

March 2021 report for the Thredling Division from Cllr Matthew Hicks

SCC increases budget to support most vulnerable residents and county's recovery from Covid-19

On February 11, Suffolk County Council agreed its budget for 2021/22. Following approval of its annual budget, SCC is increasing its planned spending once again in 2021/22 to £597.9million, some £41million (7.4%) more than 2020/21. As part of this, the council will be spending £15.3million to address its ongoing Covid-19 costs, arising from the continuing local response to the pandemic. There are no proposed reductions in council services or personnel in 2021/22. 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. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic over the last 11 months or so, the Government has continued to support local authorities as they adapt to serve communities, redeploy staff into alternative specialist roles and see income streams such as business rates and council tax reduce significantly. SCC has received around £82.2 million in financial support during 2020 to meet Covid-19 related costs and whilst the challenges of continuing to respond, and in time recover, from Covid-19 remain, significant financial pressures will continue. The council's income from council tax is going to be £7.9 million less than expected in 2021/22 and this shortfall will be met by using council reserves. Reserves can only be spent once and do not represent a viable long term financial solution. This effective use of reserves is made possible because SCC has maintained a consistent approach to managing its finances effectively for a number of years, holding a proportionate level of reserves for this exact situation. In 2021/22, general Council Tax will rise by 1.99 per cent. There is also a two per cent rise in the Social Care Precept for the forthcoming year as the council recognises the ongoing challenges with meeting the rising costs and rising demand for adult care services. This means a Band D property will see an overall rise of £53.55 this year for Suffolk County Council's element of their Council Tax bill, from £1,343.61 in 2020-21 to £1,397.16 in 2021-22. It is fair to say that the pandemic this year has also significantly impacted the expected progress of the council's recognised transformation programmes, as it has been absolutely necessary to focus on community resilience. This has included redeploying staff into bespoke roles such as procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) to support Suffolk's care sector and adapting working practices for frontline staff to maintain effective social distancing measures. As a result, the council is expecting a shortfall of around £7.8 million in projected savings for 2021. Whilst this means that further work is needed to identify potential future programmes of work, many of the new ways of working adopted by the council during 2020 because of the pandemic may actually offer potential alternative transformation savings as the organisation continues to adapt and tailor the way it works to deliver services for Suffolk's communities. As part of the meeting, the council's Business Plan for 2021/22 was approved which draws attention to the ambitions for the authority over the next 12 months and its commitment to four key priorities: Living with Covid-19 and Suffolk's recovery; Inclusive Growth; Health, Care and Wellbeing; Efficient and Effective Public Services Throughout the business plan the Council presents its environmental thread demonstrating the range of projects and commitments in place as part of addressing the climate emergency that was declared in 2019. This includes details of the Council setting its Carbon Budget and the related work involved in achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

Highways doubles drainage budget following £27.2m announcement

On February 17 it was announced that Suffolk Highways allocated an extra £2m to support the fight against flooding. Drainage and flooding, Rights of Way bridges and resurfacing of roads in Suffolk have been allocated extra funds for the 2021/22 financial year following Department for Transport's funding announcement. Keen to progress more drainage schemes across Suffolk to support the fight against flooding, Suffolk Highways has allocated an extra £2m – double its current budget allocation – in order to help tackle the worsening flood problems being experienced across the county. Suffolk Highways also looks set to bolster its resource to support in the repairing or replacement of seven Rights of Way bridges across the county with an additional £800k, whilst committing a further £3.4m to the county's surface dressing programme. Although the budget is less than the 2020/21 allocation, Suffolk Highways prudently prepared for a decrease and allocated a tentative £21m for the 2021/22 financial year. Allocating funding for Suffolk's highway budget is a complex process and one we carefully consider ahead of receiving our allocation from the Department for Transport. It is important to ensure our funding is used to focus on current priority areas across the county. I am glad our allocation is more than we prepared for the 2021/22 financial year and I am delighted that we will be able to progress on some much longed for drainage schemes, bridge repair projects, not to mention our bolstered road resurfacing programme – where we have committed to resurfacing a further 140 miles this year. Although this funding still represents a fall when compared with last year, we will continue to do what we can to spend this allocation appropriately and for the benefit of all Suffolk's residents.

16 new COVID-19 rapid testing centres to open in Suffolk

It was announced that a further 16 rapid testing centres for COVID-19 were to open in Suffolk, bringing the total number of centres to 28. The sites are planned to open over the next two weeks in Beccles, Bungay, Halesworth, Southwold, Aldeburgh, Saxmundham, Debenham, Framlingham, Woodbridge, Eye, Holbrook, Needham Market, Elmswell, Hadleigh, Nayland and Brandon - serving more rural communities across the county. The 28 centres use 'lateral flow' testing to identify people who may have coronavirus but who do not have symptoms. The tests are for people who do not have symptoms of coronavirus and cannot work from home. It's because one in three people with coronavirus do not have symptoms so regular testing is vital in breaking the chain of infection and keeping Suffolk safe. Testing is a key weapon in the battle against COVID-19, so we are delighted to be able to open a further 16 sites in more rural communities across Suffolk. Whilst Suffolk's vaccine rollout programme rapidly picks up pace, we need people who cannot work from home and who do not have symptoms to get tested twice a week. It is how we will break the chain of infections and protect vulnerable people. It takes just 15 minutes to get a test and you get the results within the hour. 12,780 tests have already been completed. Suffolk needs everyone to play their part. All 28 centres are listed on Suffolk County Council's website, including their addresses and opening times. The testing sites are operated on behalf of Suffolk County Council (SCC). Tests should be booked online or by phone in advance. Employers are being urged to encourage their staff to book regular testing.

There are already 12 facilities open, including at the University of Suffolk in Ipswich, the STEM Centre in Western Way at West Suffolk College, Bury St Edmunds, Haverhill Arts Centre, St Etheldreda's parish centre in Newmarket, and Kirkley & Pakefield FC in Lowestoft.

New hedgerow planted as part of Suffolk 2020 tree planting programme to increase biodiversity

On February 22, a new mixed-species hedgerow was planted in Great Barton as part of Suffolk County Council's Suffolk 2020 project. This project seeks to plant 100,000 trees and 15 kilometres of hedgerow over the next 12 months. This will create new habitats and wildlife corridors in multiple areas of Suffolk to support local biodiversity. It is the first of six farms on the Council's County Farm estate to benefit from the planting of new hedgerows this winter. Suffolk County Council is working closely with the Woodland Trust, the Suffolk Tree Warden Network, local landowners and contractors, and its County Farm tenants, to deliver this ambitious project. Giles Landscapes are undertaking the hedge planting during February and March, which will total around 10 Kilometres (just over six miles) of new hedgerow, consisting of around 50,000 plants of mixed native species such as hawthorn, field maple, hazel and dogwood. Hedgerows are important features of Suffolk's agricultural landscape, providing a habitat for many species and 'corridors' for wildlife to move through them. All the planting stock being used is UK sourced and grown to reduce plant health risks and improve biosecurity, with much of the stock being supplied by The Woodland Trust. Local straw mulch is being used to reduce competition from weeds and to help retain moisture as the hedges become established. The tenant farmers will continue to maintain the hedgerows located on their land. As part of the preparation for this project, 40 miles of existing hedges were surveyed with a drone and on foot by a local specialist company based in Suffolk, Hardy Woodlands and Forestry, utilising a range of mapping technology to provide data to the project team. I am really pleased to see the first new hedgerow established as part of the Suffolk 2020 tree planting project. The team is now working its way across the county to plant similar areas of hedgerow. This project is directly linked to the motion at Full Council in December when I was very pleased to see all councillors who attended the meeting, offer their full support to increase Suffolk's biodiversity, halt the loss of habitats and species, and reintroduce declining species in suitable locations. The Council is committed to continuing to lead by example through the use of our land by adopting biodiversity-friendly land management practices where possible. I want to thank all partners involved in this project, it is a real Suffolk team effort and with the support of landowners, tenants, local communities and contractors, Tree Wardens and The Woodland Trust we are making a real difference. I hope our efforts encourage more of Suffolk's farmers to invest in their hedges and conservation management.

Matthew Hicks - County Councillor for the Thredling Division