

Annual report for Lavenham Parish Council from Robert Lindsay County Councillor, Cosford 17.4.24

Apologies I can't be with you for this tonight. I was at short notice given a last minute slot for a surgical procedure I've been waiting some time for on the day of your meeting.

Flooding in Suffolk

From end of October 2023, Suffolk suffered a winter of repeated flooding, most notably Storm Babet, when Debenham, Framlingham and Needham were particularly badly affected.

The drainage systems in the county were unable to cope with the volume of water. Suffolk County Council have committed an extra £1m for flood investigations (jointly with the Environment Agency) to try and prevent future incidents; where usually there are only three or four such investigations each year, for 2023 the number is likely to be near 100 investigations. They have to be held in a parish where four or more properties have been affected.

My political group tabled a motion on flooding in December, which among other things, proposed to increase the frequency of clearing drains and gullies around the county; however, the Conservatives proposed an amendment removing this recommendation and passed a weaker motion which did not include any changes to the usual schedule of drainage works.

Lower speeds – 20mph

It is good that the 20mph consultation has finally begun. I was first asked to take up the cudgels for such a scheme by a previous parish chair while the Bildeston 20mph scheme was still in process. It made sense to me and still does for Lavenham - a village with exceptionally heavy footflow - where driving at 30mph risks life and limb for pedestrians - to have a lower speed limit. In the face of great unwillingness from the county council. During the "informal" design consultation process I and the PC forced them to include a much larger area in the scheme than they had originally wanted. Now it is at consultation it is up to individual residents and others to make representations. Meanwhile Bildeston's 20mph scheme was installed and it will be interesting to see if a survey shows average speeds have reduced. It is my impression, living in Bildeston, that they have. As for enforcement. Not everyone obeys speed limits but the majority of people do – whether they are 30mph or 20mph – and whether or not there is a police trap in place.

During the year I also got approval for a 60mph to 40mph speed limit reduction on the A1141 at Semer and Kersey. The design for this is being worked on.

Proposal to make it easier to get lower speeds

In July I, with the backing of my political group, proposed a motion to make it easier for communities to lower speed limits on rural roads where the safe speed for driving is clearly lower than the current National Speed Limit. The motion suggested that on these roads, where average speeds are already below 60mph, a lower speed limit than 60mph would encourage many more drivers to slow to a more appropriate, safer speed, thereby reducing accidents and making roads safer for all users. This motion was voted down by the Conservative administration.

Benefits better signposted

My group did pass one motion successfully during the year in May 2024, which was for the council to work with its partners to better signpost members of the public to

benefits they may be entitled to. This motion was raised as a result of reports that over £15bn of means tested benefits are going unclaimed because people were not always aware of the support they could access to help them.

Buses – an investment strategy and priority list needed

It was a pity that the council chose to reject the submission from Bildeston, Finborough and Hitcham, backed by me, for a daily route between Hadleigh and Stowmarket during commuter hours. I suspect they simply did not have enough in the grant pot for such a scheme. I will continue to push for the need for a daily route to the mainline station at Stowmarket, from the train-less town of Hadleigh. Having a goal written into a strategy will make it more likely that the county will win competitive bids for bus cash in the future. I hope something may come of the Digibus scheme for demand responsive transport.

Pension committee

I sit on the pension committee at the county council, the value of the fund has risen from 3.2billion to £4billion in the year. I have been pushing to clean up investments and remove fossil fuel investments from our holdings. This has been partially done with something like 25% of the fund in a “carbon aware” fund. The committee also two months ago, for the first time, set a target for reaching net zero with its investments, which was “by 2050 or earlier”

Budget

In February 2024, the Council's budget for 2024/25 was voted in. The Conservative budget proposed an increase in council tax of the maximum 4.99%, Council services have faced another year of spiralling demand and additional cost pressures, and the council's administration have had to draw £16m from council reserves to balance their budget.

Special Needs failure and remedy

Suffolk County Council and its NHS partners who provide SEND (special educational needs) failed their inspection in November 2023. The inspection found ‘widespread and/or systematic failings’ in the service. .

As a result of the inspection, the two Cabinet Members for children's services and education at the council quit their roles, and new cabinet members have been appointed to these roles. A new full time and permanent Director for Children's Services (DCS) has also recently been appointed, who will start at the council in July.

Suffolk Devolution Deal

After much talk of devolution in the last few years, it looks like this may now happen in Suffolk. The county council will have a directly elected leader – elected by the public next year rather than by councillors. In return there will be a £16m annual investment fund for economic growth, a £5.8m lump sum to regenerate brownfield sites across the county, and a £3m one off investment in retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient. This is small beer in comparison with the council's £750m annual budget. Real decision making powers being handed over from Government at this stage are very hard to find.

There is a consultation being held about the deal right now, and you can find out more about it and fill out the survey here: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/devolution>