

Suffolk supports you with the cost of living

Column by Councillor Bobby Bennett – Cabinet Member for Equality and Communities

With the current cost of living pressures affecting us all, it has never been more important to ensure that people are supported to receive the right help, when they need it. In Suffolk we have a number of support services ready to help you, your friends or your family, if you are struggling.

The Local Welfare Assistance Scheme helps those experiencing financial hardship, including access to items like household furniture and white goods, fuel vouchers for electricity and gas top-ups, supermarket vouchers, and contributions towards increasing costs during the winter months.

Local organisations across Suffolk can submit an application for support, on behalf of an individual or family. These organisations include Citizens Advice Bureau, district and borough councils, health services and voluntary organisations. A list of these organisations, who will assess your circumstances and submit an application for you, is available at www.suffolk.gov.uk/FinancialHardship

After the recent spell of warm weather it may feel a long way off now, but Autumn and Winter can be a time when energy and fuel costs rise. Suffolk's Warm Homes Healthy People is a project designed to help vulnerable people and families make their homes more energy efficient cheaper to heat. It can help you to access grants to help pay for insulation, basic draught proofing, or first-time central heating. It can also offer emergency support if you need it in the form of temporary heaters or support with emergency boiler repairs.

If high energy bills are preventing you from putting the heating on, or you know any friends, family or neighbours who need extra help heating their home, please contact Warm Homes Healthy People on 03456 037 686 or email whhp@eastsuffolk.gov.uk

There's also a wealth of support in Suffolk for families with young children.

Healthy Start vouchers help parents of children under four years old, to access healthy food and milk. Through the county's Tackling Poverty Strategy, we have been working with health visitors, and partners in the voluntary sector to support eligible families to take up the offer. We identified potential barriers to families accessing services, such as language barriers, and developed promotional materials to make the vouchers more accessible to families in need.

Since work began to promote the Healthy Start vouchers in November 2021 we've seen an 11% increase in those taking up the offer. The most recent data March 2022 shows 72% of those eligible are now taking up the offer.

You may be entitled to Healthy Start Vouchers if you are more than 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under 4. To check if you can apply or to find out more speak to your Midwife or Health Visitor or visit HealthyStart.nhs.uk

The Holiday Activities and Food programme, provides enriching activities to children and young people, as well as free meals during school holidays.

The programme launched in 2021 following a successful pilot in Suffolk in 2019 and 2020 and is backed by government funding of £200 million per year for the next three years.

In 2021, more than 44,800 meals were provided to children in Suffolk through the scheme and more than 48,400 face to face activity sessions took place. These Holiday club activities introduce young people to new experiences and skills, from dance and drama to cooking and gardening, as well providing opportunities for physical and social activity.

More than 33,700 offers of support were offered remotely to children who could not attend the clubs in person. These offers included activity booklets and food packs.

If your child is in receipt of Free School Meals, you may be entitled to support during future school holidays, speak to your school to find out more.

Suffolk County Council recently published its Tackling Poverty Strategy and action plan. The strategy, which has been coproduced with District, Borough and Voluntary Sector partners, along with people with lived experience of poverty, pulls together the many strands of work that have been helping people for many months, as well as looking to the future. You can view the strategy and action plan at: www.suffolk.gov.uk/poverty

Tackling poverty is a system-wide challenge and as such, the work of the Poverty Strategy will report into the Health and Wellbeing Board and Suffolk Public Sector Leaders and Suffolk's Collaborative Communities Board. Suffolk Public Sector Leaders have provided £1 million in hardship funding to support this work.

I want to say a huge thank you to the voluntary community and people who came forward to tell us their stories, which helped us to develop the Strategy and Action Plan.

Finally, if you are struggling or know someone who is, then please look into what help is available.

Visit www.suffolk.gov.uk/FinancialHardship where you can find a list of the support services in Suffolk.

The importance of buses

Column by Councillor Richard Smith – Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Transport Strategy and Waste

Public and community transport in rural areas was the topic of a conference I attended recently, and which provided a great deal of food for thought.

Organised by Suffolk County Council's passenger transport body Suffolk On Board, the Rural Transport Conversation event examined different ways in which services could be provided in the future.

For a largely rural county such as Suffolk this is an important topic because if people do not have access to a car they are largely reliant on public transport.

The purpose of the conference was not to come up with instant solutions, rather it was to examine potential ways of working in the future.

There were presentations on how demand responsive transport has been introduced in Kent by the county council there and operator Go2, a similar scheme in Swaffham, Norfolk, a route-planning programme by BT and the work of the National Community Transport Association.

We also heard from BACT Community Transport of Bungay of the issues facing community transport in Suffolk, which includes rising fuel prices, a shortage of volunteer drivers, and people still wary of leaving their homes post-covid.

These are tough times for bus operators. Fuel costs, driver shortages and passenger numbers are just some of the issues they are having to contend with.

Government funding has allowed us to pay contracted operators at levels prior to the pandemic, but passenger numbers are still not back to where there were pre-covid.

That funding is due to end in October, and while we are hopeful it may continue in some form there is no guarantee that it will.

No operator can run at a loss and, while Suffolk County Council has stepped in to help retain loss-making but socially important services, there is only so much that we can do with the fully committed resources that we have.

However, one piece of good news is that we are about to formally sign the bus passenger charter, a significant step in delivering even better services.

The charter will set out what passengers can expect from both the bus operators and Suffolk County Council, describing the standards of service that will be provided.

Those standards will apply to all bus companies, big and small, commercial or council-supported.

It is a key part of our bus service improvement plan, which sets out how we propose to deliver improved services to support resilient, connected, and sustainable communities across Suffolk, help meet the transition to net zero, and create economic opportunities that benefit everyone.

It is by working together with operators that we make bus services better, more appealing and running smoothly.

This will range from before you even set out on your journey – ensuring that there is up-to-date information about services and any disruptions – to what you can expect on your journey, what tickets you can buy and how you can pay for them.

Together we and the operators are working hard to provide the best possible bus service and this charter will play a big part in ensuring standards remain high.

However, the public also has a part to play. The phrase 'use it or lose it' applies here because if people do not use buses to the point where they become economically unviable then another phrase risks coming into use – 'you don't know what you've got until it's gone', and the loss of a bus service can have a highly detrimental effect on those people who do rely on it.

Passengers are the lifeblood of any bus service which is why I ask that if you have a journey to make, where there is a bus service available then please consider using it.

One bus can move as many people as several cars, which means more road space for vehicles that do need to be there, such as delivery vans or the emergency services.

The environmental benefit is that less vehicles on the roads also means cleaner air and the reduction of carbon emissions, something which is of benefit to us all.

Bus charter to deliver highest standards for passengers

It was announced on August 15th that bus passengers in Suffolk can look forward to higher standards of service following the signing of a new charter.

The charter has been signed by Suffolk County Council (SCC) and bus operators covering the county and is a key part of the Suffolk Enhanced Partnership.

The Partnership is made up of councils, operators and other stakeholders and supports the improvement of all local bus services operating in the SCC, Local Transport Authority (LTA) area and neighbouring LTA areas where services are cross-boundary.

The charter has a wide range of pledges detailing what passengers are entitled to expect before, during and after their journey.

They include:

- Information about service disruptions will be posted on bus company websites, apps, and social media.
- A recognisable bus stop, with access to up-to-date timetable and contact information, and real-time displays at major stops
- To be able to pay to travel by contactless, mobile apps or smartcards – not just cash – and tickets that are easy to understand
- Buses that are clean, comfortable, and accessible
- A clear, consistent process for complaints, feedback, and praise – with a speedy resolution

The charter also outlines the part passengers can play in helping buses run smoothly.

This includes reporting damage to buses, stops, or shelters, having passes, tickets, or fare money ready as they board, and helping keep the bus clean by taking litter home and keeping their feet off the seats.

The charter will be reviewed and renewed every 12 months by the Enhanced Partnership.

Councillor Alexander Nicoll, the chair of the Enhanced Partnership and Suffolk County Council Deputy Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy, said:

“This is a significant step for bus service provision in Suffolk.

“We want to get more people using the bus in Suffolk, and by introducing and implementing these high standards they will see how the bus offers a welcoming, convenient, and reliable way of getting out and about.

“More people on buses means reduced congestion on our roads and in our villages and towns, freeing up road space for those that really need it and producing a cleaner environment which benefits everyone.”

More details on the Enhanced Partnership and the passenger charter can be found [on Suffolk On Board](#). Suffolk County Council website.

I hope A-level students are rewarded for their hard work this Thursday

Column by Councillor Rachel Hood – Cabinet Member for Education, SEND and Skills.

Despite it being the summer holidays and thousands of children and young people enjoying the very best of Suffolk in the sunshine, this week I would like to focus my attention on schools. In particular, two recently newsworthy subjects the forthcoming exam results and newly published figures pertaining to exclusions and suspensions.

As you know, especially if you are the expectant young person or their families, this Thursday is A-level results day. GCSE results are published next Thursday (August 25). I remember when my children were younger and the nervous wait for exam results unfortunately, it doesn't get any easier with practise or time. The disruption of the pandemic years on Suffolk's young people has been significant.

Students have spent many weeks learning online in their bedrooms or kitchen tables, or short periods within school just to face another lockdown, or even being unwell with Covid. It has been an acute struggle for pupils and schoolteachers.

The forthcoming exam results will therefore be a time for celebration and relief regardless of the grades obtained. The Department for Education is warning that some students may see an 'uneven impact' of the pandemic on their results, with many schools opting to teach differently through the two years of the pandemic.

Not all young people have been taught on an even playing field. The important thing to remember is the success and triumph of these students and helping them pick the right next steps in their education. I wish them all the best of luck.

You may have seen a newspaper article recently on newly released figures from the Department for Education on pupil exclusions in Suffolk. I wanted to share with you some context and background and also correct some misleading interpretations of the figures, which are complicated to dissect and understand.

It was reported that Suffolk has one of the highest exclusion rates in the country. The term exclusion refers to fixed term suspensions or permanent exclusions, which should absolutely be the last resort for headteachers and school governors. The decision to exclude a child rests with headteachers and is determined by guidance from the Department for Education.

Suffolk County Council recognises schools' autonomy in this matter but actively works to reduce the use of these sanctions. We work with schools - and robustly challenge where necessary - to address any high levels of suspension and exclusion, particularly where children have additional needs. Once a child has been permanently excluded, the council is responsible for securing new provision.

It is important to say that Suffolk County Council always reports accurate and timely figures. This exclusion data, which has been collated and released by the Department for Education, relates to 2020/21. As this was a pandemic year, children's education was greatly disrupted. It is widely believed that whilst the majority of children settled well when they returned to school, some children found it difficult to adjust to school boundaries.

In a few cases that led to increased numbers of exclusions. It has also been noted that where pupils were on the verge of exclusion pre-lockdown, some found themselves in difficulty when they returned to face-to-face education. Another explanation for the increase in figures is better recording of exclusions by schools. In the past, some schools were not recording all suspensions and in 2020/21 Suffolk County Council reaffirmed the importance of accurate data. This will have had an impact on the comparative performance.

The council accepts the figures for primary school suspensions and permanent exclusions are too high. There has been a trend in recent years of increasing numbers of exclusions and we continue to focus our efforts on understanding why this exists. A lot of action is being taken to improve these figures.

A report by this newspaper and on social media reported that children under four had been suspended in Suffolk. This is not the case. There has been 85 suspensions relating to 39 children in reception years in 32 Suffolk primary schools (79 % academy, 21% LA maintained).

This amounts to 13% of all primary schools and is a considerable concern. We are specifically focusing our efforts to work with schools who have a higher rate of exclusions. Some of the action we are taking include a new team who will visit schools and are dedicated to preventing permanent exclusions; a push for more schools to sign up the Inclusion Quality Mark which demands schools be more inclusive; officers from the SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) team working with schools to understand and support children in mainstream schools at risk of permanent exclusion; and greater support for school governors to enable them to advocate for children at risk.

It is encouraging to see that many schools in Suffolk do not exclude children - and this is testament to the hard work of the teaching staff and management team. However, we must ensure that all schools and settings apply the same criteria when dealing with challenging behaviour. I'd like to finish by wishing you all a very safe and happy summer holiday.

I hope our young people are rewarded with good grades for the hard work they have put in. My thanks once again to teachers who have worked tirelessly to deliver first rate education in the most challenging of circumstances.

Suffolk Waste Partnership back national campaign to raise awareness of safe battery disposal

Suffolk Waste Partnership is backing a nationwide campaign urging people to safely dispose of old batteries in a bid to avoid starting fires in refuse vehicles

The Partnership has signed up to the Stop Battery Fires Campaign launched by national safe electricals recycling group [Material Focus](#), which aims to raise awareness of how householders can properly recycle batteries and electricals.

Batteries, or electricals containing batteries, that end up inside bins or recycling and waste lorries with other materials, get crushed in the waste or recycling process. This can result in them being punctured and self-combusting, setting fire to dry and flammable waste and recycling around them.

In June a fire at the Materials Recycling Facility in Great Blakenham, near Ipswich, which recycles waste from across Suffolk, is suspected to have been started by a battery dumped with household recycling. The fire was located deep within nearly 400 tonnes of waste and took firefighters and staff nearly two hours to extinguish.

Electricals containing batteries that tend to be discarded the most are smaller, frequently used and often cheaper electricals like toothbrushes, shavers, chargers and toys. Lithium-ion batteries are responsible for around 48% (more than 200) of all waste fires occurring in the UK each year according to the [Environmental Services Association](#), the trade body representing the UK's resource and waste management industry.

These fires cost some £158 million annually to waste operators, fire services and the environment. Yet the Material Focus survey found 45% of householders are unaware of the fire risk if they do not safely dispose of batteries hidden inside electrical items.

Simple scheme to buy solar panels returns for Suffolk residents

Solar Together Suffolk, a scheme which has helped over 1,500 homes to install solar panels and batteries, opens for new registrations on 22 August 2022.

The scheme helps homeowners feel confident that they are paying the right price for a high-quality installation from pre-approved installers, whilst increasing their independence from the grid and reducing their carbon emissions.

Solar Together Suffolk is supported by Suffolk County Council and all local borough and district councils.

From 22 August 2022, Suffolk residents can register for free with the group-buying scheme, with no obligation to go ahead with an installation: www.solartogether.co.uk/suffolk.

It is open to anyone interested in:

- installing new solar panels (with the option for battery storage and EV charge points)
- adding battery storage to an existing solar panel array

The innovative scheme builds on four years of the highly successful Solar Together programme run across the UK. To date, Solar Together Suffolk has:

- installed 17,900 solar panels at over 1,500 Suffolk households
- retrofitted over 200 batteries
- avoided carbon emissions totalling 28,730 tonnes of CO2 across the county

Councillor Andy Drummond, chair of the Suffolk Environment Portfolio Holders Group, said:

“This is the fifth year that Solar Together Suffolk has been rolled out, and I expect it will prove the most popular yet. With electricity prices continuing to climb, more and more homeowners are looking into their own solar power as a way to generate their own clean energy and reduce their bills.

“However, investing in solar panels and battery storage can be a daunting project to take on – knowing who to approach, comparing quotes, trying to understand the complexity of the products or how the process works.

“But Solar Together Suffolk does all that work for you. All you have to do is register your details, and Solar Together will send you a competitive, personalised quote from an approved installer. There is nothing to pay until you decide you want to go ahead with your installation.”

Solar Together Suffolk is one of the projects which contributes to Suffolk’s Climate Emergency Plan, to support and guide residents, communities and businesses to make the changes required to help Suffolk achieve Net Zero by 2030.

How does it work?

- 22 August to 26 September: registration is open, it is free and with no obligation
- 27 September: pre-vetted installers take part in the auction to bid against each other to offer the best deal
- 17 October: a few weeks after the auction you will receive a personal recommendation based on your registration details
- 25 November: your deadline to accept your personal recommendation and proceed with an installation

Support is on-hand throughout the whole process which, together with information sessions, will allow households to make an informed decision in a safe and hassle-free environment.

Suffolk’s local authorities are again working in partnership with independent experts iChoosr to roll out Solar Together Suffolk.

iChoosr has a strong track record of delivering group purchase schemes for local authorities. It has worked with 160 UK local authorities on its collective energy switching schemes. iChoosr’s schemes have also been delivered in partnership with local authorities in five countries. Over 70 schemes led to 110,000 residents installing solar PV systems.

Free registration, with no obligation is open from 22 August to 26 September 2022, submit your details at www.solartogether.co.uk/suffolk.

Suffolk to take part in trial walking and cycling on prescription scheme

Walking and cycling to improve mental and physical health is to be offered by GPs in Suffolk as part of a nationwide trial.

The county is one of just 11 areas in England to take part in the £12.7 million scheme announced by the government.

The pilots, part of the government's [Gear Change plan](#) published in 2020, aim to evaluate the impact of physical activity through cycling and walking on a person's health, such as reduced GP appointments and reliance on medication.

The scheme in Suffolk will receive £1.5 million and will focus on Ipswich and Lowestoft.

The funding will go towards several pilot projects including adult cycle training, free bike loans and walking groups.

Other schemes include all-ability cycling taster days where people who may not have cycled before can try to in a friendly environment, or walking and cycling mental health groups where people can connect with their communities as they get active.

Individuals assessed as being suitable to take part in the scheme will be provided with:

- A bicycle/e-bike or e-cargo bike to be used as a mobility aid (with safety equipment, adaptive cycles/trailers, and secure storage),
- 1-1 support with learn to ride/cycle confidence/Bikeability training,
- Basic bike maintenance
- Journey planning using the local cycle network
- 'Buddy riding' to destinations such as workplaces, schools, or shops to build confidence for everyday journeys.

Stakeholders led by the Public Health and Transport Strategy teams at Suffolk County Council include the primary care networks, Healthwatch Suffolk, Community Action Suffolk, Active Suffolk, and the University of Suffolk Integrated Care Academy.

The county's former NHS clinical commissioning groups - now Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care System and Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care System – are also stakeholders.

Councillor Alexander Nicoll, Suffolk County Council Deputy Cabinet Member for Transport Strategy, said:

"I am delighted Suffolk is to take part in this innovative scheme.

"That we have been selected is a tribute to the hard work and team effort of all the stakeholders and I look forward to seeing the scheme progress."

Stuart Keeble, Director of Public Health for Suffolk, said:

"The health and wellbeing benefits of walking and cycling are well recognised, and this scheme will allow us to use them as a non-clinical way of helping people.

"By supporting people to move more we can help them to improve their physical and mental health and wellbeing, improve the environment and help relieve the burden on the NHS."

The pilots will be delivered between 2022 and 2025 with on-going monitoring and evaluation to support continued learning.

The project brings together a range of government departments and agencies including:

- NHS England
- Office for Health Improvement and Disparities
- Sport England
- National Academy for Social Prescribing
- Defra
- Department for Health and Social Care

Could you help a family in need? – Suffolk supports Ukraine

Column by Councillor Bobby Bennett – Cabinet Member for Equalities and Communities

Today, 24 August, the people of Ukraine mark their Independence Day - exactly six months since Russia's wholly unjust invasion, and 31 years since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Suffolk County Council has joined other councils, in lighting up our headquarters in yellow and blue to mark the Ukrainian Day of Independence, and we are flying the Ukrainian flag to show our continued support.

Suffolk has a proud history of supporting people in need and in the last six months, we have seen people and communities across our county come together to do all we can to help those fleeing the conflict in Ukraine.

More than 1,000 Ukrainian guests have now arrived in Suffolk via the Homes for Ukraine scheme and I want to say a huge thank you to each and every person and family in Suffolk who has taken Ukrainian guests into their homes and into their hearts. You are making a real difference every day, supporting and welcoming Ukrainian families into our communities.

Sponsors originally signed up to host guests for at least 6 months, with the option for those who are willing and able to continue beyond this. We are extremely grateful to those who are able to continue to provide this invaluable support to families beyond this initial period, however we fully understand that some will be unable to, due to changes in their circumstances in this time. Again, thank you for everything you have done - supporting a person or family fleeing conflict is no mean feat and it cannot be underestimated how much of a difference you have made in these people's lives.

Guests on the Homes for Ukraine scheme who are not yet ready to leave sponsorship and move into their own alternative accommodation, but who cannot stay with their current host after 6 months, can move to a new host.

We also sadly continue to see more people fleeing the conflict each day. We are therefore asking anyone who thinks they may be able to help a family in need to sign up to the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

We are in need of a wide range of homes for single people, mums with children and complete families. Anything "self-contained" is especially helpful - for example if you have a second home or an annexe.

Accommodation must be available for at least 6 months, be fit for people to live in, and suitable for the number of people to be accommodated. This can be anything from an empty room to an unoccupied home, as long as it's safe, heated and free from health hazards, and gives your guests adequate access to bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Sponsors who sign up to the scheme will be eligible for a monthly £350 thank you payment for up to 12 months (starting from the date your guests first arrived in the UK), whilst your guests are living with you.

If you think you can help, or know anyone who is interested, please visit homesforukraine.campaign.gov.uk.

If you would like to speak to other hosts, to find out more before you sign up, or to offer your support for a family who may be moving on from their current sponsor, you can email Community

Action Suffolk at ukrainesupport@communityactionsuffolk.org.uk. They can put you in touch with existing community groups in your area.

Council to boost electric vehicle charging across Suffolk

It was announced on August 24th that the council submitted a bid of £1,362,000 to the Department for Transport, as part of the Local EV Infrastructure (LEVI) pilot scheme.

Suffolk's residents and visitors will see further improvements to the county's electric vehicle (EV) charging network, following Suffolk County Council's successful bid to fund more charging points.

With additional contributions such as commercial funding, the project will see a total investment of around £2.75m.

The new LEVI funding will allow the council to develop the county's EV charging network by:

- PV solar power and battery storage upgrades to approximately 10 existing sites
- Installing community EV charging, PV solar power and battery storage at over 30 further sites in urban and rural areas
- Identifying key commercial sites for 7kW, rapid and ultra rapid chargers, which will benefit the local community

Suffolk County Council has led the way in electric vehicle charging, following the launch of Plug In Suffolk in 2019. It was the UK's first 'fully open' public EV fast charging network and has seen other local authorities around the country follow that model.

Plug In Suffolk has now installed 100 charging points around the county, with an emphasis on installations in rural locations and supporting households without off-street charging capabilities.

Councillor Richard Rout, Suffolk County Council's Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Environment, said:

"This is excellent news for those living in Suffolk, and those who are visiting to enjoy everything our county has to offer.

"We have had over 70 expressions of interest for potential sites, which will offer over 200 new charging points, including proposals for installations of solar carports, as well as regular charging points.

"These are places such as community centres, village halls, sports clubs and park and ride sites, many of which are within walking distance of people who do not have access to off-street parking.

"Through Plug In Suffolk we have a history of successfully creating these EV charging community hubs, for example at the Coddensham Centre. We will now be able to create more sites like this, and working with parish councils and local groups makes the installations a real community effort."

This project contributes to Suffolk's commitment to be Net Zero by 2030. The Suffolk Climate Emergency Plan identified that decarbonisation of vehicles in Suffolk was a key aspect of meeting that target.

