

Parish Report – January 2025

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Motions Passed at Council

At Council on Thursday 12 December, three motions were passed more or less unanimously by councillors. The first was a Conservative motion opposing government's changes to Agricultural Property Relief, which mean that from April 2026, Suffolk farmers will only have relief from inheritance tax for up to £1m of combined agricultural and business property. Above this £1m, they will have to pay inheritance tax at half the usual level (20% rather than the usual 40%). The change has inspired protests since it was announced by the government, including farmers driving hundreds of tractors into Westminster and in Suffolk, along the A14 from Ipswich to Felixstowe at 5mph. The Conservative motion also opposed industrialization of the countryside by major energy projects, including solar farms.

The motion brought by my group also related to solar farms, specifically the need to prioritise rooftop solar over solar farms and lobby for changes to planning so that new housing and commercial developments have solar panels, and priority is given to retrofitting solar to buildings or brownfield sites over new solar farms which take good quality farmland out of food production. For example, in France solar panels are often mounted on canopies above car parks to maximise space. As well as contributing to the country's net zero targets, solar panels could significantly reduce energy bills for Suffolk schools and libraries.

The final motion was tabled by the Conservatives on knife crime and proposed that a knife crime action plan for Ipswich be discussed at the next meeting of the Safer, Stronger Communities Board in March 2025.

Suffolk Economic Strategy

At Cabinet on Tuesday 3 December, a new economic strategy was tabled which followed the creation of the Suffolk Business Board earlier in 2024. The Board produced a strategy for the county for the next five years, listing the areas which are most important to the Suffolk economy, including clean energy, agriculture, tourism, and ports and logistics. It also outlined how the Board hopes that digital innovation, AI and robotics can help drive improvements and growth in these areas, along with plans to support start ups, provide business mentoring and skills projects with young people. My group asked questions about the impact of Sizewell C on the tourism industry, and the competition for workers where Sizewell was offering wages that local hospitality businesses, for example, would be unable to match. We also expressed concern that the strategy barely mentioned arts, heritage and culture, and that no arts or cultural organizations were represented on the Board. The plan was approved by the council's Cabinet, and the Suffolk Business Board will now finalise how it plans to deliver the strategy and will report back to Cabinet every year on their progress.

Children's Services Improvement Plans

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee met on 5 December to review the plan for improvement following the Ofsted inspection of the council's children's social care provision earlier in the year. The Ofsted report was published in August 2024 and the council learned it had dropped two grades, from being rated Outstanding in 2019 its current grade of Requires Improvement. The council had to produce an action plan for improvement which it has submitted to Ofsted and the Department for Education. The Cabinet member for children's services and officers from the department attended the committee meeting to outline the actions they have taken so far, including recruitment of extra staff members to drive improvement, and arranging peer reviews with other councils. There will also be a new Strengthening Services for Children and Families Board, which will be chaired by the council's Chief Executive, Nicola Beach. The council particularly needs to improve services for care leavers and consistency of practice and quality assurance - this means reviewing interactions with children and families to make sure the council is doing the best it can to help them. This work is separate to the council's improvement work for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), which is subject to a separate inspection process by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC).

Devolution and Council Reorganization

Following the new government's shelving of the previous devolution 'county deal' for Suffolk, the Government published a white paper just before Christmas, outlining the approach they wish to see in reforming local government, including the abolition of district councils. (it can be accessed here: [English Devolution White Paper](#)) This sets out the government's plans for a massive shake-up in local government, including the formation of mayoral authorities across the whole country, and also a change to the two-tier local government structure, replacing this with unitary councils. This is a very big change, but the government is ambitious and wants to work at pace. This would be the biggest local government reform since 1972, when the two-tier (three including parish councils) local governance structure was introduced.

While there are obvious benefits to having a 'one stop shop' for all things local government, if this is to be introduced without losing the 'local' from local government the minimum resident number needs to be more flexible. With the recommended figure in the white paper being a minimum 500,000 residents per council, this potentially means only one council for the whole of Suffolk (760,000 residents) would fit this requirement.

Suffolk and Norfolk could potentially go into a 'priority programme' as one of the early areas to seek change, though there are differing views between the various councils involved. Both Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils are holding extraordinary council meetings on Thursday 9th January so that they can make decisions ahead of the government's deadline of Friday 10th. This is a fast-moving situation and I can provide verbal updates when I attend parish council meetings.

Whilst I am open to discussion about change, and welcome devolution of powers from central government, I am very concerned that these changes will reduce democratic accountability and local decision making.