

2024/25 ANNUAL REPORT
TO THE TOWN COUNCIL AND PARISH COUNCILS
OF BLYTHING DIVISION, SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL
FROM COUNCILLOR RICHARD SMITH, MVO

It has been an eventful and momentous year, my fifteenth as a County Councillor and my eighth representing Blything Division.

Last May the Leader of the County Council, Councillor Matthew Hicks, reshuffled his Cabinet and asked me to become his Deputy and also to bear responsibility for Finance, Economic Development and Skills. As I had previously held the Finance portfolio, I was pleased to resume responsibility for that crucial area of Council work which will spend, in the 2025/26 financial year, a net £803 million delivering its services throughout Suffolk. I was also pleased to be able to continue with my responsibilities for Economic Development and Skills, both of which are vitally important to all our futures.

Last year saw the demise of the New Anglian Local Enterprise Partnership, which had successfully steered business spend from Government to Suffolk and Norfolk. It has been replaced in Suffolk by a new Suffolk Business Board, who work under the brand ‘Suffolk Economy’ and the leadership of its dynamic and much-respected Chair, Mark Pendlington, a businessman and former High Sheriff of the County, who initially agreed to chair the Board for its first year, but has recently been persuaded to continue his chairmanship for one further year. The Board also keeps its eye on initiatives for up-skilling young people and those already in the workforce. I work in close liaison with the University of Suffolk and our three further education institutes, Suffolk New College, East Coast College and West Suffolk College to co-ordinate efforts to produce a skilled workforce which meets the demands of today’s world of work.

Many of you will have heard from me how tight local government finances are. Suffolk County Council spends 77 pence of every pound on social care and services to people who are disadvantaged in one way or another. To keep elderly people in care homes who can no longer pay their fees, to provide caring accommodation to adults with a wide range of disabilities, and to keep young people safe and properly safeguarded costs huge sums

of money, in our case considerably over £300 million pounds this year. The care sector has been widely affected by the Government's rise in the National Minimum Wage – which must be welcomed – but also by the rise and widening of the scale over which Employers' National Insurance is paid – which most certainly is not. The care sector initially looked to us to pay for their extra costs, but we simply are not able to do so, nor should we assume responsibility for extra costs imposed by central government action. So the situation and prospects for this year in the sector are a matter of concern.

The County Council wants to spend more money on maintaining the road network than it is able to do. While many of us do not use the care services, we do all use the roads. Resurfacing and mending of potholes all costs money, and that money is rationed severely. However, we try to do our best with the resources available and thanks to a relatively mild winter there have been fewer potholes occurring, but they are still annoying to the motorist when they do open up, and we try to fix them as quickly as possible. To that end we have brought in two 'dragon patcher' machines to help. They dry the road and the sub-surface before effecting a permanent repair, and they have made a difference. But their cost has been £3 million, so we need to assess their effectiveness before taking a decision to pay to use them again next winter.

This time last year we were negotiating a local government devolution deal with the then government. The new government, elected in July, cancelled those negotiations, and a few months later started again with their own plans, with which we are faced now. They want to see a Mayor covering Suffolk and Norfolk elected in May 2026 to sit at the table of the Council of Nations and Regions, through which most money for local government will be distributed. Their plans also mean the abolition of both our District Councils and the County Council - to be replaced, I hope, with one Unitary Authority for Suffolk. Preliminary figures, and I stress they are preliminary, shows that if Suffolk ends up with one Unitary Authority, savings of around £110 will be realised over the next five years. But the view of our District Councils (and I will let them elaborate on this for themselves) is that Suffolk should have either two or three Unitary Authorities. Two authorities would still save money over a five year time-span, but ninety per cent less than one authority – around £10 million. And if we had three – East Suffolk, West Suffolk and a Greater Ipswich which would probably take in Felixstowe,

Woodbridge and Needham Market, then this option would cost you and I as Council tax payers at least £50 million over five years, with considerable extra costs continuing into the future.

All councils had to put their initial ideas to Government by 21 March, and we now have until 26 September to work up a full, detailed business case. The Government will then make their decision before the end of this calendar year. Undoubtedly we now face six months of political controversy about which of the various options is right for Suffolk but, ultimately, we will have to do what the Government tells us to do. My final point for the moment on this subject is that I hope we find some really top-class candidates for the post of Mayor, as we need a figure who is a hard-hitter for our two counties on the national scene.

Elsewhere, taking decisions is never easy, and sometimes our influence is not great. Here I mention the LionLink and Sea Link projects to which we are opposed, but to which our opposition does not count for as much as it should. The final decision is in the hands of Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy, and he has been over-riding local opposition and approving every project that goes across his desk. The Sunnica wind farm in West Suffolk was a terrible project which was recommended for refusal by the Planning Inspectorate. He approved it. So, I fear, that the projects affecting our area will also ultimately be approved, whatever the feelings are in the local area where the full effects will be felt – be they cables coming ashore under Walberswick beach or the building of one or more giant converter stations on high ground just outside Saxmundham. As to the effects of a yet-to-be sanctioned Sizewell C, I am almost lost for words. No final investment decision has yet been taken, although I suspect we all know that you and I as taxpayers will end up funding it. The developmental works are already proceeding at a vast pace, and from my own anecdotal, unscientific experience, the traffic along the A12 in the month of March has been not far short of what we usually experience in high Summer.

Finally, I want to say a few words about Libraries. Suffolk Libraries have run the service over the last 13 years, but the back-office costs have grown from single figures up to 33%. We could not reach agreement with them during extensive negotiations, complicated by the legalities of the procurement process, and the County Council's Cabinet agreed in March to bring the Library service back into house. Last year we gave them an

emergency loan amounting to an extra 12% and we were not convinced that they could keep to their budget in future, over 92% of which is supplied by the County Council. My Cabinet colleague laid out in very great detail all about the process and negotiations, and this is now all on the public record to counter certain mis-information which has been circulating. Our guarantee is that all 45 library sites will remain open, at present opening hours. In addition, new mobile library vans will be purchased to guarantee the continuance of the service to villages across Suffolk, and we will invest in bringing the IT systems up-to-date. I firmly believe our libraries have a very bright future, not just for the borrowing of books, but for their continued development as community hubs encompassing many useful social and economic functions. The transfer of responsibility takes place on 1 June.

Without the advent of local government reform I had planned not to seek re-election and to retire on 1 May this year. Those plans are now on hold and I will continue to serve as your County Councillor until the government-defined end-of-term of this administration. We know the Government has postponed elections by twelve months, so retirement still beckons before too long! I am proud to represent Blything Division, but retirement still looks tempting...

Richard Smith, MVO

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Suffolk County Council

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