

Suffolk County Council – 22 May 2025

Speech by Cllr. Matthew Hick, Leader of the Council

Introduction

Thank you, Madam Chairman. May I begin by congratulating both you and the Vice-Chairman on your election today—a role I know you will approach with your customary and unwavering dedication to public service. I would also like to thank Liz and congratulate her on a successful year as Chairman.

Can I echo the comments made by the former Chairman regarding our colleague and friend Cllr Robert Everitt. His passing has left a hole in the political and community life of Bury St Edmunds. A man who's boundless energy and enthusiasm was as unshakable as his belief in the power of community and the good within all. I will miss Robert, and I wish to extend my thoughts and sympathies to his wife Diane and his whole family at this sad time.

Councillors will want to know that Robert's Memorial Service has been set for 17th July at 3:30 at the Cathedral in Bury St Edmunds – all are welcome to attend.

The threshold of a bold new future

Today in Suffolk, we stand at the threshold of a bold new future—an exciting new chapter in our county's story. Local government here is about to undergo complete transformation.

Thanks to this administration's determination, persistence, and willingness to work across party lines, we've secured a leading role in that change bringing new powers and significant investment.

Our journey toward devolution—more funding and more decisions made locally—hasn't been easy. But we've remained focused on a single goal: to ensure Suffolk is at the top table of national decision-making.

We tried in 2016 and came close but colleagues in Norfolk took another view. Then came our County Deal and that, too, fell through after last year's election. Now, it really is happening on the third time of asking. The creation of a Combined Authority with Norfolk and a directly elected Mayor means Suffolk will finally get its seat alongside other key players like Andy Burnham, Ben Houchen, and the new Conservative Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Paul Bristow. We won't be on the periphery looking in—our Mayor will be in the room, fighting for more funding, investment, and opportunity for our county and region.

On local government reform, as a proud Conservative, I have long supported the benefits of a unitary model. Reducing waste, eliminating duplication, having fewer highly paid staff, excellent though they may be, and freeing up money for better services and lower council tax always made sense.

Suffolk now stands at the front of the queue for full local government restructuring. The future is ours to shape. I know some in this chamber believe we shouldn't be sitting here today. I believe the Government had no choice but to postpone our local elections—the precedent was clear and unambiguous. With so much work still to do before the Full Business Case can be submitted, maintaining stability in this council is the right decision until we are ready to elect to the new authority.

To those who criticise this and say that they no longer feel they have a mandate to represent their division, I say this: resign. No one is forcing you to remain—step aside and let **others lead where you will not**.

This is our one chance to get it right. Let's stay focused on delivering the best outcome. Suffolk is best served by pursuing a single authority approach, which not only delivers the financial savings and efficiencies required but protects and enhances the economies of scale that serve thousands across our county—young and old alike.

Any suggestion of disaggregating this or creating artificial divisions within this single market—leading to a postcode lottery in care services or pitting one side of the county against another—is not something we should pursue with any seriousness. The only option is for one Suffolk, and this is coming over loud and clear as we talk with people across our county.

The Government has said change is long overdue and needed. On that point, I agree with them.

Change is needed, and I am proud that Suffolk is leading the way.

Let me be clear, though—it is on a very short list of things I agree with this government on.

A New Government

A year ago today Prime Minister Rishi Sunak stood on the steps of Number 10, in the pouring rain, to announce a general election would be held in July.

Tabloid headlines at the time were, “Things Can Only Get Wetter,” and “Time for Change.” What amazes me is just how accurately those same headlines describe Keir Starmer today! A man who seems determined to drive this country headlong into rack and ruin.

Whether it's farmers facing the heartbreak of selling family farms to cover crippling inheritance tax; pensioners freezing in their homes while unionised train drivers enjoy inflation-busting pay rises; or Ed Miliband gleefully approving the covering of prime agricultural land with miles of solar panels—all under the false promise of lower energy prices.

This is the same old Labour we've always warned about. The same old policies of spending your way to socialism with other people's money. The same **self-inflicted** financial black holes patched with more taxes, while their union masters reap the rewards. It's Labour as we've always known it—spin, distraction, and a mistaken belief that levelling down makes us all equal. In fact, it just makes us all equally poor, all equally hopeless, and all equally too exhausted to fight back.

Well, I for one am ready to fight back. And this month's local election results make it clear why.

The Local Elections

On May 1st, we witnessed a political earthquake for both major parties. Driven by frustration and anger at national politicians overpromising and underdelivering on key issues: illegal migration, the rising cost of living, and the failure to build back better from COVID.

Interwoven into this was the ongoing failure of national governments—of all colours—to properly fund local government with long-term financial settlements. This has left councils struggling to deal with key issues like highways, flooding, housing, and SEND services. A perfect storm—and the local elections became the perfect lightning rod.

The big winners, of course, were Reform UK, and we cannot ignore the concerns of thousands across the country who now feel forced to use their vote in protest.

One thing I can agree with Reform on is their position on homeworking in the public sector. I believe local services should be proportionate, responsive, and accessible. That includes services being delivered from professional work-based spaces wherever possible. During COVID, homeworking was essential. But my view is officers must be back in our buildings and while we still need to ensure we attract and retain the best staff, the public expect the staff they fund through their council tax to be visible. We are a public facing service provider, not a remote one, and we must behave like it.

On net zero I can understand where some of the public anxieties have come from. Net zero comprises two elements at its core—national policy and local responsibilities and action. Locally speaking, I believe we must continue with our impressive work to date, forensically examining things and taking sensible steps. We have been very clear; we will only spend on decarbonisation where it saves the taxpayer money and repays investment quickly. Much like we all do at home, we invest in making our building cheaper to heat and run. This is only sensible. BUT we do not, and will not, decarbonise at any cost. It must make financial sense.

Reform makes much of their rejection of anything labelled Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion. We at SCC have never believed in making this an industry. Public funds should be spent directly on local services, not on internal box-ticking or promoting the ideology of the latest fad to come out of a left-wing think tank. That has always been our approach and will continue to be so.

Reform also advocates using consultant to help slash council budgets - over the last 10 years we have invested in changes to policies and approach to make £200m in transformational savings. Farage's cries of cut and burn may make good headlines, but they don't make good policy. There is not much left to cut in local government. BUT, if they really want to save money they could always support our One Suffolk Campaign.

Finally on the flying of flags - Let me be clear. The UK flag will always take precedent over all others here in Suffolk, having said that, I for one am proud that the Ukrainian flag flies here in Suffolk - showing our support for the 1600 people who have taken sanctuary in our county from Putin's brutal war. I am as proud of that, as I am to be British and fly the Union Jack from our flagpole.

Of course, on the other end of the spectrum there is the Green Party.

Under the Green Party alarm bells should ring with any person who aspires to do well in our country. Their views on taxation and business are in the Jeremy Corbyn school of economics.

The Greens like to portray themselves as some kind of community-focused moral saviours of the planet—at least they do while they remain in opposition—but it's not until you see them in positions of power that you start to see what they really represent.

Or do you? Like other green creatures, our green politicians are chameleons. Nationally, they shout from the rooftops about the cult of net zero. That we must decarbonise as quickly as possible and at any cost. Nationally, they love renewables. Is it any wonder then, that with a Green MP and Green district councils, that Suffolk is suffering an onslaught of green energy projects? Projects the Greens very often then claim to oppose when its on their doorstep. I said I didn't agree with the new government on much, Madam Chairman, but the Prime Minister was

right to call out our Green MP on this hypocrisy. It is those beliefs that those opposite and Ed Miliband share that is driving the industrialisation of our countryside.

In opposition, the local Greens made lots of noise about the changes they wanted to see. They were critical of Gateway 14 but now sing its praises. Freeports were tax-avoiding hives of foreign companies, all stealing business from local companies—suddenly they're the best thing since sliced bread.

They said we should never invest in fossil fuels, and we have discussed their investment in Shell many times. They promote the virtue of real grass school fields, whilst voting in astroturf. Large scale housing applications across East Suffolk and Mid Suffolk continue to be approved, but while in opposition, they were always critical of new developments. Remember, everyone, the Green Party mantra of "a radical transformation of society for the benefit of all"

Delivering for the people of Suffolk

Contrast that to my party, the Conservatives who continue to deliver for the people of Suffolk, I am proud that this authority is one which delivers on its promises. We cannot solve every challenge overnight, especially those that come from national issues, but we have and will continue to deliver for the people of Suffolk.

We have continued to do all we can to ensure we can invest the maximum amount available into areas such as Adult Social Care and CYP SEND.

As an authority we are now spending £77 out of every £100 on core services. We have invested a further £18.6million into the creation of 200 new specialist places for our children and young people with SEND. This is in addition to the 1,025 new places agreed in the past 5 years.

It isn't enough, Madam Chairman, I am always the first to admit that, but we are doing all we can to support people in our county, and I am proud of that achievement.

Our delivery doesn't just end with people's services, though. Even whilst spending record amounts on those services, we are still delivering elsewhere for the people of Suffolk. Over the last year alone, we have seen:

- The completion of the £145 million Gull Wing Bridge in Lowestoft, transforming local connectivity and supercharging economic prospects.
- We have opened the new £2 million Haverhill Recycling Centre in August last year, replacing the smaller Chalkstone Way site.
- Invested £3.5 million in new fire engines and support equipment, with a further £1.6 million investment to support our fire service.
- Provided £500,000 of funding to support the work of 33 cultural organisations across Suffolk.
- Invested up to £4.7 million in the Benacre Flood Protection Scheme, protecting homes and businesses near Lowestoft.
- We have invested in Ipswich with our £2 million Ipswich investment fund, seeing improvements like the Gipping River Path Environmental Enhancements project and Ipswich Waterfront streetlighting upgrades.

- Suffolk Highways completed the Europa Way in Ipswich, on time and on budget - £2.1 million invested in another project in our county town.
- Madam Chairman, this council believes in Ipswich **as a part of** Suffolk—not an Ipswich **set apart from** Suffolk, as advocated by IBC in its LGR proposals.
- Most recently, this administration acted decisively to protect our precious library service when threatened by opening hour reductions. Bringing all 45 libraries back into the care of the county council in 10 days' time, keeping them open and able to provide for our communities.

We managed all that and much more.

Delivering for the people of Suffolk is what this single authority strives and continues to do, and I want to thank each of my Cabinet members for the hard work they have put in over the last year. My thanks also goes to my group because we are a really good team working hard together to deliver for our residents. I am proud to be the Conservative Leader of SCC and a large part of that is due to the strong work ethic of our Group.

Creating a future we can be proud of

Madam Chairman, as I said at the start of my speech, we stand on the threshold of a bold new future for Suffolk. We have, through our own sheer determination, achieved the opportunity to reshape not only the political makeup of Suffolk, but also reforge the future of our county and its people.

We cannot afford to throw this opportunity away by choosing to recreate multiple layers of bureaucracy and complexity, with unnecessary multiple local authorities. We cannot risk the disaggregation and dismemberment of our Adult Social Care services from the essential economies of scale it needs to continue to provide good quality care and support services to our most vulnerable residents. We cannot afford to throw away hundreds of millions of pounds of efficiency savings which could be used to invest further in essential services.

Now is not the time to look to create unnecessary borders within our county, dividing East from West or North from South.

Now is not the time to create postcode lotteries of essential services, with authorities squabbling over finite pools of financial and human resources.

Now is the time for visionary leadership - this council has a responsibility to get this right for the people of Suffolk, to create a future that we and future generations can be proud of—and that's what I and the administration I lead will do.

ENDS

*For accuracy check against actual delivery