

Parish Report - June 2019

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New leadership team for LDGI Group

My political group at Suffolk County Council, made up of Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent (LDGI) councillors, has elected a new leadership team for 2019/20. The group will be led by Cllr Penny Otton (Liberal Democrat), with Cllr Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw (Green) as deputy leader.

Ofsted rates Suffolk County Council Children's Services "outstanding"

After a week-long inspection in April, Ofsted have given Suffolk County Council Children's Services an "outstanding" rating, an improvement from the previous rating of "good" in 2015. Suffolk County Council is one of only seven in the country to achieve this rating, and the positive report is testament to the hard-working frontline staff at the council.

However, the council does still struggle to fill social worker vacancies, particularly given it does not pay social workers as much as some neighbouring councils. Staff at the council are hopeful that this Ofsted report will help in attracting social workers to Suffolk.

Furthermore, this is in stark contrast to the inspection of Suffolk SEND services earlier this year, which Ofsted rated "inadequate". Although a SEND oversight board has been set up, this is only meeting four times per year and we do not have a representative on the board.

Rise in the numbers of care-leavers housed in unregulated accommodation

BBC Newsnight has reported a large rise in the number of care-leavers being housed in unregulated accommodation. Whilst this is a national issue, the figures for Suffolk were the fourth largest of all English authorities. Furthermore, in Suffolk the numbers of children living in unregulated accommodation has risen from 24 in 2009 to 113 in 2018.

Children in care may move to supported accommodation once they are over the age of 16, to encourage independent living. There are support workers living on site or paying regular visits, but the accommodation is not subject to the same checks and inspections as regular children's homes.

Poverty motion voted down by Council

At the Council AGM on 23 May, my group proposed a motion asking the Council to acknowledge the findings of the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty following his visit to the UK in November last year, and to set-up a cross-party policy develop group tasked with investigating actions that Suffolk County Council could take to reduce poverty in the county. Unfortunately, the Conservative administration decided to vote against the motion.

The UN report found that 14 million people in the UK are living in poverty. Suffolk has not escaped the national crisis: earlier this month, End Child Poverty published its 2019 statistics which revealed that over 50,000 children (28.5%) in Suffolk are being brought up in poverty.

New “task and finish” groups to scrutinise education

Suffolk County Council has pledged to set up “task and finish” groups to scrutinise education issues, such as home-to-school transport and SEND placements. The council previously had a dedicated Education Scrutiny Committee, but this was dissolved in 2017.

My group has requested that any meetings should be open to both the public and the press, to ensure the scrutiny process is transparent.

New system for funding sponsored bus services

A new system has been agreed for allocating funding to sponsored bus services, following a cross-party policy development panel (PDP).

In the past, decisions on allocating funding were made on subsidy per passenger figures and on the recommendations of officers within the Passenger Transport Unit, with no formal scoring. The new system devised by the PDP sets out a defined methodology for allocating resources, to ensure this process is consistent and transparent.

Factors that will be taken into account include:

1. Average single passenger journeys per day of operation
2. Percentage of English National Concessionary Travel Scheme journeys for both age related and disabled passengers
3. Number of entitled students on bus route (additional weighting of 1.5)
4. Type of service, days operated and consideration of alternative services
5. Integration with bus services that operate on a commercial basis
6. Average cost per passenger journey

Restrictions on recycling

The amount of goods that can be recycled in Suffolk has reduced, with TetraPak cartons and metal items such as pots and pans no longer being accepted in recycling bins. This decision was made by the Suffolk Waste Partnership following a refurbishment of the Material Recycling Facility near Great Blakenham, because the new sorting equipment that is being installed will not be able to separate out cartons.

Cartons and metal items will now need to be taken to household recycling centres. In addition, new restrictions on composting mean that households can no longer put kitchen waste into brown bins.