

District Councillor Report – Harry Richardson

3rd January 2025

<p>Local government reform</p>	<p>Following the publication of the government's devolution white paper in December, Suffolk County Council are now meeting on Thursday 9th January to decide whether to submit an expression of interest to join the government's 'Devolution Priority Programme'. The Conservative Group, who hold a majority on the Council, are supportive of this position and so this is likely to go ahead.</p> <p>The submission deadline is Friday 10th January, and the government is expected to make a decision in mid-February on whether to approve applications for the priority programme. Those that are approved will see County Council elections postponed from May 2025, with elections to the new unitary authorities in May 2026.</p> <p>For Suffolk, there are three main options being considered, in descending order of likelihood: a single, Suffolk-wide authority; two Suffolk-wide authorities (East and West); and one urban authority concentrated in and around Ipswich, with another covering the remainder of the county.</p> <p>The third is the least likely to materialise as Ipswich's wider population, i.e. including Kesgrave, is smaller (~circa 180k) than the government's intended minimum of 500k for a unitary authority. For context, the total population of Suffolk is approximately 768k as of the 2021 census, so either of the first two options are plausible.</p> <p>In either scenario, and if the plans do proceed, then Mid Suffolk District Council would be abolished in May 2026 and its statutory responsibilities transferred to the new unitary authority.</p>
<p>Thurston station upgrades</p>	<p>At MSDC's Cabinet meeting in December, Network Rail were awarded £6k to progress the steps of the Thurston rail improvements and level crossing project. This will allow them to complete the pre-ES3 stage works, and to develop a cost and programme for the ES3 phase which will confirm the final option chosen of a suitable crossing at this Station.</p> <p>Although this is only a relatively small sum of money, it is a necessary part to progress to ES3 stage.</p>
<p>Skills & Innovation Centre</p>	<p>Planning permission has been granted for MSDC's Skills and Innovation Centre at the Gateway 14 site in Stowmarket. This will be a three-storey, 35,000 sq. ft facility and will include office space for high growth start-ups, collaboration and innovation spaces, training and meeting rooms, and a café.</p> <p>Freeport East agreed £16.6m funding for the centre earlier this year, with Mid Suffolk District Council meeting the remaining cost of £2.4m.</p>



<p>Suffolk Economic Strategy</p>	<p>The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders Group, which includes Mid Suffolk District Council, has endorsed a Suffolk Economy Strategy.</p> <p>The strategy was developed by the Suffolk Business Board through extensive collaboration and consultation with key stakeholders and aims to build a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable economy that supports local communities and contributes to the national economy.</p> <p>It is also designed to leverage Suffolk's strengths in clean energy, agri-food, and logistics, integrating these core sectors with emerging opportunities in technology and innovation. The hope is to establish Suffolk as an epicentre of clean technology convergence, supporting robust economic growth while ensuring that every resident can benefit.</p>
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