available for Suffolk's libraries.

It follows an attempt to secure an external provider for a new six-year contract (with the option to extend for up to a further six years) which had to be abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.

Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1 June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

### Background

- Suffolk’s library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on **31<sup>st</sup> May 2025**.
- Suffolk County Council is the main funder of the service, with an agreed budget of £5.9 million a year. In 2023/24, Suffolk County Council increased the annual budget by £720,000 to £6.6 million a year.
- The contract to operate libraries in Suffolk had to be put out for competitive tender in 2024 as it had reached its maximum legal length.
- The procurement was abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.
- Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.
- In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

Suffolk County Council published two open letters explaining its proposal, one to Suffolk residents and the other to Suffolk Libraries staff, volunteers and supporters.

## Octopus Energy and Suffolk County Council trial ‘Zero Bills’ upgrade on existing homes

Octopus reveals first ‘Zero Bills’ green tech upgrade for existing homes, offering no energy bills for at least 5 years.

- Kicking off trials in Suffolk, with county council offering £15k interest-free loan for residents to kit out their homes with solar panels and a battery
- Octopus Energy estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to ‘Zero Bills’ standards

Octopus Energy, the UK’s largest energy supplier, is taking its world-first ‘Zero Bills’ initiative to the next level by trialling an upgrade offer for existing homes, allowing more householders across the UK to eliminate their energy bills.

Octopus’s upgrade trials will transform existing homes by installing cutting-edge green tech - a heat pump, a battery and solar panels - bringing them up to Octopus’ ‘Zero Bills’ standard, where customers receive no energy bills for at least 5 years, guaranteed.

The energy supplier is kicking off a series of trials in new homes in Suffolk. The company is teaming up with Suffolk County Council to help more local people benefit from low-carbon tech through the County Council's £15,000 interest-free Warm Homes Loan.

The loan covers the upfront costs of installing solar panels and a battery, allowing Suffolk homeowners who already have a heat pump to embrace low-carbon living while unlocking major savings on their energy bills.

Octopus is reaching out to local Suffolk customers with homes built since 2015, offering them a chance to join the revolutionary trial and take advantage of the council's funding.

The energy supplier estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to a 'Zero Bills' home. Octopus Energy aims to deliver 100,000 'Zero Bills' homes by 2030 and has already rolled out the initiative in Germany and New Zealand, as well as the UK.