

## **February '25 report to Bungay and Wainford villages from**

### **County Councillor Judy Cloke**

I went to Bury on a very cold and wet evening in early February for the County Farms annual meeting. All Suffolk County Councillors who have County Farms in their Division were invited – I have one – and all of the tenants. SCC is the largest landowner in the County and it was interesting to learn of all the issues which concern them and what a wide variety of size and types of farm we own.

I am pleased SCC has voted to underwrite £2m for the remedial works on the A12 at Benacre to prevent coastal flooding. The lion's share of the funds has been found by the Sizewell C project and the Environment Agency ; obviously they have a vested interest as do we all.

The scheme will see 82 hectares of grazing land transformed into saltmarsh, along with construction of clay embankments and two new pumping stations. The new habitat will absorb the energy of the sea during storms and ensure the A12, homes, businesses, farmland, freshwater resources, and wildlife are protected against a 1 in 200 year storm for the next 50 years.

Were the scheme not to go ahead it could cost an estimated £235m over the next 50 years and compromise not only the A12, but also 200 domestic and commercial properties, and 450 hectares of farmland.

Because of a long standing family commitment I missed the meeting at which the vote took place on both Devolution and the future of Suffolk Libraries. I can't deny the Library decision came as a shock to everyone outside those who were closely involved and of course my inbox has been full in the last couple of weeks with emails of complaint and pleas to overturn the decision. As this is going to Cabinet, I do not have a vote. All of the information has not been published because much of it is commercially sensitive. I understand completely that people feel passionately about their library, as do I or I would not have been a Trustee at Bungay for more than 10 years, but sometimes difficult and unpopular decisions have to be taken. I have stood down from my role at Bungay because I didn't think it appropriate to remain.

As part of the deal to take the Library 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.

I attended a Storm Babet recovery meeting in Halesworth library supporting officers from East Suffolk and SCC in encouraging residents to claim for grants to assist in 'storm proofing' their property. The take up of these central government grants has been quite high in Suffolk because our teams have been so pro active in advertising them . They have worked impressively hard.

I don't have any specific parish related issues for this month, apart from to report I have managed to persuade the contractors for the Virgin installation to undertake remedial work on the poor restatement of the paving slabs in Earsham St, Bungay. It is not as tidy as I would like , but better than it was. I also disappointed the Grey's Lane Solar farm has been given the go ahead , particularly regarding the loss of prime agricultural land and the impact this development will have on the ancient landscape.

**Another Solar development:**

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.

A number of 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.

## **Fire service news**

Further funding is earmarked for the county's fire service following a key report by Government inspectors. Suffolk County Council is proposing to invest an extra £1.6 million over two years into Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) following a government inspection.

Inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found SFRS effectively operates its 35 stations, 43 fire engines and a range of specialist vehicles strategically situated around Suffolk.

The inspectors rated the service as good at preventing fires and risk, and protecting the public through fire regulation, and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, plus managing and developing its leaders. However, the assessment highlighted areas where inspectors feel the service needs to improve – leadership, culture, commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, and IT infrastructure.

## **Sustainable Travel**

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

## **Arts funding**

Thirty-three arts organisations and museums from across Suffolk have been awarded funding from Suffolk County Council's £500,000 Culture Project Fund.

- 33 organisations made successful bids
- Vast array of projects cover all corners of Suffolk
- Successful bids range from £1k to nearly £30k

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From baby classes to a new community radio show, the successful projects range in size and scope, and support an array of different people across Suffolk. Examples include promoting performing arts in Sudbury with the Quay Theatre, environmental events at Dunwich Museum, and an education and arts project to address racial inequalities in Ipswich.

The successful bids range from £1,000 to £27,000 – and one of these was awarded to the Bungay Folk Festival 2025 – well done Pete!

The new fund, which was launched last year to boost cultural activity across the county, attracted 131 applications, requesting a total of £2 million in funding. The quality of applications was exceptionally high, and more than 60 projects scored ‘excellent’ or ‘outstanding’ against the assessment criteria. Following a rigorous selection process, a panel of experts from across the arts, heritage, and community sectors reviewed 62 shortlisted applications. This resulted in 33 successful bids.

### **Lack of energy project co ordination**

National Grid’s decision for the LionLink interconnector project to make landfall at Walberswick, will have serious implications for Suffolk’s coastal and inland communities, and environment. The interconnector is a new subsea cable, creating an electricity link with the Netherlands, and connecting to a Dutch offshore windfarm.

Should proposals go ahead, the impact on Suffolk will mean significant onshore construction work at Walberswick, a 26-metre tall converter station at Saxmundham, a substation at Friston, and underground cabling between all the sites.

Another National Grid energy project, Sea Link, is already planned to make landfall just a few miles down the coast at Aldeburgh.

In March 2024, National Grid published details to say that it has no intention to coordinate LionLink with the more advanced Sea Link project.

Suffolk County Council has long campaigned that both projects should share as much infrastructure as possible.

### **Zero Bills !**

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.

Judy Cloke 11 March 2025