Firstly, I would like to congratulate you Madam Chairman on the taking up of your new role. I know we are in safe hands for the coming year. I would also like to thank the outgoing Charman for first raising so much money for his charities but also for the good humour with which he carried out his responsibilities. I would also like to thank him for holding his Chairman’s reception in Carlton Marshes as I had not been before and found the visit fascinating and hugely enjoyable.

As tends to happen when you mark a milestone in life, I have taken some time to reflect on my role as I enter my 7th year as leader. One of my biggest reflections is the significance that global events have had on our lives in Suffolk. An international pandemic, foreign wars, inflation, extreme weather – these events have impacted the lives of everyone living in Suffolk.

And just as they have dominated the discussions at Westminster, they have also dominated debate, forward planning and policy setting at Suffolk County Council.

However, I believe it has been a challenge that the Suffolk Conservative Group has fought calmly, resiliently and effectively. We have worked together as an administration, united in our ambition to protect the most vulnerable in our communities and deliver quality public services that provide value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer. None of this would have been possible without my group sat around and behind me.

We are not a party of empty words or hot air – we fulfil our ambitions, we get things done and we make a difference to the people of Suffolk.

And that is why it is an honour and a privilege stand before you as Leader of the Council and one I do not take for granted.

Thank you.

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I now want to look back at the past 12 months.

It’s fair to say that this year has been one of mixed fortune. Framed by events outside of our control, such as the war in Ukraine, cost of living pressures, budget constraints and a turbulent national political stage, yet, we continue to step up and make a difference in Suffolk.

At Suffolk County Council there are things we do well. Very well in fact. Here is a quick run-down of some of our key achievements this year:

* Our adult community services have been rated good by the Care Quality Commission
* The success of our Cassius Digital Care work and innovation which is being heralded across Europe
* Millions of pounds being invested in new waste sites in Ipswich and Haverhill
* Our Archaeological Services has made internationally significant discoveries about Suffolk’s Anglo-Saxon past, through the Rendlesham Revealed project
* The launch of new strategy for dementia, helping to bring Health and Social Care together around the voice of people with lived experience
* £13m delivered for active travel
* 250,000 trees being planted
* Over 100 new EV charging points, with an on-street charging programme underway as part of over £7 million of government investment in Suffolk
* New billion-pound Highways contract with Milestone
* And our firm stand against energy projects, which threaten the beauty of our countryside

The list goes on and there is much more that Suffolk County Council can rightly be proud of.

Reflecting on the year, I’d also like to address the momentous event of October 21st 2023 – Storm Babet. While some communities were relatively unscathed by the storm, the destruction and disruption it caused in many areas of Suffolk was significant. More than 900 properties were flooded.

Storm Babet did bring about a large increase on works to the highways with a 82% increase in HMOP reports and a 364% increase in roadside flooding.  We understand the concerns and continue to invest in our roads and progress is being felt. So far, we have invested an extra £20 million into improving drainage and footpaths, and £10 million towards resurfacing residential roads across Suffolk.

We have also invested £1m and brought in additional flood investigation specialists to identify key causes of flooding via S19 reports which are underway as we speak.

I’d like to take this opportunity to once again thank the blue light services, highways and council staff for their work. Also, Suffolk’s wonderful volunteers, farmers and members of the community, who stepped up and helped. As is so often the case in our wonderful county, they demonstrated a truly special quality inherent in the people of Suffolk.

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As is the case anywhere in the country, there are, however, things we should have done better this year and it would be wrong of me as leader to ignore or skirt over these things.

In January, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission published its report into Suffolk’s SEND services. Quite frankly, it made for very bleak reading. The SEND service, which we run in partnership with our NHS colleagues, was found to have widespread failings.  This is not good enough.

What is vital now is proving – through very clear action – that we are improving. It is right that we face significant scrutiny from external experts and officers from the Department for Education. We must be held accountable at every stage of our plans.

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Madam Chairman, I’d like to turn our attention now to the year ahead.

In this current year we face a budget under significant strain. Local Government across the country grapples with increasing demand for services, inflation and scarcity of public funding.

In the past five years, we have saved £66 million by working leaner and smarter. But now it is time to go further, and £64.7 million will be saved in 2024/25 and 2025/26. It is a time for difficult decisions and prioritisation.

We are putting adult and children’s care at the heart of our plans. Over the next two years, we are investing an additional £74 million into services that protect and support the most vulnerable people in Suffolk.

As is widely acknowledged, Suffolk is a well-run council which makes sensible and prudent financial decisions.

Thank goodness we ignored the suggestions of the opposition in spending every penny and holding no reserves at all. Had we taken such an approach this council will not have survived the last 12 months – and Madam Chairman – it is the people of Suffolk who would have suffered.

Instead, this administration will be measured and cautious in our approach.

It’s also worth noting here – Madam Chairman – the significant achievements that will be delivered this year.

In this year, Suffolk will see:

* The Gull Wing bridge in Lowestoft – open!
* New homes on SCC land – built!
* More than 1,200 new school places for children with SEND – thriving!
* Hundreds more EV charging points – go live!
* Millions of pounds to prevent flooding and improve footpaths – invested!
* Tarmac being rolled out in locations where people live being - delivered!

These achievements show ambition and prudent planning in action.

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Before announcing the Cabinet and committee changes I just want to reflect on the opposition over the last year. Cllr Stringer has always been his good humoured self in this Chamber and for that I thank you. I have been the subject of some good humour as well as I did find myself recently featuring on a Green parliamentary candidate’s leaflet. This also included a Conservative MP, a Conservative Lord and two conservative parliamentary candidates and activists. At first, I thought does this mean the Green candidate is crossing the floor to join us as there are more Conservatives than Green on the leaflet, but it became clear a that was not the case and my photo was just being used without my permission.

We now have a Green administration running their first council and that needs scrutiny. They have decided despite significant funds in the bank from the prudent previous conservative administration to tax and charge residents to a level not seen before. I can only imagine they hoped no one would notice. Well, let me run over them:

Dog bins up 22.5% and litter bins up 23.3% . MSDC have also put Council house rents up 7.7% and HRA garage rents up 8.9% and sheltered housing service charges up 18.0% on average. They also put sheltered housing utilities up 44.0% and also voted to put up the collection of bulky items (up to 5 items) - by 20.2

These are back door tax increases.

Why am I mentioning this or indeed the fact that despite criticising everyone for using fossil fuels MSDC Greens have at Full Council agreed to invest in Shell and BP! A decision I do agree with as they give a great dividend. So, the Green party say one thing but do another. They tax those who struggle most.

Nationally, I hear they are admitting a large number of Corbynistas displaced from the Labour party. As we head to 2025 and our election, be assured we on this side of the chamber will point out this hypocrisy to the voters. They are actually left of Starmer with hugely dangerous policies that are now starting to come out from behind the mask.

I want to touch on the Labour Party as well. They may feel they have cause to have a spring in their step nationally – however, locally, they remain a party that lacks ambition. Ipswich has been blighted by years of Labour who just plod from year to year. We are all aware of the Town’s Fund debacle. Ipswich deserves so much more than the Borough gives it. I am delighted with the £2million investment in the town from the PDP and we will continue to push for a conservative resurgence in Ipswich.

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Madam Chairman, as is customary, I will now announce changes to my Cabinet for the year ahead.

Firstly, Richard Rout, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, is standing down as he pursues his candidacy to become MP in a few weeks for the Waveney Valley on 4th July. Richard is one of the countries experts in NSIP and SCC set up the NSIP centre of excellence, so Richard will continue to support us on that.  I wish him every success and thank him for his leadership, impressive knowledge and advice and – more importantly – his friendship over the years.  He will make an excellent MP and I am sure we all look forward to watching his progress in the years to come.

I wish to welcome Richard Smith to his new role as Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Economic Development and Skills. Richard brings a wealth of experience to the role and has excellent understanding of the financial envelope we must work within. I am also delighted he has agreed to be Deputy Leader and look forward to working closely with him in the build up to 2025.

We are also saying goodbye to Craig Rivett this year, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection. Thank you, Craig for your dedication and commitment – you have served the people of Suffolk well. We all wish you well in your new job.

The other changes to Cabinet are:

Philip Faircloth Mutton will pick up the Environment brief with Communities & Equality.

Chris Chambers joins Cabinet with responsibility for Transport Strategy, Planning and Waste.

Steve Wiles joins Cabinet with responsibility for Public Protection and Public Health.

Melanie Vigo Di Gallidoro is stepping back as a Deputy Cabinet Member to have some more free time but will still represent us on the Broad’s Authority and IFCA. A big thank you to Melanie for your kindness and generosity of spirit and commitment to the brief.

And finally, Judy Cloke will become Deputy Cabinet Member for Roadside drainage & flooding.

Other positions stay the same.

I have been thoroughly impressed by, and am enormously grateful to, our Cabinet Members, the Deputies and the wider Group for their contributions to our achievements and thank you all.

Madam Chairman I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chief Executive, Nicola Beach, and all the staff who make our ambitions for Suffolk become a reality.

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Time and again, this Conservative Group has proved – by words, not action – that we can deliver. We deliver what we said we would, especially in regards the big countrywide, national and global challenges we face.

And this year as we head towards our election in 2025 will be no different. We will overcome our financial worry with sensible, prudent steps – steps that will protect our most vulnerable members of society, but will also ensure the durability of Suffolk County Council.

Our values are clear:

Strong leadership

A prudent and robust approach to finances

And a clear commitment to protect Suffolk’s unique landscapes.

Thank you, Madam Chairman.