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Suffolk's Public Sector Leaders review county's positive collective action towards addressing the climate emergency and Covid-19 Recovery planning

Suffolk's Public Sector Leaders met on February 26 to discuss local plans to reduce the impact on the environment as part of Suffolk's climate emergency declaration, and to focus on the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and how Suffolk plans to enter a local recovery phase when the time is right.

In 2019, all councils in Suffolk declared a Climate Emergency, committing themselves towards working to achieving Carbon Net Zero by 2030 through day-to-day business operations. To support this work and to chart progress, Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) agreed to map out the projects already underway, and explore what would be needed to meet the challenge of reducing carbon across Suffolk.

There are already a number of notably successful projects up and running with the installation of plug-in vehicle charging points, the planting of new trees and hedgerows, and the planned use of new zero and ultra-low emission fleet vehicles for councils and Suffolk Police. Taking a collaborative approach to this work gives partners across Suffolk a greater

voice in encouraging others to follow this example and to lobby and work with Government on new environmental initiatives.

Leaders previously commissioned an independent evidence base to inform development of a collaborative climate emergency plan across Suffolk.

The collective work towards achieving Carbon Net Zero is based around the following six key themes:

- Domestic Buildings
- Transport (public and private)
- Industry and Commercial Energy Use
- Power (consumption and generation)
- Finance
- Cross cutting issues (that affect all partners)

It is hoped that the full plan can be considered by SPSL in their June meeting.

During the same Suffolk Public Sector Leaders meeting there was also a presentation to update the group on Suffolk's recovery plan for Covid-19 following the Prime Minister's announcement this week, charting the four significant markers to reopen schools and in time businesses and hospitality.

The presentation at SPSL updated how the Leaders' and NALEP joint investments created a Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund the first round of which has seen some £338,000, to support the roll out of the Virtual High Streets initiative in Babergh and Mid Suffolk; enabled businesses to take on apprentices in 2021, improved coordination of work across Suffolk's network of business innovation hubs and invested in Suffolk's creative digital sector, providing space for business growth and support for business start-ups. The second round of investment will be announced in March 2021.

As part of the revised timetable given the continued period of Covid-19 response, Suffolk's recovery plan is due to go to Suffolk Public Sector Leaders' meeting in June to ensure there is continued momentum and support measures in place.

Councillor Matthew Hicks, Chair of Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group, said:

"Suffolk continues to have a strong ambition and determination towards creating the greenest county. Making a commitment to recognise the Climate Emergency is a crucial element of this work as no one authority or partner organisation can achieve this alone. Together we are working with communities and businesses as well as the public sector to drive initiatives that significantly reduce our impact on the environment and drive down carbon production towards net zero."

"The shared sense of urgency driving our aspiration to be carbon neutral by 2030 means taking on what may be the biggest challenge we have faced, using our collective influence

and powers to cut greenhouse gas emissions, protect our environment and adapt our relationship with the Suffolk environment. We are building on a great deal of fantastic work that is already happening through individual authorities, so I am confident we can create many more opportunities and increase the pace of response with the support of our communities and businesses. I look forward to seeing the plan at a future meeting.”

Over 98% of pupils receive a place at one of their preferred Secondary Schools on National Offer Day

On March 1 it was announced that 98.16% of pupils received a place at one of their Preferred Secondary Schools in Suffolk on National Offer Day.

This year, Suffolk County Council (SCC) received 7,652 applications from parents indicating at which secondary school they would prefer their child to be educated from September 2021.

7,114 pupils received offers for their first preference school and 7,511 pupils received an offer for one of their three preferred schools.

Councillor Mary Evans, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services, Education and Skills, said:

“I am pleased that this year more families have once again received their first choice of school and that the vast majority of families have been offered a preferred school place.

“We use published criteria to decide who has priority for places so that the process is fair and clear. I appreciate that not all families will have received a place at their preferred school and where a parents’ preference for a Suffolk school is refused, we will automatically add their child’s name to the waiting list for that school. We will also advise them how to lodge an appeal should they wish to do so.

“Starting secondary school is an important moment for any child, and the more we can do to make the transition to a new school smoother for them, the better.”

Feedback sought to improve Recycling Centre booking system

People of Suffolk are being asked to rate their experience of the ‘book a slot’ system that's in place to visit a Recycling Centre.

A booking system was introduced at Suffolk’s recycling centres in May 2020 to manage maximum visitor numbers and enable the safe reopening of the service after closure at the start of the first Covid-19 lockdown. The sites welcome around 14,000 visitors per week on average.

Suffolk County Council is working on upgrades to the booking system software to improve the customer experience by making it quicker and easier to make and amend bookings. Before any improvements can take place, the council is seeking feedback on how well the booking system has worked so far.

People can give their views by completing the 2-minute questionnaire online at suffolkrecycling.org.uk.

Suffolk has long held ambitions to Create the Greenest County and the Suffolk 2020 fund, which is a programme of work all about investing in projects that benefit Suffolk communities, aims to support the council's climate emergency declaration and improve Suffolk for all residents in years to come.

Councillor Paul West, Cabinet Member for Waste Services, said:

“We have already seen how well the ‘book a slot’ system has been working in Suffolk, but we know we can improve it to make the experience for people visiting the sites even quicker and easier. By gathering the views from those who have used the current system, as well as those who haven't used it yet, we can understand better what works and where we can make improvements.

“We plan to link the new booking system to the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system already in place at our sites so we can maximise the benefits for visitors by speeding up the process for getting in and out of the recycling centre.

“I'd urge people to give us their feedback because the easier we make it for everyone to recycle, the better the outcome for our environment and the people of Suffolk.”

Breaking down the barriers to accessing digital care services in Suffolk communities

On March 5 Suffolk County Council announced the launch of a new project which commits to providing a range of accessible local care support services to help residents continue to live independently in their own homes.

As a largely rural county, Suffolk County Council is committed to providing a wide range of accessible local care support services to help residents continue to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. This approach is even more important at the current time with Covid prevalent in the community, and the authority has successfully adapted its services through the use of technology to reduce risks to the health of residents as well as staff at this time.

Making the most of the advances in digital technology and keeping residents and communities connected has really proved successful in recent months as more and more

people see the benefits of using the range of opportunities to personalise the care services they receive through digital options.

As a result of Suffolk 2020 project funding, the Council is launching a new initiative to adapt and kit out a number of community vehicles with digital connectivity and provide a showcase for a range of supportive technology and digital solutions to take out and about into local communities, introducing residents to the potential benefits of using the equipment and services.

Last year, Suffolk County Council successfully introduced the use of video carephones to people who may be vulnerable or shielding, to help them stay connected with friends and loved ones during periods of isolation. As part of this Covid response, it became increasingly clear that there was a significant number of other elderly, vulnerable and isolated people in Suffolk who do not have the ability to access technology or connectivity but may find such services useful and beneficial. Such an approach has already proved to be successful in other parts of the UK and is supported by national and regional data.

The plan is for Suffolk County Council to enhance existing community vehicles as 'Mobile Digital Care Hubs' to enable residents to experience some of the digital care technologies first-hand to better understand opportunities available to them and if they would support them to meet their individual needs. The vehicles will be travelling around the county with a focus on reaching those who live in more isolated areas of Suffolk.

The project will provide a chance for skilled members of staff to talk about, show and demonstrate some of these technologies first-hand and provide a better understanding of how digital care can help individuals to live more safely and independently for longer.

Digital care solutions offer a wide range of other benefits including improved wellbeing and the ability to stay better connected with family, friends and other people who may offer invaluable support.

Councillor Becca Hopfensperger, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Adult Care, said:

"Projects like this help break down the barriers that might otherwise restrict or stop Suffolk's vulnerable residents from accessing and benefiting from the services available through digital care.

"Digital care solutions help to supplement existing care and bolster support provided by our experienced, committed and excellent team of carers during these difficult times. By helping to keep people connected we have seen many positive benefits supporting the mental and emotional wellbeing of people, evidenced by speaking to family members, care providers and local support networks.

"Digital enablement is vital for the future of care delivery in Suffolk and is something that has become ever more pronounced during the course of the last year."

Suffolk criminal exploitation initiative extended after success

Of March 8 an additional £1.4million was awarded to extend a successful initiative that supports young people in or at risk of criminal exploitation.

The Suffolk Against Gang Exploitation (SAGE) Team was established in 2018 as part of Suffolk's three-year work programme to tackle gangs and county lines and is funded by Suffolk Public Sector Leaders.

During that time it has been delivering diversion, prevention, and early intervention work with young people in or at risk of gang violence and has also developed a practice framework, training courses and provided expertise and advice for practitioners across the county.

A recent evaluation of SAGE showed positive results for the young people they are working with including equipping them to make better choices in future, improved attendance & completion of interventions, deeper level of awareness and understanding amongst practitioners and reported improved mental wellbeing.

Building on this success, Suffolk Public Sector Leaders have pledged an additional £1.4million to tackle criminal exploitation in Suffolk. The new work programme will run from April 2021 until March 2024.

Councillor Paul West, Chair of the Safer Stronger Communities Board and Suffolk County Council Cabinet member for Communities, said:

“The work being done by the SAGE team is of great importance in the battle against the exploitation of young people in Suffolk. I am pleased with the additional funding and the support from all partners. We must stop at nothing to drive out exploitation of young people on our own doorsteps. We are building on some of the success and good practice already achieved but the funding allows us to move our work to the next level.”

Suffolk Police and Crime Commissioner Tim Passmore said:

“I was very pleased, as a member of the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders group, to support this bid to continue funding the excellent work being carried out by the SAGE team. Preventing our young people being groomed by the gangs and criminals involved in the illegal drugs business is crucial to Suffolk's future well-being. Helping young people make the right choices as they enter adulthood has a positive impact on us all.”

Suffolk County Council secures £3.1M for building decarbonisation initiative

It was announced on March 9 that Suffolk County Council, working in conjunction with property specialists Concertus, was successful in gaining over £3M of funding.

This funding has been received from The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to promote capital energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation projects within buildings used to provide frontline public services.

Working with Concertus, the council has been preparing a range of packages to support the decarbonising of various buildings in the Council's estate including applications for the council's headquarters at Endeavour House in Ipswich, four rural fire stations, Beacon House, Waterloo Centre and Leiston Children's Centre.

The council's Children and Young People service also reviewed their portfolio of school buildings along with Concertus. This review resulted in the submission of grant applications for nine schools across the county, all of which were successful.

This grant scheme aligns with BEIS' new mission and priorities: fighting coronavirus, backing business, unleashing innovation, and tackling climate change. Through this scheme, it is supporting the council's own commitment to be net zero by 2030 along with the Government's own net zero goals and encouraging further green investment within the UK.

Packages of work vary from building to building, but many include the fitting of solar panels and battery storage, as well as improvements to wall or roof insulation and installation of Air Source Heat Pumps to move away from the use of fossil fuels for source of heating.

Speaking about the funding, Councillor Nick Gowrley, Cabinet Member with responsibility for council assets said:

"This is a really important step in the council delivering upon its commitment to be net zero by 2030. The estimated cumulative effect of these packages will see the council's carbon footprint reduce by over 360 tonnes of CO₂ per year, the equivalent of taking 120 cars off the road. This is a fantastic result and underlines our commitment to the county and the planet. I would like to thank all those involved in securing this funding, especially Concertus, Vertas and the Greater South East Energy Hub. I look forward to seeing the work rolled out over the coming months."

The council hopes to have the work completed at all the sites before the 30 September 2021.

Suffolk partners with environmental charity in new campaign to stop people trying to recycle disposable nappies

It was announced on March 11 that Suffolk Waste Partnership has joined forces with environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy and other local authorities across the country to launch a new campaign aimed at stopping the millions of disposable nappies that are contaminating recycling.

The campaign comes after a new survey revealed that seven per cent of nappy users – parents, grandparents and carers – wrongly put their disposable nappies in with their recycling, which equates to more than *one million people.

Locally, around 150 tonnes of nappies end up in Suffolk recycling bins each year. This equates to approximately 3000 nappies needing to be removed from the recycling every day. This truly unpleasant job needs to be done by hand by staff at Suffolk's Material Recycling Facility (MRF) in Gt Blakenham. So, by keeping nappies out of our recycling bins, you are not only helping to get our recycling right but protecting staff at the MRF.

The national survey, carried out by YouGov, also revealed that younger people, aged 18-24 were more likely to put them in their recycling bin (15%) and more than one in ten Londoners who used disposable nappies (11%) tried to recycle them.

Now, the Suffolk Waste Partnership is trying to reach nappy users with a new campaign that has been tested with them and offers a clear message that disposable nappies should never go in their recycling.

The campaign is fronted by 'Ted' and will be appearing on billboards around the country and on social media to drive the message home. In Suffolk, additional information will be shared on the Suffolk Waste Partnership's website, social media channels and newsletters.

Suffolk launches Quiet Lanes for residents to enjoy as lockdown eases

On March 16, the Quiet Lanes initiative was launched. Suffolk County Council is encouraging residents to explore more of the beautiful countryside on their doorstep.

As we move into spring, we are all keen to get outside and make the most of the weather. Quiet Lanes is a nationally recognised designation for narrow, rural roads which can be

shared with walkers, horse riders, cyclists and other road users. It encourages drivers to take their time when they see the Quiet Lanes sign, so we can all enjoy rural lanes with greater safety.

Quiet Lanes at Snape and Glemsford have just achieved planning consent and the initiative has another 50 proposed lanes going through planning for April 2021. A new website allowing residents to find the Quiet Lanes near them will be available in May.

Councillor Andrew Reid, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member responsible for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs, says:

“This is a fantastic sustainable initiative aimed at opening up more of our countryside for leisure and recreation activities and active travel. Quiet Lanes are a precious resource on many of our doorsteps. Now with this recognition, we will encourage residents to make more use of the countryside around them rather than always getting in the car, and reap the associated health and environmental benefits.”

Suffolk to be included in Government's UK Gigabit Broadband programme

On March 19 it was announced that Suffolk is to be included in the £5 billion strategy to deliver next generation, gigabit-capable broadband to the entire country.

The programme aims to connect the first one million homes and businesses with gigabit speed broadband in the hardest to reach 20% of the UK by 2025. Gigabit-capable broadband connections offer the fastest and most reliable speeds currently available. Connections will enable and create a range of social benefits alongside boosting jobs and economic growth over the coming decades, and help improve connection and opportunities, especially for rural communities. It is hoped the rollout will give people the freedom to live and work more flexibly.

The scheme will use a broad range of interventions to deliver gigabit broadband, including contracts for new publicly funded infrastructure, use of broadband vouchers and other innovative solutions to deliver the roll out.

Leader of Suffolk County Council, Cllr. Matthew Hicks said:

“I welcome the announcement from Government that Suffolk is going to be included in the first phase of the Government's UK Gigabit Programme, with the aim of deployments starting by the end of 2022. Suffolk has always been at the forefront of implementing Better Broadband with coverage of Superfast Broadband speeds approaching 98% of premises; a new LoRaWAN Innovation Network and the recent announcement of the Port of Felixstowe as a national 5G pilot. This announcement will maintain the momentum we have

established under the Better Broadband for Suffolk Programme, improving Broadband across the county, with the third phase of our programme due to complete before the end of 2022.

"We're ready for this exciting new stage of our connectivity journey, bringing full fibre to everyone's front door and look forward to working with Central Government on the delivery of this vital national infrastructure in Suffolk."

Lowestoft's Gull Wing officially marks the start of construction

The start of construction work on Lowestoft's Gull Wing was formally marked on March 22.

The start of construction work on Lowestoft's Gull Wing was formally marked on March 22, despite officials not being able to host a traditional groundbreaking ceremony at the site, due to Covid lockdown restrictions.

Instead, a video featuring a range of people involved with the scheme has been released, including Jack and Hayden, former Somerleyton Primary School pupils who won the schools competition to give the Gull Wing its name.

In the video, a number of facts about the Gull Wing are revealed, such as how long it will take to open when ships need to pass underneath, and how many tonnes of concrete will be used during construction.

Councillor Matthew Hicks, leader of Suffolk County Council, said:

"We have achieved many milestones in recent months, and I'm delighted that we can now formally recognise the beginning of the construction works for the Gull Wing. The last couple of months have seen lots of preparation work going on behind the scenes, but contractors are now beginning to work on site and hoardings are going up.

"Of course, building such a large and complex structure will require us to temporarily close some roads and alter how people are used to moving around the town, at various points in the next couple of years. But I ask local residents and businesses to be patient and work with us, and to look towards the end result which will bring so many benefits and much improved access around the town."

Peter Aldous, MP for Waveney, said:

“This nationally significant project is now a reality and it will be great to visit the site as soon as it is safe to do so under lockdown restrictions. Special thanks are due to all those who have worked so hard to get us to this stage. The Gull Wing provides many exciting economic opportunities for Lowestoft and the surrounding area and we must now do all that we can to make them happen.”

Success following £500k boost for highways improvements near schools

It was announced on March 23 that locations around schools across Suffolk have benefitted from new road markings and signs, following £500,000 Highways Investment Fund (HIF) cash boost.

The extra funding, which was announced by Councillor Andrew Reid, cabinet member with responsibility for highways during his speech at February 2020’s full council meeting has been focussed on improving the safety of pupils and parents travelling to and from school, refreshing lines and cleaning and repairing signs in and around school zones.

Following inspection of the condition of road lining and signs in the vicinity of every school in Suffolk, 146 locations were identified as requiring new signs to replace those that were damaged or missing. Additionally, 218 areas with faded road markings are receiving a refresh.

Sign cleaning and light vegetation works have also been carried out where it was required.

Councillor Andrew Reid, Suffolk County Council’s Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs, said:

“I am delighted with the progress that’s been made to date to refresh and renew signs and lines around our schools in Suffolk, as well as carrying out low-level maintenance and improvement works such as vegetation clearance.

“As county councillors, we receive a lot of feedback from local parish and town councils related to faded road markings and dirty or broken signs – so the cash boost in this regard has been very welcome.

“To ensure we use every last penny of the funding, we are looking to spend the remaining budget on cycle lane road markings outside of, and on routes to local schools. Those areas that are in need of attention are currently being identified and a programme of work to address these is being developed.”

As of March 2021, almost all sign-related works have been completed. Road markings are being refreshed continuously and it is hoped that the project will be finished in its entirety by the end of April 2021.

100,000 trees planted as part of ambitious council scheme

On March 23 it was announced that 100,000 trees had been planted in just five months, since Suffolk County Council committed £228,000 from its Suffolk 2020 Fund to protect biodiversity.

Located in the Little and Great Waldingfield area, the 100,000th tree, a field maple, is part of 6.4 miles of new hedgerow which the council has planted across a number of its farm holdings.

The council has been working closely with the farm tenants, The Woodland Trust, Giles Landscapes, The Suffolk Tree Warden Initiative and local communities to ensure that a total of 102,586 saplings have been distributed and planted in the best possible places available over this last winter.

Councillor Richard Rout, Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection at Suffolk County Council, said:

“Planting trees and restoring hedgerows on this scale, in such a short time period is an incredible achievement, particularly with the COVID-19 restrictions. The planting has taken place at a rate of nearly 4,500 each week.

“As part of this project, we are working with partners to ensure that these new plantings are managed and supported so that they can thrive for years to come. My genuine thanks go out to all who have been involved in making this happen – it’s been a real team effort and shows how nature can be given a chance to flourish when we work together.

“I hope that communities of insects, animals and birds will benefit from all this activity, which in turn will benefit our local communities. Although this will contribute to offsetting some of the council’s carbon emissions, our aim is still to eliminate emissions completely where we can as part of our commitment to our climate emergency declaration.”

Hedgerows are important features of Suffolk’s agricultural landscape, providing a habitat for many species and ‘corridors’ for wildlife to move through them. All the planting stock being used is UK sourced and grown to reduce plant health risks and improve biosecurity.

Local straw mulch is being used to reduce competition from weeds and to help retain moisture as the hedges become established. The tenant farmers will continue to maintain the hedgerows located on their land.

Automatic number plate recognition cameras to be installed in villages across Suffolk

An announcement on March 24 noted that Suffolk County Council and Suffolk's Police and Crime Commissioner and Suffolk Constabulary, has launched the use of Automatic Number Plate Recognition cameras.

The Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras are being used to help detect and deter speeding offences that have been highlighted in Suffolk villages, and educate drivers on the importance of road safety.

An ANPR camera will be installed at a site where it has been identified by a parish council, with support from their county councillor, there is a problem with speeding and / or rat running on roads with a 20 or 30mph speed limit.

An ANPR camera will identify a speeding vehicle by capturing an image of the number plate of the vehicle. Data will then be shared with the Police and the County Council. The County Council will write to the owner of the vehicle on behalf of both parties explaining that their vehicle has been registered as speeding. Repeat offences at a particular location could prompt the deployment of speed enforcement vans and subsequent fines to those who breach the speed limit.

Ten ANPR cameras will be purchased and each one will remain in situ for up to one week per site. There is the option of extending this period if needed.

The project has received funding from the Suffolk 2020 Fund, which is a programme of work all about investing in community projects and improving Suffolk for all residents now and in years to come. The funding secures the ANPR project for a two year pilot where its impact to reduce speeding will be monitored before it receives a further financial commitment.

Councillor Andrew Reid, Suffolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs and Chair of the Suffolk Roadsafe Partnership, said:

"The use of ANPR technology is both innovative and necessary in our quest to educate drivers by detecting and deterring speeding in key hot spots across the county.

"I'm pleased that the Suffolk 2020 Fund was able to support this project. It will bring improvements to many Suffolk communities. I look forward to seeing the project develop."

Suffolk's Police and Crime Commissioner, Tim Passmore said:

"I welcome the county council's initiative to improve road safety in the county.

"Keeping speeds down in villages is of continuing concern for all of us and the mobile ANPR systems will make a worthwhile contribution to road safety, complementing the existing Community Speed Watch initiative.

“I’m pleased that the Constabulary is able to support the county council in this project and look forward to monitoring its impact as it’s rolled out across the county.”

Healing woods and spaces to play an important role in Suffolk’s mental health

On March 24 it was announced that 90% of respondents strongly support the idea of establishing ‘healing woods’ in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The creation of healing woods and spaces will give more people better access to the natural environment, offering dedicated places for peaceful reflection and offering a positive focus.

Two in every three respondents to the survey, said that the pandemic had negatively impacted on their mental health and wellbeing.

The council’s healing woods project connects with the motion unanimously passed by the county’s councillors (18 March 2021), to commit to developing mental health support in Suffolk.

Since the survey, officers have been contacting organisations who expressed an interest in supporting the scheme, and the council is now appealing for communities to suggest sites where healing woods and spaces could be adopted or created. Suggestions can be made by contacting HealingWoods@suffolk.gov.uk.

Councillor Richard Rout, Cabinet Member for Environment and Public Protection at Suffolk County Council, said:

“We’ve now had initial discussions with some potential sites, which could see the adopting of existing woodland and green spaces, or the creation of brand new sites. Now that we have a better understanding of what is important to achieve, we would like to hear from more local communities about where healing woods and spaces could be located in their area.”

“I’m incredibly grateful to the 500+ people who responded to the survey, and to organisations who want to be involved. They have really helped shape our thinking and developed the idea of improving everyone’s access to nature in Suffolk and the benefits that brings.

“Following the survey, it’s become apparent that giving people access to nature is what is important, and of course there are already many places where people can do this, and many organisations who help make that happen. So we are now working with these organisations to identify where best to establish healing woods and spaces, but also to understand why people may not feel that they can access nature, and resolve that.”

Although the idea of healing woods and spaces has been in response to the pandemic, they will leave a long-lasting, positive legacy for communities and allow people to benefit from nature for many different reasons.

New research recently published by the University of Essex with The Green Light Trust demonstrated that access to woodlands and green space can significantly improve people's wellbeing.

One shining example of how access to the natural environment is helping people, is The Green Light Trust's project at Castan Wood in Martlesham. The woods are on land owned by Suffolk County Council, but leased to the Trust as a safe and secure setting where educational courses and wellbeing support can take place, often working with vulnerable people. Over 200 adults and around 80 children benefit each year through organised programmes at the site.