

County Councillor Report

February 2026

SUFFOLK COUNTY COUNCIL BUDGET 2026/27

The budget for the forthcoming financial year has been discussed at Scrutiny Committee on 13 January and will pass to Cabinet on 27 January, and to Council for approval on 12 February. Despite challenging financial constraints, and spiralling demand for our services, a balanced budget has been produced.

Expenditure for 2026/27 will rise from the current £810.7 million to £850.0 million. Funding from the Government will increase by 4.1%, an extra £33.4 million. It is proposed to increase Council Tax by the maximum allowable amount of 4.99%, which will yield an extra £26.9 million. This is for the Council to decide, but in practice we have no choice. If we do not increase Council Tax by the maximum permissible, the Government cuts how much they give us in grants. The total income will be £844 million, which leaves a shortfall between income and spending, which will be covered by £5.9 million from our reserves. This will reduce the unallocated reserves by 2027 to £44.4 million. This will remain above the recommended amount of 5% of expenditure (which is £42.5 million).

The budget includes £46.5 million of savings. Much of this, a total of £25.8 million will come from efficiencies resulting from our Fit for the Future Programme, but not reducing essential services which we deliver. The two biggest areas of spending (the two combined amounting to 77% of County Council spending), Adult Social Care, and Children and Young People's Services will see significant increased investment. ASC budget will rise from £373.7 million to £383.4 million and CYP from £209.7 million to £222.2 million.

POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS

In 2025 the Government postponed the County Council election due in May of last year. This was due to the decision to implement unitary government, and the consequent abolition of County and District Councils. Legally a deferral can only be made for one year, which means elections were due in May 2026. The Government consulted the 63 Councils involved in the fast track process on a further deferral this year. Suffolk County Council were asked to respond on a specific question – whether a deferral would release resources to implement Local Government Reorganisation, that is unitary. As yet, we do not yet know whether this will be one unitary council, or three, for Suffolk. We were not being asked if we wanted the election cancelled, that is not for Suffolk County Council to decide, it is a Government decision. The case for deferral is that an election

process would deflect attention and resources from planning the reorganisation. Councillors would be concentrating on campaigning, decision making would be curtailed during a pre-election moratorium, and there would be a hiatus between the election and a Council meeting to appoint a new Leader and Cabinet Members. Officer time would also be required to train, induct and support potentially many new Councillors elected.

An additional Council Meeting was called on 12 January to debate our response to the Government question. As a result, the Leader sent a letter to the Minister stating that capacity would be released to support local government reorganisation if elections were deferred. Once again, we did not request a deferral, our position remaining that this a decision for the Government. Subsequently, the Secretary of State made a decision on 22 January that elections due this year will be deferred in 29 areas, including for Suffolk County Council and Ipswich Borough Council.

The process going forward will be that an election for either one or three unitary Councils will happen in May 2027. Those elected will sit initially as a shadow Authority until April 2028, deciding matters such as the constitution, committee structure, premises required, etc. The new Council(s) come(s) into being on 01 April 2028. Until then Suffolk County Council remains in existence, until handing over responsibility on 01 April 2028.

This all means that is likely that I will remain your County Councillor until 2028. You have my assurance that I will continue to fulfil my role to the best of my ability. I will attend all meetings unless circumstances prevent me. I will continue to ask probing, robust questions to hold the Cabinet and Officers to account. I will carry on lobbying for what I think best for the people of Felixstowe and the Trimley villages.

FELIXSTOWE SCHOOL SIXTH FORM

This week brought a catastrophic decision, which has been met with surprise, dismay and consternation in the local community. Unity Schools Partnership, the Academy Trust which runs Felixstowe School (our secondary school), has decided to pause entry to the Sixth Form from September 2026. Existing students will complete their term of study, after which the Sixth Form is effectively closed. Apparently, the decision was made unilaterally, with no consultation with the Board of Governors, parents, stakeholders or the public. The reason given is declining student numbers, and therefore that the Sixth Form is no longer viable.

I believe that this decision is short sighted, ill judged and erroneous. For many years, significant numbers of parents have chosen to send their children elsewhere, rather than to attend Felixstowe School. The situation was not helped when the school was

rated “inadequate” in 2017 and entered “special measures”. Improvement has occurred, the School is out of special measures, and it is rebuilding its reputation. This disastrous decision will only reverse this progression. Parents who justifiably seek the best education for their children should not have to incur the £1050 per year travel cost to send our young people to other schools. Felixstowe and Trimley deserve a quality education for our children, and this should include a Sixth Form. For an area of our population size it is unacceptable that there will be no post 16 education available in Felixstowe. In an increasingly technological and knowledge driven employment world, our children require education to age 18 and beyond.

As a result of the decision, Felixstowe Town Council called an extraordinary Council meeting on 22 January. Opposition to the decision and disappointment at the lack of consultation was voiced by all Members. I said that there had been a lack of ambition and aspiration at the school for too long, and that a good education was an inalienable right for every child. There was unanimous support for a motion calling on the Department for Education to take action. Additionally, on 27 January, Suffolk County Council Cabinet is due to ratify a decision awarding a contract to run the planned new primary school in North Felixstowe. This was given to Unity Schools Partnership as a result of an interview panel, of which I was a Member, in July 2025. In view of this week’s decision, The Town Council have requested, if it is procedurally possible, for this decision to be deferred at Cabinet on Tuesday 27 January. We stated that we had lost faith in Unity Schools Partnership.

COUNCILLOR STUART BIRD B.A.(HONS)

COUNTY COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE NORTH AND TRIMLEY DIVISION

TOWN COUNCILLOR FOR FELIXSTOWE PORT WARD