



# February 2025 Row Heath Parish Report

## From Councillor Colin Noble, County Councillor for Row Heath

Thank you for reading this Parish report on things that are happening and coming up next month for your interest.

The two big issues are Devolution and the reorganisation of the district and county council and news about Suffolk Libraries.

Suffolk County Council has voted to be at the forefront of local government transformation, with significant changes on the horizon due to devolution agreements and council reorganisation. These changes will aim to streamline local government and provide an elected mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk, who can then sit at the top table of the new Council of the Nations and Regions that the Labour Government is requiring.

Devolution, in essence, transfers decision-making powers from central government to local authorities. In the case of Norfolk and Suffolk, this involves the creation of a combined authority led by an elected mayor. The combined authority will oversee critical areas such as transport, housing, skills development, and economic growth. The goal is to give our area greater control over resources and decisions directly affecting our community. This should enable more tailored solutions to affordable housing, sustainable transport, and job creation while unlocking additional government funding for local projects.

In parallel, local government reorganisation is underway, with proposals to replace the current county and district councils with a single or two unitary authorities for Suffolk. Norfolk and Suffolk have long operated under a two-tier system, where county councils manage services like Adult social care, Children's support and protection services, education and highways, while district councils oversee bin collection, housing and planning. However, the shift to unitary authorities promises a more efficient, simplified structure. Instead of multiple layers of governance, a single authority in each area would handle all local government functions. This change could reduce duplication, lower costs, and make services more accessible to residents.

Critics argue that reorganisation risks losing smaller councils' local knowledge and community focus, but proponents highlight the opportunity to deliver services more effectively and equitably across the County. The new structure will strengthen Norfolk and Suffolk's national voice, ensuring our rural and coastal priorities are heard.

Local elections to the County Council are to be suspended for May this year as what would be the point of spending over £1M, which is what a county-wide election costs. We have to do it all over again in the new structure. There is likely a Mayoral election in May 2026 and elections to the new unitary council or councils in Suffolk in May 2027.

As residents, we can play a vital role in shaping this new era. Parish councils will remain at the heart of grassroots democracy, ensuring local issues are addressed and voices are heard. It is essential that we engage with consultations, attend public meetings, and share our views on the proposed changes, so keep an eye out for the proposals and how to have your say.

Of course, there is an alternative view that suggests we should not engage with the government and instead wait for decisions to be made for us further down the line. This approach appears to waste an opportunity to shape future developments to our advantage. Moreover, not having a mayor in the Council of the Nation and Regions as soon as possible to advocate for investment in Norfolk and Suffolk would, in my opinion, be a mistake.

While reorganisation and devolution bring challenges, they also present a unique opportunity to shape a stronger, more responsive system of governance. With collaboration and community involvement, we can ensure these changes benefit here in our villages.

Let us embrace this transformation with optimism and determination to build a brighter future for Row Heath.

### **The Future for Suffolk's Libraries**

The other big news is about Suffolk Libraries; there is a lot of hearsay and myths floating around since the announcement last week. But the facts are these Suffolk's 45 libraries would remain open, see no change to opening hours and have new mobile libraries and computers as part of a plan to bring the service back into Suffolk County Council.

Subject to a formal Cabinet decision on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2025, staff running Suffolk's library service – along with their years of experience and love for libraries - will transition to the direct employment of the council on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025.

The county council would invest £200,000 in replacing Suffolk's aging mobile libraries with a further £157,000 for new books and to replace public computers in libraries across Suffolk. This is in addition to the £6.6 million a year budget available for Suffolk's libraries.

It follows an attempt to secure an external provider for a new six-year contract (with the option to extend for up to a further six years) which had to be abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.

Following the end of the procurement process, Suffolk County Council entered negotiations with Suffolk Libraries (the current provider) to reach agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1 June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

In addition, serious concerns about the viability of Suffolk Libraries also surfaced. The concerns included their proposal to reduce opening hours by 30% and issues with the financial stability of the organisation. There is also concern about the cost of their head office, including senior managers, which equates to 33% of their annual staffing costs. Suffolk County Council believes that more of the library budget should be invested in frontline services.

**Councillor Philip Faircloth-Mutton, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Environment, Communities and Equality, said:**

“The future of Suffolk’s 45 libraries will be in safe hands as part of our plans to protect and enhance the service.

“With these proposals, there will be no library closures, no reduction in library opening hours, and certainty and security for our most important asset - library staff and volunteers.

“Additionally, we propose new investment to buy new mobile library vehicles and upgrade computers across library sites.

“We know how important library services are to residents, particularly those who rely on them for education, access to information, support and, of course, books.

“A 30% cut to opening hours and the current management costs are unacceptable to Suffolk County Council. This is why we’re taking action. We are responsible for libraries in Suffolk and this is the right thing to do to protect them and the services they provide to residents.”

## **Background**

- Suffolk’s library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on **31<sup>st</sup> May 2025**.
- Suffolk County Council is the main funder of the service, with an agreed budget of £5.9 million a year. In 2023/24, Suffolk County Council increased the annual budget by £720,000 to £6.6 million a year.
- The contract to operate libraries in Suffolk had to be put out for competitive tender in 2024 as it had reached its maximum legal length.
- The procurement was abandoned due to difficulties in aligning submissions with the service requirements and budgets.
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agreement on a shorter-term contract. The intention was to secure the immediate future of the library service from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2025, while the longer-term future was considered. However, Suffolk Libraries were unwilling to accept those terms and proposed different terms which were not acceptable to Suffolk County Council and would have breached procurement law.

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### **Council Tax for 2025/26**

In February, the County Council discussed the budget for the coming year. While it was hoped that the rise would be smaller, the Labour Government's National Insurance increase has resulted in considerable additional costs for the external companies that provide much of the adult social care the council offers. This must be factored into the budget, leading to a 4.99% rise in Council Tax, which comprises a general 2.99% increase and a social care precept of 2.0%. The opposition at the council did not table any amendments, and the budget was almost unanimously voted through.

### **Rough Sleeping**

West Suffolk Council are taking active steps to reduce the numbers of people rough sleeping in the West Suffolk Area. This is a very difficult and challenging situation.

If you see or suspect someone is rough sleeping, please report this to [www.streetlink.org.uk](http://www.streetlink.org.uk) or directly to the Team on 01282 7578178

### **Highways Locality Budget**

I have a budget for minor highway works ranging from better signage to dropped kerbs; if there is a small highway improvement you would like to see, please let me know.

### **Locality Budget**

I have a small budget for community projects which can often help kick start an initiative with some seed funding or assistance to purchase a new piece of equipment that a community group needs. Let me know if there are any groups or projects that could benefit from a grant.

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