**Offton and Willisham Parish Council**

Minutes of the Parish Council Meeting held at Offton & Willisham Village Hall on Tuesday 18th March 2025 at 7:30pm.

Present: Cllr T Wells (Chair) Cllr S Frost

 Cllr B Wilcox Cllr A Cox

 Cllr C Pinson-Roxburgh Cllr C Eves

 Cty Cllr K Oakes

 4 Members of the public

Clerk - T Davis

**ACTION**

| **1.****a)****b)****c)** | **Meeting Administration**The Chair Opened the meeting and welcomed everyoneApologies were given by Cllr Kerry, Cllr Seddon & Cllr Bannister. Dst Cllr Pratt was running lateA non-pecuniary interest was declared by Cllr Pinson-Roxburgh for item 8 |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **2.** | **To approve the draft minutes of the Extraordinary Parish Council Meeting held on 20th February 2025 and the Chair to sign as a true record**It was Unanimously AGREED for the Chair to sign the Minutes. |  |
| **3.** | **Public Participation Section** (To hear reports form the County and District Councillor and comments from the Public and invited guest speakers)Members of the public wanted to bring to the councils attention a housing issue. It was agreed to come back to this issue once the District Councillor arrived.Cty Cllr Oakes then gave her report and confirmed that the verges are being looked into. |  |
| **4.** | **Chair Report**The Chair wanted to give thanks to all those involved in the multi agency work carried out. Especially to the efforts of the Councillors and Pylon Group in forming the National Grid response. |  |
| **5.** | **Clerk Report, with details of emails and correspondence up to 10th March 2025**Clerk confirmed attendance at the Mid Suffolk Forum on 5th March. The SALC liaison was this evening unfortunately the same time as the meeting. The forum spoke about Devolution and the Local Government Reform process. I can answer any queries anyone has.A further Norwich to TIlbury consultation has been received today which runs from 18th March to 17th April although I do not think it pertains to the Offton and Willisham part of the route but for Tilbury to Chadwell, there is a webinar on 2nd & 8th April.At this point the Council discussed the Taxi Bus Service and agreed it was a good idea to place information on The Link when the route that includes Offton & Willisham begins. |  |
| **6.** | **Updates on standing items agreed at the Annual Meeting****i. Road Erosion - Cty Cllr Oakes**As mentioned in the public participation, work is in progress. Cllrs advised of the flooding on the road and it was confirmed this was also in progress**ii. The Flood Plan - Cllr Seddon**The Chair read out the current flood plan update. A six step plan is given.Cllrs would like it key information on the Noticeboard. In respect of the list of people that could help, will they need to be qualified in anyway?Thanks were given to both Cllr Seddon and Cllr Bannister for their continued efforts on this work. | Cllr OakesCllr Seddon |
| **7.** | **Planning & Governance Consultations****i. Government Devolution - Norfolk and Suffolk Devolution, Closes 13th April**Discussion took place regarding the governments consultation. Concern was made about the representation of the local area’s representation. It was agreed Cllrs would individually respond. The Clerk will also gather a collective response on behalf of the Parish Council.**ii. Baylham Neighbourhood Plan**Councillors agreed they had no concerns with this Neighbourhood Plan**iii. Babergh & Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Letter**Councillors were advised of the session at The Mix on Friday 2nd March 10am. | ClerkClerkClerk |
| **8.** | **To discuss and approve future funding for the Village Hall (no financial details as of 10/03/25)**Cllr Pinson-Roxburgh spoke on behalf of the Village Hall. Councillors discussed the details and need for details to enable adequate funding for the Village Hall to continue running in light of the increasing costs.As a point of order the Clerk read out the minutes of the meeting on 4th November, page 625 Item 9iii.Further discussion then took place with the other representatives that were in attendance. It was confirmed that the grant of £1,000 for 3yrs was agreed at a previous meeting during agreement of the budget as no information had been received from the Village Hall at that time. Councillors then discussed more specific details on the difficulties the Village Hall faced. It was agreed that the cost of the oil would be paid pending qualification of legislation since the LURA (Levelling Up and Regeneration Act) 2023 enabled Parish Councils more freedom to help Village Halls. The Clerk would need to confirm the correct legislation.If confirmed as correct, the for payment for the oil along with the grant application form received by the Village Hall of £700, would be paid if agreed by full council at their meeting on 6th May, a total of approximately £1,400 for the 2025-2026 Financial year.It was at this point Dst Cllr Pratt arrived and took note of the residents concerns to take away and investigate. | ClerkCllr Pratt |
| **9.****a)****b)****c)****d)****e)****f)** | **Current Bank Balances as at 28th Feb 2025:-****Current Account = £2,454.71****Savings Account = £14,762.72****To note payments made since 7th January meeting:-****i) Clerk Wages Feb - £421.94**Noted**To review and approve payments:-****i) Clerk Wages March - £421.94****ii) ClerkMileage and Office Allowance up to 31st March - £134.40**This was Proposed, Seconded and Unanimously AGREED to be paid**To review and approve the 3rd Quarter Accounts**Cllr Cox advised the council he had made all checks and reviewed and was happy with the accounts tallying with invoices and receipts.The Approval of the Accounts was Proposed, Seconded and Unanimously AGREED**To review and approve Heelis & Lodge as 2025-26 Auditors as recommended by the RFO**The internal auditor for the next financial year was Proposed, Seconded and Unanimously AGREED to be Heelis & Lodge**To review and approve the Asset Register 2024-25 and Identify any work needed**Councillors reviewed the asset register and were happy it contained what it should. Councillors volunteered to look at the minor issues listed.The Asset register was Proposed, Seconded and Unanimously AGREED | ClerkClerk |
| **10.** | **To review and approve the Action Plan and provide new objectives for 2025-26**Councillors reviewed the action plan as agreed to take out ‘village road pedestrian access and continue with Bus Routes, Road Erosion and Flooding as the priorities for the coming financial year. It was also agreed that a Parishwide Event for all ages should take place in the Summer and that this should be on the agenda for May as well as CIL spending to go on the Agenda for May. The Councillors also requested a policy for donations, which the Clerk will compile. | Clerk |
| **11.** | **To Consider and Approve arrangements for the APM (Annual Parish Meeting) currently the Annual Parish Meeting is on the 13th May (Annual Parish Council Meeting is on 6th May)**It was Unanimously AGREED to hold both the Annual Parish Council Meeting (APC) and the Annual Parish Meeting (APM) on 6th May. The Annual Parish Council Meeting would take place first. Refreshments would be available for the APM. | Clerk |
| **12.** | **Next meeting(s) 6th May - APC & APM** |  |

**Meeting Closed at 9:30pm**

**ADDENDUM**

1. **Dst Cllr Pratt - Report for March**

**District Council Report for Battisford and Ringshall Ward**

**Including Barking, Battisford, Great Bricett, Ringshall, Offton and Willisham**

**March 2025**

**Annual Budget 2025/26**

On Tuesday 27th February MSDC approved the annual budget for 2025/26. The headlines are:

* **No council tax increase** for the district council portion of the tax. The council tax bill for a Band D property remains at £175.03. This is the equivalent to £3.36 per week.
* **MSDC expects a budget surplus of £2.4m in 2025/26**. This is down from last year due to factors such as rising employee costs for servces and the end of the government’s Rural Services Delivery Grant.
* **Capital programme agreed**. The council committed to a capital programme of £36m to deliver projects across the district. This expenditure includes among other measures £300k per year for projects in rural communities, £350k per year for biodiversity projects, major investment in the Skills and Innovation Centre, £1.5m to support high street regeneration in Stowmarket and an increase in locality grants to £10k per year to fund smaller projects across the district.

**Local Government Reorganisation Update**

In January, Suffolk County Council voted to apply to ‘fast track’ local government reorganisation, to combine County and District Councils into Unitary Authorities, which will sit under a new Mayoral Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk. The government accepted this, resulting in the cancellation of the May 2025 County Council elections. A public consultation on devolution for Norfolk and Suffolk is open until April 13th: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution/norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution-consultation>

Initial plans are to be send to the government by 21st March 2025. An extraordinary meeting of MSDC is scheduled on April 10th to discuss issues surrounding devolution. The Mid Suffolk administration is concerned about the lack of consultation on the emerging details of the reform. It will continue to campaign for the most local form of democracy to be established, with powers passed down from Westminster to locally elected councillors, not drawn up to mayors required to deliver Government priorities.

**Biodiversity and Landscaping**

I am currently working with developers and our enforcement team to ensure that, as much as possible, we can fulfil the landscaping and biodiversity mitigation obligations on both historical and current development sites in the ward.

EN/25/00015 – Tollemache Grove, Offton

Following engagement from our enforcement team, the developers will now implement the landscaping scheme in March 2025 which includes the planting of a new hedge at the development site boundary.

DC/19/02324 – Bowl Meadow, Battisford

Landscaping and biodiversity mitigations included the installation of bird/bat boxes, hedgehog holes and new trees. Bird boxes have been installed by the developer on shared spaces on the site. Following consultation with residents and landlords, we are now working to try to deliver the remaining features within resident’s properties.

DC/21/00193 – Land to the North of Tye Green, Barking Tye
There is ongoing engagement with the developer to deliver landscape mitigations including new hedges and trees to be planted on the boundaries of the development.

**Mid Suffolk District Council magazine**

A new magazine is being distributed to every household during February/March. It contains useful news and information - such as details of Mid Suffolk’s cost-of-living support, a free home insulation scheme, and the Feel Good Suffolk healthy living support services.

**Ipswich to Cambridge Community Rail Partnership Update**

The new Ipswich to Cambridge Community Rail Partnership (CRP) has now been set up and preparing for it’s first year of operation. The CRP was supported by Mid Suffolk District Council in 2024 and hopes to replicate the successes of other CRPs in Suffolk, by raising the profile of train travel and attractions on the line and improving the stations and facilities that serve it.

**Locality Awards**

The Locality Grant fund is now closed for 2024/25 but will re-open for applications when the next round of funding begins - hopefully in late May/early June. More information can be found at:  <https://www.midsuffolk.gov.uk/web/mid-suffolk/w/locality-awards>

1. **Cty Cllr Oakes - Report for March**

# County Council report – March 2025

# Suffolk prepares for another significant solar farm proposal

Suffolk County Council is preparing to respond to another large solar farm proposal, set to cover around 1,500 acres, near Eye.

EcoPower Suffolk is putting forward plans to build a solar farm and battery storage facility, which would impact Yaxley, Brome, Gislingham, Mellis, Eye and Occold, with connections made at the existing substation to the north of Yaxley.

The project aims to deliver around 250 megawatts of renewable energy. At that size, it will be classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), requiring planning approval from the Secretary of State, rather than the local authority.

**Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs, said:**

“Another NSIP is looking to land in Suffolk and for many of the communities impacted by EcoPower Suffolk’s plans, this comes hot on the heels of discussing the Norwich to Tilbury pylon proposals. So, I can fully understand how local communities are wearily bracing themselves for a time-consuming and uncertain road ahead.

“It does feel like a case of ‘here we go again’, but I am expecting regular, productive engagement with EcoPower Suffolk – not just with the council, but with residents and parishes.

“I trust that their opening words on their website are sincere – they talk about collaboration, and a commitment to community engagement and understanding local challenges and aspirations.”

Several consultations, beginning in March 2025, will be held by EcoPower Suffolk as it shapes its final planning application.

The county council will be contributing to these, to support and represent residents, businesses, agriculture, our landscape and ecology.

**Cllr Rout continues:**

“Suffolk County Council has previously been clear in setting out its views that solar farms in Suffolk should not take our best quality farmland out of food production and that, broadly speaking, solar installations should be rooftop before rural.

“Moreover, the council has the highest possible expectations that any solar developer fully rules out any possible links to forced labour in China or elsewhere in the world.”

“Ultimately, any decision to approve or refuse this scheme will be made by the government. The worst-case scenario is that we will suffer a similar farce to the Sunnica project: an incredibly poor proposal, seemingly rushed through on a whim by the Secretary of State, with no interest in the welfare of local communities or the environment. All because the government is hastily chasing an unrealistic target of decarbonising the Grid by 2030.”

EcoPower Suffolk hopes that the project will connect to the Grid in 2030.

More information can be found at [www.ecopowersuffolk.com](http://www.ecopowersuffolk.com/)

# OPINION: Devolution is a win, but myths must be tackled

Column by Cllr Richard Rout, Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reform and NSIPs.

On Monday, I was appointed as Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects. This is a new and important role and one that will require hard work to ensure everyone in Suffolk feels they can help shape the future of local government in our county should they wish.

In case you missed it, Suffolk is one of only a handful of areas on the government’s new fast-track Devolution Priority Programme. What this means in practice is that Suffolk’s 50-year-old two-tier council structure is set to change with the government proposing to abolish all six of Suffolk’s district, borough and county councils and replace them with just one authority providing all councils services in an area. It is argued that unitary councils (as they’re known) can deliver better outcomes for residents and save money that can be reinvested into public services. They also bring clarity for residents – when I’m out in Bury St Edmunds, local people talk about ‘the council’, often not knowing or caring which council delivers a given service. Nor, really, should they. Like me, they just want their bins emptied on time, their roads fixed, for support to be there if they or their family need it and for their council tax to be well spent.

The government also intends to create a mayor (covering Suffolk and Norfolk) who would take control over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, economic development, health improvement and blue light services – along with devolved government funding to deliver positive change. The mayor will be elected in May 2026.

There are a lot of myths buzzing around about the council restructuring elements of this programme. There is, for example, absolutely no truth whatsoever in the claim that a single remote council will govern all of Norfolk and Suffolk or that all public services in Suffolk would be governed by a new mayor. The mayor would have set responsibilities for strategic areas like transport infrastructure and economic development. Emptying your bins, deciding on planning applications, filling potholes and caring for vulnerable adults and children – these are all services that will remain the responsibility of your local council.

The government is clear that it wants to see unitary councils and has indicated these should represent a minimum population of 500,000 residents or more – unless there is a good reason for smaller councils.

I want our proposal to be evidence-based and focused on the best outcomes for Suffolk’s residents and businesses and the best value for money for local taxpayers. This shouldn’t be an emotional or ideological decision. I am already checking and testing my own assumptions and encourage everyone else to do the same. This decision is too important for a snap judgement, and this is why the county council will spend the next few weeks assessing the options and evidence before announcing our preferred model ahead of 21 March. A final business case will be submitted in September 2025.

Some people are concerned that larger councils are intrinsically distant from the communities they serve. This can be the case with any sized councils but I for one want this whole reorganisation process to fundamentally improve those connections – whether that’s through elected councillors, better community engagement or transparency.

I fear I might have to spend a lot of time dispelling myths in the coming weeks and months, but if that is the case then so be it because residents deserve the facts.

Devolution and local government organisation is a once in several generations opportunity to make positive changes for Suffolk. Our local government structure has been in place for over half a century, and few will disagree that it could be more efficient, simpler and cost effective. This opportunity hasn’t happened before in my lifetime and is unlikely to again. It’s a chance to improve outcomes, improve services, reduce costs and duplication.

I’ve been asked several times how people can be part of the decision-making. The government will lead on public engagement and consultation with number opportunities coming forward in the next few months. However, from our perspective, I want residents, businesses, community organisations and public sector partners to be part of this journey and help to shape the future of local government in Suffolk. Everyone has a role to play, and the input of all sectors is vital.

Being on the government’s fast-track is a major win for Suffolk and one that will be welcomed by those who want to see efficiency, accountability and streamlined delivery of council services. It is an opportunity to improve our county for everyone in it and move forward with renewed ambition and optimism. The decisions ahead of us as we shape this future may be difficult, conflicting arguments may be put forward, but it is incumbent on all of us to park our emotions and personal ambition and base our proposals firmly in evidence and on outcomes for Suffolk’s residents.

# Funding made available for safer, healthier and accessible travel around Suffolk

Suffolk County Council has been awarded £3.7 million to continue to encourage cycling, walking and active travel across the county, and making journeys more accessible.

Government has awarded the county council £0.9 million from the Round 5 of the Active Travel Fund, and £2.8 million from the Consolidated Active Travel Fund.

Funds are available to be spent on projects such as:

* Better footpaths and crossing points
* Maintenance of existing walking and cycling infrastructure
* Improved cycle routes
* Traffic calming measures
* Improvements to the Public Rights of Way network
* Rail station access improvements

# Suffolk County Council confirms 2025/26 budget

Suffolk County Council has confirmed how it will spend its money in the forthcoming financial year - an £803.7 million plan focused on protecting essential services and supporting the county’s most vulnerable residents.

The council’s budget for 2025/26 was approved at a meeting of all councillors on Thursday 13 February, with an emphasis on meeting rising demand for children’s and adult care services.

For every £1 the council spends in the next financial year, 77 pence will go directly toward services that support the health and wellbeing of people in Suffolk.

The remaining 23 pence will fund other critical areas such as fire and rescue, highway maintenance, climate initiatives, waste management and bus services, as well as the infrastructure, staff, and technology required to keep services running efficiently.

The council’s budget will increase by 6.7%, from £752.9 million in 2024/25 to £803.7 million in 2025/26.

Despite a slight uplift in Government funding for local authorities, rising costs and growing demand have required the council to set significant savings targets to balance the books.

The council has approved £10.9 million in new savings, which will focus on restructuring and transforming how services are delivered. This follows £17.5 million in savings approved in the previous year, bringing total savings for the 2025/26 financial year to £28.4 million.

Suffolk County Council’s share of Council Tax will rise by 4.99% next year, which includes a 2.99% general increase and a further 2% dedicated wholly to helping meet the rising costs of social care.

This means households will see the following changes in their weekly Council Tax payments:

* Band B property: £24.67 per week, a £1.17 increase from 2024-25
(Band B properties are the most common in Suffolk)
* Band D property: £31.72 per week, a £1.51 increase from 2024-25.

# Suffolk’s 45 libraries to remain open and see new investment as Suffolk County Council plans to take service back in house

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 18th 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 1st 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.

**Background**

* Suffolk’s library services have been delivered by Suffolk Libraries IPS since 2012, with the current contract ending on **31st 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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Suffolk County Council published two open letters explaining its proposal, one to Suffolk residents and the other to Suffolk Libraries staff, volunteers and supporters.

# Octopus Energy and Suffolk County Council trial ‘Zero Bills’ upgrade on existing homes

Octopus reveals first ‘Zero Bills’ green tech upgrade for existing homes, offering no energy bills for at least 5 years.

* Kicking off trials in Suffolk, with county council offering £15k interest-free loan for residents to kit out their homes with solar panels and a battery
* Octopus Energy estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to ‘Zero Bills’ standards

Octopus Energy, the UK’s largest energy supplier, is taking its world-first ‘Zero Bills’ initiative to the next level by trialling an upgrade offer for existing homes, allowing more householders across the UK to eliminate their energy bills.

Octopus’s upgrade trials will transform existing homes by installing cutting-edge green tech - a heat pump, a battery and solar panels - bringing them up to Octopus’ ‘Zero Bills’ standard, where customers receive no energy bills for at least 5 years, guaranteed.

The energy supplier is kicking off a series of trials in new homes in Suffolk. The company is teaming up with Suffolk County Council to help more local people benefit from low-carbon tech through the County Council’s £15,000 interest-free Warm Homes Loan.

The loan covers the upfront costs of installing solar panels and a battery, allowing Suffolk homeowners who already have a heat pump to embrace low-carbon living while unlocking major savings on their energy bills.

Octopus is reaching out to local Suffolk customers with homes built since 2015, offering them a chance to join the revolutionary trial and take advantage of the council’s funding.

The energy supplier estimates 500,000 UK properties built since 2013 could be eligible to be upgraded to a ‘Zero Bills’ home. Octopus Energy aims to deliver 100,000 ‘Zero Bills’ homes by 2030 and has already rolled out the initiative in Germany and New Zealand, as well as the UK.