

Annual report for Cockfield parish meeting by Robert Lindsay, Suffolk County Councillor 16.5.24

Apologies for not being able to attend tonight. I have a clashing meeting. But I wish the people of Cockfield and the parish council all the best for the coming financial year.

Lower speeds

Much of my year was taken up with chasing lower speed limits for a number of communities that want them. Bildeston now has its 20mph limit. Lavenham's 20mph scheme is now in formal consultation. A 40mph limit for the A1141 at Semer and Kersey is being designed, but implementation is some time away. I know Cockfield PC are considering applying to get a reduced speed limit on the A1141 from Jeffries Green northwards and I am supportive of this and prepared to contribute financially towards some of the survey costs.

Proposal to make it easier to get lower speeds

In July I, with the backing of my political group, proposed a motion to make it easier for communities to lower speed limits on rural roads where the safe speed for driving is clearly lower than the current National Speed Limit. The motion suggested that on these roads, where average speeds are already below 60mph, a lower speed limit than 60mph would encourage many more drivers to slow to a more appropriate, safer speed, thereby reducing accidents and making roads safer for all users. This motion was voted down by the Conservative administration.

Flooding impacts

Storm Babet and exceptional extreme rainfall that we have all been warned climate change would bring about have impacted most communities across Suffolk this winter. Particularly hit were Framlingham and Debenham where people had to be evacuated from their homes.

The county council and the Environment Agency have to investigate flooding in a parish when four or more homes are flooded. In a normal year there are a handful of investigations, this year they expect approaching 100.

Buses – an investment strategy and priority list needed

I was pleased that Monks Eleigh's suggestion of a demand responsive Digibus got some funding in the recent round of bus improvement funding. It was a pity that the county council chose to reject the submission from Bildeston, Finborough and Hitcham, for a daily route between Hadleigh and Stowmarket during commuter hours. The county needs a proper costed strategy for priority bus routes which will make it more likely that it will win competitive bids for bus cash in the future.

Pension committee

I sit on the pension committee at the county council, the value of the fund has risen from 3.2billion to £4billion in the year. I have been pushing to clean up investments and remove fossil fuel investments from our holdings. This has been partially done with something like 25% of the fund in a "carbon aware" fund. The committee is pledged to clean up the rest of the fund though it is slow going.

Budget

In February 2024, the Council's budget for 2024/25 was voted in. The Conservative budget proposed an increase in council tax of the maximum 4.99%, Council services have faced another year of spiralling demand and additional cost pressures, and the council's administration have had to draw £16m from council reserves to balance their budget.

Special Needs failure and remedy

Suffolk County Council special educational needs service failed its inspection in November 2023. The inspectors found 'widespread and/or systematic failings' in the service. .

As a result of the inspection, the two Cabinet Members responsible for the service quit their roles. A new full time and permanent Director for Children's Services (DCS) has also recently been appointed, who will start at the council in July and £4.4m in staff investment pledged.

Suffolk Devolution Deal

After much talk of devolution in the last few years, it looks like this may now happen in Suffolk. The county council will have a directly elected leader – elected by the public next year rather than by councillors. In return there will be a £16m annual investment fund for economic growth, a £5.8m lump sum to regenerate brownfield sites across the county, and a £3m one off investment in retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient. There is a consultation being held about the deal right now, and you can find out more about it and fill out the survey here: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution>