

Suffolk County Council
Speech by Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council.

Delivered 25th May 2023

Thank you, Mr Chairman, and may I take this opportunity to once again congratulate you on your election.

Mr Chairman, I believe it is important to also thank my colleagues on this side of the chamber who have once again put their trust in this administration, and me, to continue to lead the authority through the political, economic, and social times we have ahead of us.

I do this with humility because no one has a right to govern. No one. That privilege needs to be entrusted in the first place, and then actions thereafter need to prove that position has been earned.

I believe that the actions of this administration have firmly demonstrated that that trust is well placed and sits with a Conservative Group that does not take anything for granted, that helps people to help themselves and that is motivated by delivering quality public services that provide value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer.

Later today, I will be sharing a document with setting out some highlights of what we have delivered in our first two years of this administration. I do not have the time to run over the 50 examples, but I have picked out a few of those achievements, which demonstrate our successes:

- Our Cassius Digital Care work and innovation is going from strength to strength.
- An extra £2.5m for mental health services.
- 300 miles of road now designated as quiet lanes.
- New household waste sites in Ipswich and Haverhill.
- £13m in funding secured for active travel.
- 3,000 environmentally friendly homes being delivered on SCC land.
- 250,000 trees being planted.
- Over 100 new EV charging points.
- A new Highways Contract with Milestone starting in October.
- 43,400 streetlights converted to LED.

There are many, many more.

These are achievements that have been made possible by the hard work and dedication of my colleagues on this side of the chamber and I want to take this opportunity to thank them all today because as a motivated, energetic, and united team we deliver for our Suffolk.

I also want to thank the CEX and all the staff who make our ambitions for Suffolk become a reality.

But these are not just achievements. They are achievements rooted in the ambitions that we as councillors agreed in 2021 and that form a golden, or blue, thread that runs through this authority. Our focus on building a strong economy is sharp, our commitment to improving health and wellbeing is compassionate, our environmental credentials are evident, and our financial prudence is clear.

These are achievements of which we can all be rightly proud. I know I am, because I know that achieving them has not been easy and has taken determination, drive, and courage.

These are traits that we have in spades on this side of the chamber, shared among the talent and experience on our benches.

No council leader can, or should, stand before their fellow councillors and suggest that everything is going precisely as they would like.

As is the case anywhere in the country, there are things that, here in Suffolk, we must do better, and I want to focus on two areas today – Highways and SEND.

There is no denying that, after national politics, the number one issue on the doorstep at the recent local elections was highways.

Let me be clear, the state of our roads is not good enough and, in some cases, as I stood on roads they were difficult to defend as I was out supporting councillors and candidates across the county. I don't believe our roads are any worse than in Essex, Cambridgeshire, or Norfolk – but that doesn't matter and frankly it doesn't mean that we do not need to improve.

That is why today I am announcing a major investment to improve roads across the county where people live. Those smaller local roads often in estates or off the beaten track in our villages that are rutted and in need of some love and attention. To do this we will set aside a further £10million to be spent over the next 20 months reaching these locations across our county and I look forward to this being delivered with our new partner Milestone.

Turning now to SEND.

We are seeing improvements, but the pace of change is not fast enough, and it is not being felt by enough families.

This is why we brought in Anthony Douglas to redouble our efforts. Is this change as fast as I would like? No. But it is coming and with the best interests of children and their families at its core.

This is a hugely emotional issue, and it is deeply upsetting. Yes, it is part of a national struggle - but we cannot and must not hide behind that. Suffolk must continue to step up regardless of the situation nationally.

That is why Suffolk County Council is delivering up to 1,275 new specialist school places for SEND pupils by 2025, an investment of £55 million.

Going forward, work is underway now to understand the demand pressures and understand whether this investment in places is enough or needs to go further. I have also been clear that we need to support the service in its revenue spend and above all make sure we have a culture that seeks continuous improvement.

Now Mr Chairman, as I said we are now two years into our term and have achieved a lot. But there is still so much more to do. I thought it was worth reflecting and giving a flavour of what is to come.

In the next two years, Suffolk will see:

- The Gull Wing bridge in Lowestoft – open!
- New homes on SCC land – built!
- Further help for Ukrainian refugees – given!
- Our new highways contractors Milestone – delivering!

- Hundreds more EV charging points – live!
- Millions of pounds to prevent flooding and improve footpaths – invested!

There is much more, and we are brimming with ambition and will deliver more.

But of course Mr Chairman, it is important to acknowledge we have just seen a set of elections that have changed the political makeup of district councils in Suffolk.

The last two years nationally have been difficult and in many seats there were just two candidates Conservative and one other, leaving some voters without a true democratic choice. Labour, as is well documented, underperformed - particularly here in Suffolk - and did not achieve as many gains as they had hoped for.

I wish all the new administrations well and I know, that despite our political differences, you will do your best for Suffolk. We will, of course, be watching with interest and hope some of the more radical policies held by the party opposite do not see the light of day! So please, no road charging in Stowmarket or campaigns to close Wattisham Airbase!

So, while we were already hugely focused, I have no doubt these elections results will drive us harder to deliver our agenda. One thing is for sure - we are not afraid of hard work and delivering for our residents as community champions. It is what motivates us.

As is customary, I am required to confirm appointments to my Cabinet for the year ahead. I have been thoroughly impressed by, and am enormously grateful to, our Cabinet Members and the Deputies for their contributions to our achievements, so I can confirm today that I will not be making any changes today.

We have a very strong and competent foundation on which to continue delivering our improvement programme. My message to you is that we will continue to achieve successes and tackle head on the problems we face.

I lead an excellent Conservative group at Suffolk County Council. A group of councillors who bring positivity, ideas and are committed and hard working. Our successes are because of this positive attitude. I am committed to continuing with this hard work and ensuring Suffolk has a bright future ahead.

Mr Chairman,

I am confident in our Conservative policies and ambitions for Suffolk. They have created and continue to underpin a solid foundation upon which Suffolk's future prosperity depends.

We on this side of the chamber understand the importance of a balanced, inclusive and growing economy. Without which none of the other ambitions for Suffolk; the protection of our unique environment for future generations, the care and welfare of our most vulnerable people, or getting tax rates as low as possible by delivering value for public money, can ever be achieved.

When we were elected with an overwhelming majority in 2021 - none of us in this chamber could have foreseen the buffeting waves of COVID, another national lockdown, business in financial peril, Russia's illegal war pushing up energy costs, and therefore every other essential cost ever higher for people.

But this administration hasn't just endured them or taken them on the chin. We rose to those challenges and met them head on. A Conservative administration helping to distribute

money to businesses, keeping them afloat and able to support their workforces and therefore their employees.

A Conservative administration stepping up and ensuring the most vulnerable continued to receive the care and support they deserve.

We did not become defeatist in the face of these global challenges - and we will not become defeatist following the results of the recent elections.

We came out and we fought for the people of Suffolk, and now we must fight again for the values and the ideas we on this side of the chamber believe in personal self-determination, freedom of choice, supporting economic growth, small government, and low taxation.

We Conservatives still have much to offer to the people of Suffolk, and there's plenty left in the tank. So, let me tell colleagues on all sides of the chamber – the years ahead are about caring and delivering for our communities.

We have a bold vision for the future of Suffolk, and whilst events and people sometimes work to slow us down or get in our way – be assured they will only spur us on to fight harder than ever to secure a Conservative future for Suffolk.

Thank you.

(For accuracy, please check against final delivery)