

Parish Report February 2019

Councillor

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Update on 2019/20 budget

On Tuesday 29 January, the 2019/20 budget proposals were approved by Cabinet. These will now be taken to a full Council meeting on 14 February, when all councillors will vote on the final 2019/20 budget.

I am concerned by a number of the cuts, in particular:

- The decision to remove all grant funding from Citizens Advice. This will be phased over two years, with a 50% reduction in the 2019/20 budget (£0.184m);
- Reducing the amount spent on Housing Related Support, which supports those at risk of homelessness (£0.45m);
- Reduced funding for sponsored bus services (£0.34m) and cessation of the provision of roadside bus timetables (£0.1m);
- Reduction in highways maintenance, including no road sign cleaning (£0.1m), only maintaining mandatory road markings (£0.075m) and less frequent weed treatments in rural areas (£0.055m);
- Staffing reductions across all directorates, which may result in less efficient services (£2.968m).

Cuts to Citizens Advice get Cabinet approval

As mentioned above, the budget includes a cut to the grant funding provided by Suffolk County Council to Citizens Advice. This grant will be cut by 50% in 2019/20 (£184,000) and removed entirely in the 2020/21 budget.

A consultation was held over the Christmas period to assess the impact these cuts may have, and an Equality Impact Assessment was drawn up. However, neither documents were available prior to the Cabinet meeting, and so the Cabinet decided to recommend this saving before fully understanding the impact it may have. I will be raising my concerns at the Council meeting.

Upper Orwell Crossings project cancelled

The Upper Orwell Crossings project in Ipswich has finally been cancelled, after concerns were raised last summer that the project was likely to go well over the original budget. However, Suffolk County Council has still spent over £8m on the project to date, most of which was on consultants' fees.

The Cabinet has decided to consider undertaking a smaller project and complete the smaller Crossings B and C, which will provide links to the island site. The Cabinet has agreed to underwrite a maximum of £10.8m (the balance of their previous commitment) and will require other significant local contributions to enable crossings B and C to go ahead.

Potential £45.1m investment for Special Educational Needs

A cross-party Policy Development Panel has recommended that Suffolk County Council needs to invest £45.1m to develop new SEND schools and specialist units within Suffolk. This investment would create an additional 828 specialist education places in Suffolk, which are desperately needed. Currently, many children struggle to access appropriate provision and are forced to travel to out-of-county schools in order to access the educational support they need.

The Cabinet agreed in principle to the PDP's recommendations. The capital investment programme will need to undergo a full investment appraisal before the Cabinet will commit to a firm £45.1m investment. This is expected in early 2019. I asked what was being proposed for those already in the system, nothing!

New Director of Highways appointed

After a long search, a new Director of Growth, Highways and Infrastructure has been appointed. Mark Ash will be joining Suffolk County Council in February. He is currently the Director of Waste and Environment at Essex County Council.

SCHOOL TRANSPORT; at the meeting with Helen Wilson and Jean Wheeler from the high school, (who is taking the lead on this) we were told of the ideas they have to provide reduced fees for transport to the school. This included the possibility of extending the car parking using the extra land available. I have suggested Helen or Jean talks to the PC about the plans.

SCHOOL CATCHMENT AREAS; at the cabinet last week the cabinet agreed to NOT change catchment areas; I challenged Cllr Jones on this as it seems to me that anyone having applied for a place in a catchment area this could well NOT be in a nearest school and therefore NOT with free transport!

MID SUFFOLK;

PARKING PLAN; There will be a consultation on civil parking enforcement; As the police no longer do this it will be done by local councils Mid Suffolk will get another council to do so on its behalf, there are no proposals for increases in parking charges in this.

BUSINESS RATES; the government has given extra money to give further rate relief for some business that are considered retail.

BUDGET; they have reduced the sum to go into a risk reserve by £600K and put £120 K to support neighbourhood plan initiatives; not sure exactly what this will do.