

Parish Report June 2018

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Overwhelming public opposition to Suffolk County Council's school transport plans

Leaked documents from Suffolk County Council show overwhelming public opposition to proposed school transport changes. Of the 3600 responses to Suffolk County Council's home-to-school transport consultation, 85% "strongly oppose" the proposals and a further 5% "oppose" them. This is the most responses received by a Consultation in recent years, and it is clear that parents, teachers and communities have very serious concerns about the proposals.

The Cabinet is due to make a decision on changing the school transport policy on Tuesday 19 June. I, along with my Group, have opposed the proposed changes since they were first announced in September and we will continue to raise our concerns at the Cabinet meeting.

New Council Leader elected

Following a leadership challenge in the Conservative Group at the Council, Cllr Matthew Hicks has been elected as the new Leader of Suffolk County Council, replacing Cllr Colin Noble. His Deputy will be Cllr Mary Evans, the former Chair of Scrutiny.

Cllr Hicks has promised a "new era" of politics at the Council, with a focus on mutual respect, collaboration and co-operation. We are hopeful that he will be more open to working with, and listening to, councillors from other parties.

The first major change has been the removal of Cabinet Committees, which were only established in September 2017. They will be replaced by Policy Development Panels, although we do not currently have the full details on how these will operate.

'Outstanding' schools in Suffolk have not had Ofsted inspections for years

The National Audit Office has revealed that over 1600 schools in the UK have not been inspected by Ofsted for 6+ years. In Suffolk, 23 outstanding schools - almost half of those rated 'outstanding' - have not been inspected for at least 6 years. For 6 of these schools, their last inspection was over a decade ago. This means that whole cohorts of students have gone through school without a single Ofsted inspection.

My Group's Spokesperson for Education, Cllr Penny Otton, raised the issue and her concerns at a Council meeting on 24 May. The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education, Gordon Jones, assured her that he shared her concerns and would raise it with the head of Ofsted.

Ofsted have said that the majority of 'outstanding' schools are exempt by law from inspections. However, if a number of concerns or complaints are raised against a school, they would have the power to carry out an inspection.

Unitary discussions on hold

In March, it was announced that Colin Noble had commissioned the think-tank Respublica to produce a report outlining the options for a unitary council in Suffolk. This news was not well-received by the District and Borough Councils, who had not been consulted by Cllr Noble.

However, in the lead up to the Conservative Group leadership election in May, Cllr Noble announced that work producing the report had been suspended. It is not yet clear whether this work will resume under the new leader, Cllr Hicks.

Possible U-turn on Lowestoft records office

At Council on 24 May, a petition was presented by the Save Our Record Office (SORO) campaign group, calling on the Council to reverse the decision to close the Lowestoft Record Office.

Cllr Hicks responded by acknowledging the importance of keeping local records in Lowestoft, and pledged to work with local residents and councillors to develop a long-term, sustainable solution for the storage of archives in the north of the county.

However, he made it clear that there is currently no capital or revenue budget available for the project, and so the council would need to seek funding to help deliver it.

New development with affordable homes in Cockfield

On 15 May, the Cabinet approved proposals for the development of a 4.5 acre site near Cockfield, which is owned as part of its County Farms estate. The development will be comprised of 51 units, including 12 affordable rented homes. There will also be homes specifically for first-time buyers, affordable shared ownership homes, and self-build plots.

This project is being treated as a pilot for future developments on Council owned land. The County Council is planning to work closely with design and property partners, and there will be a particular focus on local needs and benefits for the local community. The council will also benefit from financial returns as a result of developing the land.