

County Councillor's Report to Annual Parish Meetings in Thredling Division

We are now living in the most uncertain and worrying economic climate in living memory.

Suffolk County Council has a duty to play a central role in leading the county through these difficult times and helping build a more prosperous future for the area. There is much that we can do and are already doing to lead Suffolk through the recession.

Firstly, we believe we can help everyone by keeping our council tax increases down. In 2005, we sought to end the years of high increases, and so, over our first four years we did just that, keeping increases to a minimum. We will continue to do this for our next four years.

As well as managing our resources so that we can protect the most vulnerable, we are providing more money to support other organisations, such as Citizens' Advice Bureaux, that have a track record of success in supporting people struggling to make ends meet.

We recognise and value the role of businesses, both large and small, in driving the economy forward and have invested time and money in nurturing their success and working with them to help develop new opportunities.

.We have held an Economic Summit, involving all the leading businesses and other organisations in Suffolk, to find ways that we can work together to help the people of this county through the recession. This meeting came up with over 40 ideas, which were worked up into 10 clear proposals. We are already working to put four of these into practice:

- Suffolk County Council is paying the council's invoices more quickly to help local businesses' cash flow.
- The Council is putting extra money into Citizens' Advice Bureaux and other advice agencies to pay for more money advisers to meet growing demand.
- The Council is providing more money to the Credit Unions to enable them to give loans to local people, thus keeping loan sharks at bay.
- The Council is helping people to get the benefits to which they are entitled.

It is during the difficult times that people look to organisations like Suffolk County Council for a lead. We have provided that leadership over the last four years, and we hope we will continue to lead for the next four.

Suffolk County Council is now working towards paying its invoices within 20 days of receipt, as opposed to the traditional 30 days. In this way we will help businesses pay their own bills and balance their books.

Citizens' Advice Bureaux – As mentioned above, for many, these are a vital lifeline. We believe CABs do an excellent job for people who often have nowhere else to turn. Therefore we have taken the decision to invest an extra £150,000 in CABS over this year and next year, to help support people in need.

Credit Unions – In desperate times, it is important that people have ethical money lenders they can turn to. Credit Unions are an excellent example of this, and we have decided to provide £500,000 over two years to Credit Unions across Suffolk, so that people can find safe and reliable financial help – thus keeping the loan sharks at bay.

Suffolk Community Foundation – We are working with the Suffolk Community Foundation to set up a ‘Lifeline’ grants programme, amounting to up to £125,000. This will be aimed at providing help to the most vulnerable people affected by the economic downturn.

Claiming benefits can often be a nightmare, working your way through very complex forms and difficult procedures. We are taking additional action now to help guide people through the process, by increasing the council’s benefit team. These advisors will be able to help people claim the benefits to which they are entitled, advising on what they can claim, and how to go about it, turning an ordeal into a simple task.

In this way, we have been able to unlock the door to additional money for people in Suffolk, amounting to £8million. This could increase to £10million over the next 12 months.

In 20 years’ time, nearly half the Suffolk population will be over 50, while, by 2025, 23% of all people in the county aged over 85 may have dementia (Source: Office for National Statistics). There are also increasing numbers of children classed as being vulnerable.

As a result, our social care services are going to be under increasing pressure over the coming years – a challenge that is only likely to be exacerbated by the current recession.

We recognised four years ago that this would be one of our biggest challenges. In our first four years we set about transforming the way the county council provides social care, creating much more efficient, adaptive, and responsive services, tailored to people’s needs, while ensuring that the resources are there to protect our front-line care services for vulnerable adults and children, and make the investment which will prepare us for the challenges that lie ahead.

Our new mobile library and community service underlines our commitment to rural communities. We have delivered new library routes that reach people better and through new state-of-the-art mobile libraries, giving people access to the full potential of Suffolk’s libraries. In the next two years we will have replaced all six mobile libraries with state-of-the-art, satellite-equipped, on-line mobile libraries, helping internet-based information reach the remotest towns and villages.

We believe Suffolk is a great place to live and work.

However, skill and qualification levels in Suffolk are below the national average. This is worrying because, while there has been a marked growth in the number of skilled jobs available in the county, the number of unskilled jobs is falling dramatically – by 7,200 in the last four years alone.

This means that people without any formal qualifications or training will find it progressively harder to get work. At the same time, businesses will move to areas of the country where people are better educated and have the right skills for the jobs. In short, Suffolk is in danger of getting left behind.

When we came to power four years ago, we saw how serious this problem was, and immediately set to work on a clear and comprehensive programme of reform, designed to bring a lasting improvement to education and skills in Suffolk.

This Administration has opened new Children's Centres, providing support for young families. We embarked on a review of how we provide education in Suffolk, and are planning a large re-building programme, together with strong recruitment and training programmes for teachers, designed to equip Suffolk with the expertise and the learning facilities needed to provide our children with a modern, high-quality education.

We are also investing in post-16 education and training, to give young people and, just as importantly, older people, across the county, the opportunities to get the qualifications, training and skills they need.

Not only will this radical programme of change help children, young people and adults reach their full potential, it will also mean that people with ambition and talent stay and build lives in the county and that we attract new people to Suffolk, contributing to our economy.

The County Council has built and opened 35 Children's Centres across Suffolk. These are places specially designed to provide a complete range of services to support young families. Children's Centres can now be found in every corner of Suffolk. A further 13 Children's Centres – bringing the total to 48 – will be opened within 12 months across Suffolk. These will be in areas such as Woodbridge, Stowmarket, Sudbury, Stanton and Bury St Edmunds.

Their services include family health, child care and early education, social care support, adult education classes with crèche facilities, and help into training and employment for parents who want it.

We have developed the Children's University. Over 50 schools have signed up to this project, which encourages a much wider range of learning opportunities to children, outside of school. There are a large number of organizations, such as Suffolk Wildlife Trust and Dance East, who provide activities for the children, broadening the scope of their learning and experience, and complementing their school work

We have carried out a radical review of our schools system, to ensure that it is equipped to provide top-class education across Suffolk over the coming decades. Central to our vision for the future is the need to minimise the number of times children changed schools. This will, in turn, give children the best chance of achieving good grades in their GCSEs and going on to higher education.

We have secured from the government over £100 million of special funding to help us build a waste treatment facility for any waste that can't be recycled. Our preferred technology for this facility is called 'energy from waste', which literally means that the waste that goes in will be burned to create electricity for the county. As a result, we not only make new use of nearly all the waste created in Suffolk (after recycling to our best endeavours), but we avoid sending it to landfill sites – which pollute the atmosphere through methane emissions, and are increasingly expensive.

The Councils in Suffolk have collectively increased levels of recycling and composting in the County to around 50% in the last four years.

Among our investments is a re-use and recycling grant scheme. This has funded £175,000 worth of projects in its first year – assisting voluntary groups and not-for-profit organisations to deliver waste reduction and re-use projects.

We have campaigned vigorously against the government's plans to abandon our coastline to the sea. Working with other Councils in Suffolk, we have successfully forced them to look again at their plans and will continue to keep up the fight for our coastline.

And we have delivered Suffolk's lowest-ever council tax increase at 2.45%.

Over our four years in charge, council tax has risen annually by just 1% in real terms.

We have put in place a radical transformation of the Council, which streamlined the structure, cut bureaucracy, and geared the council to work more efficiently.

We have saved £60 million through working more efficiently – that means we've avoided costs equivalent to increasing council tax by an additional 5.5% each year – enabling us to provide more services to more people than ever before.

Over the next year we are on track to save a further £12.5million. That is the equivalent of over £240,000 a week, or around £40 for every household in Suffolk

According to the Government's own statistics, we are now the most cost-efficient county council in England.

Despite the government not giving us our fair share of money each year, we have, through good house-keeping, been able to invest more in our front-line services, protecting the most vulnerable, while keeping council tax down.

We have successfully built up the county's financial reserves, leaving us equipped to deal with the difficult times ahead, as well as emergencies such as flooding

We have recently retained our 4-star status, which puts us among the top-ranking County Councils in the country. We have successfully held this status throughout our four years in office. Above all, we are still seen to be 'improving well'

In a recent survey of Suffolk residents, 56% of residents felt that Suffolk County Council provides value for money. This is an increase of 14% in just two years.

So in summary:

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