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Suffolk Conservatives

February 2026 Town and Parish Newsletter

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To promote and support the health and wellbeing of all people in Suffolk

To strengthen our local economy

To provide value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer

To protect and enhance our environment

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OPINION: Young People Lead the Conversation on Public Health

Earlier this month we launched our 2025 Annual Public Health Report. This year's report is different because it was led by young people, with their films, voices and experiences forming the substance of the report and shaping its focus and recommendations.

Public health is often discussed in terms of data, services and long-term trends. Those things matter, but so does lived experience. This year's report places particular emphasis on youth social action, recognising that young people's wellbeing is closely linked to whether they feel heard, supported and able to influence the places where they live.

As part of the process, I was interviewed by young people who were directly involved in developing the report and I attended the launch to hear first-hand about their work. Being questioned by young people about public health priorities was a valuable experience. Their questions were thoughtful and grounded in their own experiences, and they challenged us as decision-makers to think carefully about how our policies translate into everyday life. Young people from across Suffolk took part in a series of hacks held in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds and Lowestoft, working alongside partners from the voluntary and community sector. These sessions gave young people the opportunity to explore issues affecting their wellbeing and to put forward practical ideas about how communities and organisations could respond.

What came through clearly during these hacks was that wellbeing is not just about access to services. It's also about feeling connected, having opportunities to get involved, and

knowing that your voice matters. These factors play an important role in confidence, mental health and a sense of belonging, all of which are central to public health.

Young people also led the launch of the report, shaping the event and highlighting the issues that matter most to them. During the launch, they emphasised the importance of connection, belonging and safe spaces, whether through friends, clubs, arts or community activities, noting that inclusive, welcoming environments help build confidence and a sense of place.

They stressed the value of meaningful involvement in decision-making, calling for opportunities to move beyond consultation to genuine coproduction, with better feedback and regular engagement with councillors and other decision-makers.

Transport, accessibility and financial barriers were repeatedly noted as obstacles that prevent young people from taking part in activities or accessing support, while mental health and wellbeing, including safe, supportive spaces and trusted adults, were described as critical to everyday life. Participants also highlighted the need for inclusive opportunities, life skills development, and clear communication, along with consistent long-term commitment from organisations to ensure that young people's voices lead to real, tangible change. Hearing young people speak openly about these issues helps ensure that our understanding is grounded in reality, rather than assumptions.

Importantly, this work wasn't about asking young people to identify problems and then stepping away. The report makes clear recommendations about how youth voice and youth-led action can be better supported across Suffolk, particularly for those in rural, coastal or marginalised communities who are often less heard.

One of the most valuable aspects of this year's report is the way it demonstrates partnership. Young people worked alongside professionals, community organisations and local authorities. That approach leads to better insight and, ultimately, better decisions. As Cabinet Member for Public Health, I believe this sets a positive direction for how we work in future. When young people are involved early and meaningfully, policies are more relevant and more likely to have a lasting impact.

The publication of the report is not the end of the process. The real test is how we respond to what young people have told us by continuing to support youth-led initiatives, embedding youth voice in decision-making, and making sure this way of working becomes the norm rather than the exception.

I want to thank all the young people who gave their time to take part, including those who led interviews and discussions during the hacks. This year's report is built on their work and will help shape a healthier Suffolk in the years ahead.
To read/watch the full report visit: www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/jsna

Applications open for new Suffolk Business Board members

Suffolk County Council is inviting applications from experienced and influential local business people to join the Suffolk Business Board, which was established in 2024 to help drive economic growth across the county.

The board meets 6 times a year to help shape economic strategy and priorities for Suffolk, oversee delivery of funded programmes such as business support and skills training, and work closely with partners such as district councils, neighbouring counties and national economic and trade bodies.

Existing Suffolk Business Board members include a strong core of local business leaders alongside representatives from education and key strategic partners. New members will be joining a dynamic and proactive group, with the opportunity to immediately begin contributing to Suffolk's economic development.

The recruitment comes at a key time, as the Business Board moves into its next phase of delivery, focusing on the investment and long-term economic priorities that will shape Suffolk for years to come.

Expressions of interest should be emailed to businessboard@suffolk.gov.uk by Monday 23 February with a short biography or CV and a brief cover letter outlining your interest in the opportunity and what area(s) of expertise you feel you could bring.

Board membership is a voluntary position, and terms are for up to three years from the date of appointment. The Business Board is supported by a dedicated team of council officers. Applications would be welcome from candidates with backgrounds in the key sectors as identified in the Local Growth Plan, including Agrifood, Clean Energy, Visitor Economy and Advanced Manufacturing.

The new members will fill two vacancies that result from existing board members coming to the end of their terms.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council's deputy leader and cabinet member for finance, economic development and skills, said:

"During its two years, the Suffolk Business Board has brought together senior business leaders from across the county to help shape a clear and ambitious direction for Suffolk's economy, invested £5m in local projects to support growth and overseen a further £7m of government funded projects. The Board is already playing an important role in setting priorities, strengthening partnerships and ensuring that economic growth in Suffolk is driven by business insight and local expertise.

"We are now looking to build on that momentum by welcoming new members who can bring fresh perspectives, strong sector knowledge and a commitment to Suffolk's future. Successful applicants will help influence economic strategy, support the delivery of key

programmes, and act as advocates for Suffolk as a great place to do business, invest and grow."

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Suffolk

Ending violence against women and girls is something that sits very close to my heart, and I know I'm not alone in that. Too many women and girls, and people of all genders, live with fear, control and abuse behind closed doors. That's why I'm incredibly proud of the work Suffolk has already been doing, long before the Government announced its new national strategy at the end of last year.

In Suffolk, we didn't wait to be told this mattered. We acted.

Over recent years, we've worked closely with police, health partners, schools, charities and specialist community organisations to build a joined-up, trauma-informed approach to preventing violence, intervening early, and supporting victim-survivors to be safe and rebuild their lives.

One of the things I'm most proud of is the Suffolk Domestic Abuse Champions Network. Since launching in 2019, more than 1,600 people across our communities have been trained to spot the signs of abuse and to know how, and where, to help someone reach safety. These people aren't just working in public services; they are teachers, hairdressers, shop workers, volunteers and neighbours. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

The impact of this work has been recognised nationally. When the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales, Nicole Jacobs, visited Suffolk in 2024, she told us that "Suffolk had been the talk of the office" that week. That recognition matters, but what matters more is the difference those champions make every single day.

We've also invested heavily in training frontline professionals, because the right response at the right moment can change, or save, a life. Teachers, healthcare workers, social care staff and others are receiving training on issues including honour-based abuse, female genital mutilation, stalking, sexual violence, misogyny, online harms and trauma-informed practice. This also includes how to complete risk assessments and make referrals to a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), where professionals from different agencies work together to plan safety for people at high risk. This isn't tick-box training; it's about confidence, understanding and compassion.

Alongside this, we've significantly strengthened our safe accommodation offer for people fleeing abuse, whether they are coming from within Suffolk or moving here for safety. We now have a range of accommodation options suitable for people of all ages and gender identities, with tailored support in place, including access to specialist mental health support for those dealing with the impact of trauma and abuse.

Last year, we published our Safe Accommodation Strategy for 2025–2028, shaped directly by lived experience, service providers and local needs. Listening to people who have been through abuse and acting on what they tell us, is something I believe deeply in. This year, we're focusing especially on working with younger people who have experienced abuse, co-producing new routes to support and opportunities that actually meet their needs.

Community voice has also been central to shaping our new Ending Violence Against Women and Girls+ Strategy for 2025–2028. We held engagement sessions with victim-survivors across Suffolk, both face-to-face and online, alongside sessions with professionals. Our ambition now is to establish an ongoing survivor voice panel so lived experience continues to directly influence decisions and action.

Collaboration sits at the heart of this work. We see it in how we deliver the national White Ribbon Campaign locally, with organisations across Suffolk uniting around one clear message: violence against women and girls is never acceptable.

There is still more to do, but Suffolk's progress shows what is possible when we are determined, compassionate and prepared to listen. In March 2025, Full Council passed a motion appointing Councillor Bobby Bennett as Suffolk's Violence Against Women and Girls Champion, strengthening our leadership and accountability on this issue.

This work matters to me not just as a councillor, but as a person. And I'm proud to hand over to Bobby to share what this role means for the future.

Cllr Bobby Bennett, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and VAWG Champion:

As Suffolk's Violence Against Women and Girls Champion, my focus is on prevention, especially when it comes to children and young people.
If we want lasting change, we have to tackle harmful attitudes early, challenge misogyny and online harms, and make sure young people grow up with positive role models and a clear understanding of healthy, respectful relationships.

Through our Violence Against Women and Girls Steering Group, we're exploring new education programmes and opportunities shaped by young people themselves.
I'm proud to take on this role and to build on the strong work already happening across Suffolk as we continue striving to make our county safer for everyone.

Public's chance to try the ADASTRA trial driverless shuttle

Residents across Suffolk are being invited to see for themselves how self-driving shuttle technology could shape the future of local travel — and to have their say on how it should work for their communities.

Suffolk County Council is holding two events where the public can ride on the ADASTRA prototype, ask questions and share their views.

The council wants to understand not just whether autonomous shuttles are acceptable, but how they could best serve local needs as part of the wider transport system.

The events take place at:

- Mildenhall Hub, Sheldrick Way, Mildenhall IP28 7JX
  9.30am–2pm, Saturday 7 February 2026
- East Point Pavilion, Royal Plain, Lowestoft NR33 0AP
  10am–2pm, Saturday 28 February 2026

The council has been working with design experts Smart City Consultancy to assess the technical, operational, and regulatory requirements of incorporating autonomous shuttle services into a potential future network of mobility hubs across the county.

Shuttles could potentially link future residential developments with strategic bus routes, improve accessibility, and support sustainable transport especially in rural areas.

Shuttles could travel shorter routes to feed main bus and train service corridors where the frequency of buses and trains could be increased, and journey times can be shorter.

Councillor Chris Chambers, Suffolk County Council Cabinet member for Transport Strategy, said: "Autonomous vehicles are not trying to replace cars, they are a means to fix specific, expensive gaps in transportation.

"As a council we are committed to delivering a range of transport options to meet the changing needs of the county, which is why we are undertaking this study.
"We really want to hear what people think so I would urge people to come along, see the vehicles in action and take part in the survey."

In May 2025, Suffolk County Council secured a £75,000 government grant through the Connected and Automated Mobility (CAM) Pathfinder 1 programme, administered by the Innovation Funding Service.

The funding supports feasibility studies aligned with the government's ambition to establish a £40 billion connected autonomous mobility sector by 2040. ADASTRAL is one of 14 initiatives selected nationally.

Working with partners Smart City Consultancy Limited and Ohmio UK, the council is delivering a £325,000 feasibility study exploring how autonomous shuttles could be used alongside other transport options.

This would be via mobility hubs — transport interchanges that bring together walking, wheeling, cycling, buses, trains and shared mobility such as e-scooters, e-bikes and car clubs, alongside private cars.

The ADASTRA prototype is an Ohmio Lift shuttle, built in New Zealand.

It is designed as a fully autonomous vehicle, with no steering wheel or driver's seat. It can carry up to 14 passengers at speeds of up to 40mph; however, during the trial it is limited to eight seated passengers with a safety operator, travelling at up to 15mph.

The shuttle is operated by Smart City Consultancy and based at BT Adastral Park near Ipswich.

The project team has already showcased the shuttle to the public, business leaders and industry at EVEX 2025 and The Big Bus Show 2025.

To take part in the online survey go to the Suffolk County Council website.

Suffolk County Council's chief executive to step down

Nicola will leave at the end of March 2026 and the process to appoint a new chief executive will begin shortly.

Reflecting on her decision, Nicola said:

"Serving the people of Suffolk has been a great privilege and I am immensely proud of what has been achieved together over the last eight years.

"Leaving this job has not been an easy decision, and I have thought long and hard about it. However, I believe this is the right time to hand over leadership to those who can steer and support colleagues through local government reorganisation over the next two years, whatever option the Government decides to implement.

"I would like to thank all of my colleagues, Matthew and his Cabinet and all councillors for their support and I wish them the very best for the future.

"I do not have another role lined up – I am simply looking forward to a new change of pace and lifestyle, enjoying this wonderful county and taking time to travel and see family and friends."

Cllr Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council, said:

"Nicola has led the council through an important period of change and achievement.

"She is very well-regarded, hardworking and has an exception knowledge of the complexity of public service, plus an unfaltering desire to deliver the best services for the people of Suffolk – the county that she loves.

"Under her tenure and with strong political leadership, Suffolk County Council is well positioned to rise to the challenge and opportunity of local government reorganisation. Her legacy will be enduring and deeply felt.

"I want to thank her for her outstanding leadership and dedication, and I wish her all the best for the future."

Amongst her achievements, Nicola has:

- Managed a budget of £850 million and led the authority's 6,294 staff, significantly improving the council's culture
- Negotiated local government reorganisation and created the legacy for lasting stability during the next phase
- Transformed adult social care and ensured the improvement in children's and young people's services
- Led the council and partnership response through the Covid pandemic
- Opened Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service's new control room and ongoing improvements across the service
- Strengthened emergency planning and response, particularly during Storm Babet
- Opened the £146 million Gull Wing bridge in Lowestoft
- Brought the library service back in house

Nicola joined Suffolk County Council in May 2018 from Essex County Council, where she was director of infrastructure and environment. Previously she was chief executive of Braintree District Council.

Nicola's last day will be March 31st having completed her three months' notice period. She handed her notice in before Christmas, but it was agreed to hold the announcement until some important milestones had passed, including the closure of the LGR consultation.

Details of her replacement will follow.

Norwich to Tilbury pylon scheme is 'un-coordinated decimation of our county'

The first Open Floor Hearing took place Tuesday 10 February in Ipswich, as an opportunity for interested parties to present their views in person to the Examination panel.

Councillor Richard Rout spoke on behalf of Suffolk County Council, citing a number of long-standing and unresolved objections as to why the council believes the current project proposal should not go ahead. These include:

- The lack of alternative proposals provided by National Grid
- Insufficient clarity on the need for a connection date of 2031
- Concern over working hours to include weekends and bank holidays

- Extensive tree loss and environmental impacts
- The need to protect and enhance the Dedham Vale national landscape
- The need for compensation measures in the Waveney Valley
- Higher quality and more robust outline management plans

"The county council fully supports the need to resolve the country's energy security. But not like this. The ill-considered, un-coordinated decimation of our county by nationally significant infrastructure projects like Norwich to Tilbury, simply cannot continue."
Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and NSIPs

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and NSIPs, said:

"My primary concern is for our many local communities who would be affected by this huge project cutting its way through Suffolk.

"Their trust - and the council's - has been shattered by National Grid Group which has taken an inconsistent, disorganised and uncoordinated approach to engage the public, and other consultees, regarding alternatives to their proposed scheme.

"Furthermore, we question the apparent urgency of requiring a connection date of 2031. Together with county councils in Norfolk and Essex, we commissioned a study, which indicated that the project could be deferred by five years and on that basis, an offshore scheme using high voltage direct current would be compatible in cost.

"As the current proposal stands, we have many concerns. From weekend working hours and construction traffic which will significantly impact the wellbeing of residents, to the extensive environmental damage and impact on national landscapes.

"The county council fully supports the need to resolve the country's energy security. But not like this. The ill-considered, un-coordinated decimation of our county by nationally significant infrastructure projects like Norwich to Tilbury, simply cannot continue."

The Examination stage is expected to take up to six months.

County Council continues to back Newmarket sports hub

This is despite West Suffolk Council – responsible for providing such sports facilities – last week branding the site as unsuitable, which was met with shock and disappointment by county councillors and officers.

This is not the position of the county council, which is still prepared to support the sports facility at the St Felix site, and contribute a promised £2 million towards the project, as well as including the value of the land for the facility.

“The county council is committed to continuing to work together and playing our part to give Newmarket residents their much-needed facility at this site.”
Councillor Chris Chambers, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy, Planning and Waste

Councillor Chris Chambers, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy, Planning and Waste, said:

“Newmarket’s residents would be the ones let down by the abandonment of a sports facility at the St Felix site. But the county council still believes it is a credible and workable opportunity, and will pursue it with West Suffolk Council.

“Residents have been waiting for nearly a decade for such an amenity, and I don’t agree with West Suffolk Council’s recent, and seemingly rushed, announcement to abandon it, and the stated challenges that they say they face.

“They have had ample opportunity up until now, to raise these concerns about the delivery of a new sports facility subsequent to the delivery of housing on the site - and have approved it, in principle, on multiple occasions in previous years.

“I am also disappointed with West Suffolk Council’s handling of this situation. Their announcement was made without the county council being allowed to respond - despite clear assurances that we would be given that opportunity.”

During the planning of the new homes at the Edmundham Developments ‘Astley Place’ site, works were tailored with a new sports facility in mind. Electrical and foul water pumping infrastructure was oversized, to accommodate the needs of such a resource.

The building compound was designed to be re-used during construction of the sports facility, and top soil and aggregates from the housing development could also be used during the new construction.

Councillor Chris Chambers continues:

“I and local county council members are surprised and disappointed that it appears such planning has only taken place over recent months, leading to West Suffolk Council to make a rushed conclusion that the site is unsuitable.

“It’s regrettable that West Suffolk Council’s work on this site did not happen much earlier - we had primed it for a seamless programme of work alongside the housing development.

“But although we’re not in the ideal situation that we had put in place, the county council is committed to continuing to work together and playing our part to give Newmarket residents their much-needed facility at this site.”

Council budget protects frontline services amid rising costs and demand

Demand pressures, particularly in adult and children's social care, are expected to add £32.2 million to the council's costs next year. As a result, around 77 pence of every £1 the council spends will go directly towards services for people, including public health.

The remaining 23 pence in every £1 will fund all other services, such as fire and rescue, highways and waste management, alongside the staff, infrastructure and technology that support service delivery across the council.

To deliver a balanced budget, councillors approved £46.5 million of savings. These will be achieved through service improvements, more efficient ways of working, and a reduction in employer pension contributions, made possible by the strong performance of the council's pension fund. This reduction in employer contributions will not reduce employees' pension benefits.
Councillors also agreed a 4.99% increase in the county council's share of Council Tax, comprising a 2.99% general increase for county-wide services and a further 2% Adult Social Care Precept to help meet rising care costs.

For households, this means weekly Council Tax bills will increase by £1.23 to £25.90 for a Band B property – the most common in Suffolk – and by £1.58 to £33.30 for a Band D property.

Combined with a forecast 1% increase in the taxbase, the Council Tax changes will generate an additional £27.4 million for the council in 2026/27.

Alongside day-to-day spending, councillors approved a revised three-year capital programme, reduced from four years to reflect local government reorganisation planned for 2028. The programme will continue to fund essential projects such as school expansions and infrastructure improvements, while also investing in improvements to bus services, public rights of way, and cycling and walking infrastructure.

Cllr Richard Smith MVO, Suffolk County Council's deputy leader and cabinet member for finance, economic development and skills, said:

"This has been one of the toughest budgets this council has ever had to set. Government funding has gone up only slightly, and, because that increase is below inflation, in real terms we are receiving less. That puts even more pressure on our ability to protect essential services.

"We have made the reluctant decision to increase Council Tax. We know residents are facing their own pressures, but the government's finance settlement assume councils will raise Council Tax to the maximum. If we don't, we risk losing vital grant funding, and that would force even harder decisions.

“Even with those challenges, we have set a responsible and realistic budget that protects key services and continues to invest in Suffolk’s future. But it also underlines a wider truth: council finances remain under real strain, and many of the long-term solutions – including long-overdue SEND reform – can only come from central government.”

Councillors approved the budget at their meeting on Thursday 12 February 2026, following Scrutiny’s examination of the proposals on 13 January and Cabinet’s decision on 27 January to bring them to Full Council for approval.

The meeting can be watched back on the council’s YouTube channel. The budget papers can be viewed at committeeminutes.suffolk.gov.uk.

Man pleads guilty to £9k romance scam

Adam Mowle, 34, of Larksfield Crescent, Harwich pleaded guilty at Ipswich Magistrates Court of laundering £9,165.00 into his personal bank account from the victim of a romance fraud. The hearing took place today following an investigation launched by Suffolk Trading Standards. Mowle pleaded guilty to one count of acquiring criminal property by fraud.

The court heard of how an online relationship was formed between the victim and a person calling themselves “Jenna Smith”. Over a ten-month period, the victim paid over £9,000 to “Jenna” believing that she needed the money due to illness and financial difficulties. The victim was unaware that the money was in fact being paid to Mowle.

The victim, who does not want to be named, said:

“In January 2019 I ‘matched’ with a female called Jenna Leigh Smith on a dating app and as our relationship developed, I genuinely thought that this was the start of a long-term relationship.

“I felt genuine sorrow for the problems Jenna told me she was having that included her father having cancer and her own serious health issues. Jenna told me that she was struggling financially. I felt confident I could lend her money to assist her in the short term and she would pay be back. It was not until I suspected Jenna was lying to me that I realised I had paid £9,135 into an account that I thought at the time was owned by Jenna.

“The personal impact that the relationship with Jenna and losing nearly ten thousand pounds has had on my life is significant and has destroyed my mental health. I felt the need to gamble to try and get something back, this has led to me losing £93,000 to try and recoup the money I paid into Mowle’s bank account, going into a deep state of depression and having to seek help via medication and counselling.

“The situation was so bleak that I seriously considered taking my own life.

“This crime has cost me any chance of having a relationship due to my lack of trust and has led to spiralling depression that then led to gambling, that has further ruined my life and future.”

Graham Crisp, Head of Suffolk Trading Standards, commented after the hearing:
“This has been a particularly complex investigation, and I am proud of the officers who worked diligently in the case to hold Adam Mowle accountable.

“Mowle has repeatedly shown no regard for his victim, using the payments he received on living expenses and the upkeep of his horse.”

Councillor Steve Wiles, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection, added:

“Romance fraud is a cruel crime which causes serious financial and emotional harm to its victims.”

“I thank the courage and the bravery of the victim in coming forward in this case and supporting with the team at Suffolk Trading Standards with the investigation.”

“I would ask anyone in an online relationship to be suspicious of any requests for money from someone you have not met in person. Speak to friends and family to get advice. Stop and think, is this person who they say they are?”

Sentencing is listed for 18 March 2026.

Anyone who suspects they or someone they know is a victim of romance fraud can report this in confidence to Suffolk Trading Standards via the Citizens Advice Consumer Service on 0808 223 1133.

New Suffolk Exhibition Shines a Light on Disability

Beyond Labels explores themes of visibility, independent living, discrimination, and making change happen. Understand how national campaigns, and social and political changes have impacted lives in Suffolk. As well as discovering the histories of organisations, schools, and charities that work with and support local disabled people.

Made possible by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, this exhibition is co-curated by local community groups and Suffolk Archives and has enabled communities to share and celebrate their lived experience. Beyond Labels celebrates disability while sparking conversations about accessibility, equality, and the work that’s still needed.

The exhibition will explore local stories such as the actions taken by parents after their children were labelled “uneducable” following the Education Act 1944. Parents like Jean Thompson set up the Lowestoft and District Society for Mentally Handicapped Children,

which appointed a home visitor, opened a special care unit and occupation centre thus providing essential support and opportunities that the state system had denied.

Lived experience of disability is more and less visible in the historical record at different points in time. Wartime experiences are highlighted in a range of archival records, covering topics such as shell shock, or PTSD, long term health conditions, and individual stories such as that of Frederick Pigeon. Frederick was wounded during World War One, had his right leg amputated and was later fitted for an artificial limb. After the war he settled in Blythburgh where he married Ellen.

Coming up to present day the exhibition will explore hidden disabilities which are not always visible but have an impact on an individual's day-to-day life, promoting awareness and understanding.

Community Forum member Becca Jakaman said:

"I joined the forum for the Beyond Labels project, I wanted to get more involved with The Hold, and the amazing work they do. As a wheelchair-user, I wanted to offer my lived experience to help make the project as inclusive and open about disability as possible."

As part of Beyond Labels, Suffolk Archives, a Suffolk County Council service, has been working with more than 30 local community groups and schools on an impressive community art illustration called 'Unlabelled'. 'Unlabelled', is created from 150 giant labels made from sustainably sourced plywood, which have been decorated to represent lived experience of disability, and themes of access, visibility, and representation. The artwork will be displayed in the foyer of The Hold as part of the 'Beyond Labels' exhibition.

Cllr Nadia Cenci, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Communities, said:

"Beyond Labels is a fantastic exhibition that highlights the experiences and achievements of disabled people in Suffolk. It's an important project that helps raise awareness, challenge barriers, and encourage greater understanding and inclusion across our communities. I'm proud to see Suffolk Archives working with local groups to bring these stories to light."

Liz Bates, Director, England, Midlands and East at The National Heritage Lottery Fund, said:

"The National Lottery Heritage Fund is committed to supporting projects that encourage greater inclusion, access, and participation within heritage. Beyond Labels: Celebrating Disability is a brilliant example of this in action. Thanks to funding from National Lottery players, Suffolk Archives have recorded and preserved the stories of people with disabilities in Suffolk, past and present, so that their lives can be shared and celebrated."

The project has been made possible with a grant of £139,107 from The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Beyond Labels: Celebrating Disability in Suffolk runs from 27 February to 30 May at The Hold in Ipswich, home of Suffolk Archives. Exhibition pre-bookers get 15% off in Suffolk Archives' café.

New SEND school and centre of excellence to be built in Bury St Edmunds

Run by Eastern Education Group and funded by the Department for Education, the school in Glastonbury Road will provide 90 places for students aged 14 to 19-years-old with special educational needs and disabilities

In a first for Suffolk, the new school will also become a centre of excellence and hub for SEND guidance, offering expertise to mainstream schools. Examples of this approach include providing outreach staff to work with mainstream schools and offering specialist expertise and training opportunities.

This hub model is increasingly encouraged by the Department for Education and is reflected in guidance from Ofsted around inclusive practice and system leadership. It launches Suffolk County Council's ambition to implement this model across the county with a number of other education settings.

This news comes just a week after it was announced that Suffolk County Council and Unity Schools Partnership will open a new SEND school in Saxmundham for 126 students with severe learning difficulties.

Both new provisions have been agreed by Suffolk County Council in line with its SEND sufficiency plans, which outline how specialist provision should be delivered across the county.

This new special school in Bury St Edmunds will share a site with Chalk Hill School special school which is due to open in Easter 2026. Chalk Hill will occupy the former Horringer Middle School building, while the second school will be built by the Department for Education on a field on the site. Eastern Education Group will run both schools.

Dr Nikos Savvas OBE DL from Eastern Education Group said:

"We are incredibly proud to be leading this transformational development for young people with special educational needs and disabilities in Suffolk.

"This new school is not only about providing high-quality specialist places in Bury St Edmunds, it's about rethinking how expertise is shared across the whole system.
"As a Group, we have already led two SEND schools to improved Ofsted ratings, demonstrating our commitment to high standards, strong leadership and continuous improvement. We will bring that same ambition and care to this new provision.

"By establishing a centre of excellence and outreach hub, we will work alongside mainstream schools to strengthen inclusive practice and ensure more young people can thrive within their local communities. Collaboration, early intervention and high expectations will be at the heart of everything we do.

“Together with our partners at Suffolk County Council and the Department for Education, we are creating provision that will deliver meaningful impact for families now and for years to come.”

Reflecting on the new school, Andrew Reid, Cabinet Member for Education and SEND at Suffolk County Council, said:

“This is a significant and very welcome step forward for SEND provision in Suffolk. The new school in Bury St Edmunds will not only provide much-needed specialist places, but it will also introduce an innovative centre of excellence model that strengthens support across all our mainstream schools.

“By working as a countywide hub - offering outreach, specialist expertise and high-quality training - this provision will help build confidence, skills and inclusive practice right across Suffolk. It means earlier intervention, better outcomes for families, and fewer young people needing to leave their communities to access the support they deserve.

“Coming so soon after the announcement of the new school in Saxmundham, this demonstrates real momentum in delivering our SEND sufficiency plans. Together, these developments show our commitment to ensuring that every child and young person in Suffolk can access the right support, in the right place, at the right time.”

Trial scheme to remove vehicles blocking road resurfacing work to begin

Suffolk County Council is to launch a trial scheme to remove vehicles that are blocking highways resurfacing work.

The move comes following repeated issues with vehicles across Suffolk that have been left in roads where works are scheduled, despite advance warnings they were due to take place.

This has led to the cancellation of entire resurfacing works or small areas being left where vehicle parking has prevented access for equipment.

Offending vehicles will be either moved to a safe place in line of sight from where they were parked, or to a secure compound in Bury St Edmunds.

Any vehicle which is moved to enable works to go ahead will be subject to a £70 Fixed Penalty Charge Notice, reduced to £35 if paid within 14 days.

Vehicles taken to the secure compound, due to there not being a suitable location near the works area to move the vehicle to, will also be subject to additional fees to recover their vehicle.
The trial scheme will be introduced in March and will cover the Suffolk Highways resurfacing programme up to May 2026.

The first site where it will be used is scheduled to be in Allington Walk, Haverhill, where two days of works are due to start from Wednesday March 18.

Councillor Paul West, Suffolk County Council Cabinet member for Operational Highways, said: "Removal of vehicles will be a last resort but unfortunately there are occasions when it is necessary.

"Each time a resurfacing scheme has to be cancelled costs the Council Tax payer money, as well as the frustration of having to reschedule and notify residents again.

"Suffolk Highways is committed to maintaining the county's roads and this scheme will help our workforce get on with the job."

Each abortive visit where works are unable to take place costs in the region of £15,000. This cost covers items such as wasted material, plant, labour and equipment hire. Abortive works also impacts future programmed work delivery.

Under the removal scheme, the process would see:

- A temporary traffic regulation order (TTRO) advertised six weeks before work starting
- Warning signs erected and letters delivered to nearby residents and businesses clearly detailing whether vehicle removal will be imposed 2 to 3 weeks prior to the works date.
- No parking cones placed in the road and any vehicles parked on the road at the time of visit will have information cards placed on the windscreen two days before works start
- On the day, a District Civil Enforcement Officer will issue PCNs, offending vehicles photographed then relocated safely with the police informed
- Offending vehicles will be either moved to a safe place in line of sight, or if this is not possible to the secure compound in Bury St Edmunds
- Contact numbers and references will be left on site for the owner to call to locate/collect vehicle

Councillor West said consideration would be given for blue-badge holders and vulnerable residents, and vehicles would be moved only to safe nearby locations or the secure compound.

"This is a measure about making sure the council does not have wasted costs through having to abort a scheme," he said.

"The measure that will only be used when needed and I can assure the public that it will be implemented fairly.

"This is only being introduced for planned work that is notified in advance. It is not being used when potholes are filled on reactive call outs."

Joint Chief Executives recommended for appointment

Mark Ash, the council's executive director of organisational change and local government reorganisation, and Andrew Cook, executive director of growth highways and infrastructure, would become Suffolk County Council's first joint chief executives. They will be charged with leading the council through the challenges of delivering local government reorganisation, devolution, maintaining essential public services and financial sustainability in the next two years.

Specifically, Mark would be responsible for local government reorganisation, devolution, transformation and change programmes. Andrew will be responsible for delivering safe, high-quality and reliable services to residents, robust financial controls and ensuring the council meets all its statutory duties and requirements following independent inspections. The joint chief executives would each lead on their own areas of responsibility but work together to ensure focus is maintained across the council's duties and priorities.

The decision, which will be taken formally by all county councillors when they meet on 19 March, follows a recommendation from the council's Staff Appointments Committee which met earlier today.

The county council's chief executive of eight years, Nicola Beach, is to leave her post at the end of March 2026, with Mark and Andrew set to take on their new roles from 1 April 2026 following a structured handover.

Councillor Matthew Hicks, Suffolk County Council's leader, said:

"Mark and Andrew are very experienced and well-respected senior officers in local government, and both have a wealth of knowledge that will be invaluable to the county council and wider local government partners in Suffolk.
"I very much welcome their appointment, especially as Suffolk County Council is facing a critical time over the next two years.

"Local government reorganisation, devolution, managing spending and rising demand, and ensuring we deliver on our duties to provide quality services to the people of Suffolk, will require strong and strategic leadership. I am confident that Mark and Andrew will play critical roles.

"I have said it before, and I will say it again; Nicola Beach has been a fantastic and dedicated chief executive throughout the past eight years. Her expertise and love of Suffolk will be missed, but I am confident this new approach will build on that success."

Tens of thousands of pounds would be saved because Mark and Andrew's existing posts would not be recruited into. The number of the most senior staff would therefore reduce by one and save up to £92,000 a year. Recruiting internally will therefore save time, money on salaries and recruitment, and make use of existing, well-developed relationships with partner organisations and knowledge of Suffolk.

The council's constitution requires it to have a designated head of paid service, responsible for leading the council's employees as they deliver services to residents. Significant uncertainty in the local authority chief executive recruitment market has led to many county councils, including Leicestershire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Essex and Hampshire all making internal appointments in recent months, having advertised the roles externally.

Council objects to LionLink slamming lack of coordination and fears for communities

At its meeting on 24 February 2026, the county council's cabinet approved a 23,000-word response to National Grid's statutory consultation on LionLink, which closes on 10 March 2026.

Their selection of Walberswick as a landing site for the project demonstrates staggeringly bad judgement. It is a wholly inappropriate location and the construction impacts on this very special part of our Suffolk coast will be stark.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and NSIPs

Amongst its objections to the current plans are:

- disappointment that onshore cable routeing could not be shared with Sea Link
- the choice of Walberswick as a landing site and the long cable route to Saxmundham
- construction on a continuous basis including night-time working
- construction traffic use of the unsuitable Benhall Bridge
- private haul route which would cross the Fromus river and impact the setting of Hurts Hall
- multiple negative, highly sensitive consequences in terms of built heritage, archaeology, ecology, tourism, highways access, public rights of way, water courses and vegetation loss

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and NSIPs, said:

"I find National Grid's inability, or stubbornness, to fully coordinate with their own sister Sea Link scheme, frankly infuriating. We have been calling for this for years.

"Their selection of Walberswick as a landing site for the project demonstrates staggeringly bad judgement. It is a wholly inappropriate location and the construction impacts on this very special part of our Suffolk coast will be stark.

“The project, in addition to a long and complex cable corridor, would also put further strain on Saxmundham and Friston and exacerbate many of the transport concerns we have regarding the Sea Link scheme.

“The Secretary of State may still be minded to rush through an approval for LionLink, but through our consultation response, we are highlighting a host of issues. Hopefully National Grid will act on these to reduce the impacts on local residents, businesses and the environment.”

National Grid’s public consultation is open until 10 March, and the county council is encouraging anyone affected by the scheme to submit their views.

Councillor Richard Rout continues:

“We encourage all local communities to take part in the LionLink consultation. This is the last meaningful chance to help steer the project’s design, routing and purpose ahead of the application being lodged.

“We fully understand that people are feeling consultation fatigue, after being asked to respond again and again to different projects - something that better coordination between Suffolk’s major schemes might have helped to prevent.”

An application for a Development Consent Order is expected to be submitted by National Grid Ventures later in 2026.

£500,000 Culture Project Fund backs 37 creative and community projects across Suffolk

The fund was created to boost cultural activity, widen participation and support creativity across the county. This year’s successful projects span festivals, youth arts programmes, heritage initiatives, wellbeing-focused activities and community-led creative work, with grants ranging from £2,000 to £20,000. Among the projects funded are:

- Frame the Future at DanceEast an eight-week creative intervention using hip hop dance and film to support young people at risk of exclusion in Ipswich. Delivered in partnership with schools and specialist artists, it aims to build confidence, skills and wellbeing through co-creation.

- he Mid-Suffolk Light Railway Museum has secured funding to refurbish its accessible railway carriage, maintaining inclusive access for wheelchair users, families and visitors with additional needs, while supporting volunteer-led heritage restoration skills.

- The Bloom Community Engagement Programme, delivered by Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds, offers year-round participatory theatre and workshops across West

Suffolk, including youth theatre, SEND provision, over-55s sessions and an annual Bloom Festival to strengthen community connections.

Cllr Nadia Cenci, Cabinet Member for Communities at Suffolk County Council, said:
"I'm delighted that we are able to support such a vibrant mix of cultural projects through this year's Culture Project Fund. These initiatives show the imagination, talent and community spirit that make Suffolk such a special place.

"What stands out is how many of these projects are rooted in local people, supporting wellbeing, nurturing young talent and bringing creativity into our towns, villages and rural communities. The benefits of these art projects cannot be underestimated. They can change the lives of our communities across the county."

The Culture Project Fund continues to support both established organisations and grassroots groups, strengthening Suffolk's cultural landscape. Last year's programme delivered meaningful outcomes, from improving wellbeing and confidence to widening access to heritage and cultural experiences.

One example was Status Creative CIC's *Creative Connections* in Lowestoft, which brought together people with lived experience of domestic abuse through creative writing, poetry and music workshops in a safe, supportive space. Participants reported improved wellbeing, stronger social connections and renewed confidence.

Another was Woodbridge Tide Mill Charitable Trust's Tide Mill Museum 3D Tour, which created an immersive online experience featuring 42 learning points, videos and audio content, enabling people worldwide, including those unable to travel to explore the historic mill year-round.

This year's funded projects build on that growing legacy, ensuring culture continues to inspire, connect and enrich communities across Suffolk for years to come.

The full list of organisation receiving funding can be found here: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/cultureprojectfund