

Progress report

Not much happened over Christmas, and we've been engulfed by the emergency Council meeting and debates about devolution (see below) since the beginning of January. There are several issues still outstanding, and a few new ones to pick up, so I need to get fixed up with some visit dates with Highways and push for progress on things that aren't going well yet. I'm still waiting for a date to meet up with Adam Mayo to decide exact locations for the new speed limit signs in Bressingham and Fersfield.

I've had some answers from the buses team about some of the mysterious new bus stops but some questions remain which I need to follow up. For more things about buses see below.

I've signed a letter to the government about protecting chalk streams, and I'm involved in campaigns in support of the climate and nature (CAN) bill which is vital to protecting our countryside and wildlife and also legally enshrining our commitments to climate action agreed internationally for the sake of the whole world. We need it to protect us from this government which seems intent on vandalism across our country in the name of the nonsense they call growth.

There's further bad news now in that the government is trying to prevent environmentalists from challenging destructive infrastructure plans by way of judicial review.

Devolution

Just before Christmas, the government put out a plan for local government reorganisation and restructuring that has sent the entirety of Suffolk and Norfolk into a spin, along with many other parts of the UK. Proposals include elected mayors for large areas (in our case Norfolk and Suffolk together) and unitary authorities that combine the functions of District and County councils, and eliminate the layer of representation that is currently district councillors. Since these are the people closest to the actual places you live, and elected to serve small groups of villages rather than large areas, this seems like centralising power in large authorities, rather than devolution.

There's an option for councils to apply for a fast-track restructure, which can include postponing this year's May elections, so that elections would happen for the new authorities once the new structure is clear. Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils held emergency meetings on 9th January to decide and voted to go ahead with unseemly haste. All across the country, it seems, Conservative and Labour led councils are not too keen to go to the polls.

I don't see any evidence that going more slowly and carefully would be a disadvantage (rather the reverse). I believe we shouldn't extend the time of people elected four years ago, and we shouldn't deny people the right to elect new councillors now. The councillors elected four years ago don't have a mandate to make these massive changes for Suffolk and Norfolk.

Only the Green group voted against going for the fast track and silencing the democratic voice. The Green group also presented an amendment in favour of fairer voting systems for all new strategic authorities and mayors which is essential if we are to get representatives who command the respect of a majority of the people. That was voted down, despite a number of speakers agreeing that it would help to restore confidence in our democratic procedures.

You can watch the meeting recording on the County Council's youtube channel. We're expecting news from the government in response to the request for fast tracking, at the end of January.

Budget

The Cabinet is considering the proposals for how to deliver a balanced budget for next year within impossible constraints, where revenue doesn't match the demand for what we have to deliver, and the level of council tax rise permitted doesn't match inflation or the increased costs for social care workers that result from the rise in the minimum wage and national insurance.

Buses and roads

Norfolk has received an allocation of £15.9m for one year (2025-2026) to improve local bus transport. The funding allocation is split £7.4m capital and £8.5m running costs. This comes on top of the £49.5m we won for 2022-2025, some of which has been spent on improving your bus stops and adding new ones, including the mystery stops we've seen appearing recently.

The new £15.9m allocation is only for one year, so we need to spend it on things that can be delivered by March 2026.

I'd like to hear your suggestions for things we need by the last week of January.

Road repairs

Norfolk has been allocated £56 million for highways maintenance. Please report potholes and decaying road conditions in Norfolk to the county council by completing their online form: www.norfolk.gov.uk/potholes. However, a new report shows that the Department for Transport is totally out of touch with the decay to rural roads. See the report [here](#).

Lithium batteries

More than 1,800 potentially dangerous batteries and chargers were removed from sale thanks to a regional campaign by Trading Standards services from local authorities, led by NCC. They bought and tested 22 items, primarily from online marketplaces. All failed to provide the correct information as required by law, with 13 also failing on safety grounds, including risk of electric shock, fire and explosion. If you believe you've bought a sub-standard product, you can report it by contacting the Citizen's Advice Consumer Service on 0808 223 1133.

Info from Central Government

Bird Flu (avian influenza)

We're in a regional lockdown for poultry to prevent bird flu. People with small or large flocks of chickens that normally roam free need to keep them indoors. Guidance on how to prevent your chickens or ducks from getting it, and stop it spreading, is available [here](#).

UK Pandemic exercise planned

Local authorities will take part in the UK's [largest ever pandemic exercise](#) later this year. The 'national response exercise' is designed to test the country's ability to respond to a future major pandemic outbreak. It will involve local resilience forums working alongside all central government departments, devolved administrations, and – the government hopes – the 'most significant involvement ever' at a local level.

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