**Annual Parish Report 2020-21**

During this most challenging of years, the LDGI Group have worked hard to continue holding Suffolk County Council’s administration to account. We have adapted to the new way of working and the introduction of online council meetings and have been present at every Scrutiny, Cabinet and Full Council, representing the people of our divisions.

**Suffolk County Council Budget 2021-22**

The Suffolk County Council Budget was voted through Full Council on February 11th. This year’s budget is based on a 12-month financial settlement from government, rather than the 3 or 4 year agreement which is usually offered. Key points include:

* A council tax rise of 3.99% (1.99% basic council tax and 2% Social Care Precept, representing an increase of £53.55 for a Band D property, from £1,343.61 in 2020-21 to £1,397.16 in 2021-22.
* A council tax shortfall of £7.9m less than expected, to be met by using reserves.
* Planned spending is £597.9m, 7.4% more than 2021-21.
* £15.3m of spending to address ongoing COVID-19 costs.
* No proposed reductions in council services or personnel.

**LDGI Group Budget Amendment**

The LDGI Group submitted a budget amendment to Full Council on February 11th alongside the administration’s Budget. The key change proposed by the LDGI Group was to authorise the use of the full 3% social care precept, unlocking the maximum available funding without impacting SCC’s reserves. This would generate an extra £3.452m for social care at a cost of only £13.41 per year to a Band D household, freeing up general council tax funds to be spent on other projects and investments including:

* £700k for establishing a COVID-19 grant scheme for Suffolk charities and arts & culture venues.
* £500k for a solar energy scheme for Suffolk businesses.
* £500k to re-enable the use of concessionary bus passes on community transport and demand responsive transport across Suffolk.
* £15k for a citizen’s assembly on how Suffolk can build back better while recovering from the pandemic.
* £75k to enable community reviews of highways signage in the local area.
* £50k to expand the flood management team to ensure SCC is applying for all flooding grants it is eligible for.
* A demand-scoping exercise on where demand is for bus routes, a priority list for where future routes need to be, and a feasibility study on establishing an SCC-owned bus company to serve rural areas if commercial bus companies cannot.

This budget amendment was not accepted by the administration.

**Motions from the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group**

My Group proposed three motions to Council in 2020-21:

* A call for the Council to publicly oppose EDF Energy’s proposed Sizewell C development and retract any ‘in principle’ support for nuclear power.
* A 20mph scheme to reduce speed limits in all suitable residential areas from 30mph to 20mph, for a price of £4m. Communities would have been able to opt out.
* A biodiversity strategy motion.

The first two motions were rejected, although the Council backtracked on Sizewell C just two months later and now do not support the build. The biodiversity motion passed.

**Biodiversity strategy adopted**

At Full Council on the 3rd December, Suffolk County Council unanimously passed a motion that will see Suffolk County Council developing a biodiversity strategy and embracing biodiverse land management practices. The motion was proposed by the LDGI Group and supported by all other groups. The motion will ensure:

* Delivery of a biodiversity strategy that will set out how we could increase Suffolk’s biodiversity, halt the loss of habitats and species, and reintroduce declining species in suitable locations.
* Assessment of how the council can lead organisations across the county in efforts to improve biodiversity.
* Adoption of biodiverse land management options on council land.
* A letter to the Secretary of State asking what further support can be made available to local authorities to enhance bio diversity within their areas.

**Suffolk County Council decides to oppose Sizewell C**

The Cabinet at Suffolk County Council agreed on 22 September that they can no longer support EDF Energy’s proposals for Sizewell C in their current form. However, the Cabinet maintained their support for the principle of a new nuclear power station in Suffolk.

The Cabinet’s key concerns were regarding transport impacts, site design and the environmental impact on the Suffolk coast. The Cabinet also believe that the current proposals do not sufficiently avoid, minimise, mitigate or compensate impacts of the proposed development.

These concerns will be submitted as Relevant Representations to the Planning Inspectorate.

**Increase in social worker pay**

In April 2020 Suffolk County Council agreed to increase the pay of children’s social workers to match the remuneration offered by neighbouring councils, in order to attract and retain skilled social workers in Suffolk. It is estimated that the pay increase will cost £1.4m and will be funded from council reserves.

This policy was first proposed by the LDGI Group in as part of our budget amendment in February 2020. Both the Conservatives and Labour voted against this motion at the time.

**Cabinet approves 5-year cycling plan for Suffolk**

In June 2020 the Cabinet approved a 5-year cycling plan for Suffolk, which identified 148 potential routes to be prioritised. This is a result of a motion proposed by the LDGI group in July 2018, which called on the council to produce a strategic costed 5-year cycling plan.

Funding has not yet been secured for these routes, but the cycling plan will provide a strong basis to bid for funding as and when it becomes available.

The 148 routes identified by the plan are intended to be a starting point, rather than a fixed programme of works. The Cabinet’s approval of the plan means that discussions can begin with district and borough councils on developing the five-year-plan further. If the parish council has known routes in the area it would like to see improved or created, please let me know and I can feed this into the process.

**Climate emergency recommendations published**

In July 2020, the Cabinet approved the recommendations of a cross-party policy development panel outlining how the council should respond to the climate emergency and reduce emissions. This followed a motion from the LDGI group in March 2019, which declared a climate emergency and committed the council to be carbon neutral by 2030.

Key recommendations include:

* All future decisions must take into account carbon emissions
* Annual publication of a carbon budget alongside the financial budget
* Publish a cross-council action plan by the end of 2020 for net zero emissions across Suffolk
* Changing to a 100% renewable energy tariff
* Replacing all pool cars and service vehicles with fully electric vehicles by 2025
* Develop an investment programme for renewable energy generation on the county farms estate
* For all existing council buildings (including maintained schools), switch away from oil, LPG and natural gas use by 2030 and invest in onsite renewable energy generation
* Provide advice for academies/free schools to develop their own net zero emissions plans

**Changes to Children’s Centres challenged**

In August 2020, the Cabinet agreed to reduce the number of Children’s Centres in Suffolk from 38 to 17 full-time and 11 part-time Family Hubs. 8 centres will be repurposed for nurseries or SEND provision, whilst 2 will close permanently (Chatterbox in Ipswich and Caterpillar in Woodbridge).

The council has said that this is not a cost-saving exercise and that any savings will be used to fund additional staff for outreach work.

Concerned about the detrimental effect on families, particularly those in rural areas, the LDGI Group worked with the Labour group to collectively challenge the Cabinet’s decision. Our challenge focused on concerns over the lack of financial analysis and the lack of clarity over the new outreach model.

The challenge was discussed by the Scrutiny Committee on 11 September. Unfortunately, the majority of the Committee voted against our challenge and endorsed the Cabinet’s decision. This means that the planned changes to children’s centres in Suffolk will go ahead.

I would like to thank all Parish Councillors and Clerk for all their work and patience through what has been a testing year

Andrew Stringer