

Report for Lavenham Parish Council by Robert Lindsay, Suffolk County Councillor 6 July 2023

Water Street

I have seen the results of the trial removal of signs. They show an increase in “conflicts” - queues and vehicles having to reverse - but unfortunately the trial occurred during a diversion which massively increased traffic on Water Street, compared with the “before” survey. A higher volume of traffic is more likely to generate queues and conflicts. Also a large proportion of the conflicts were to do with parked cars, which would imply that they are not related to whether or not there are signs. One car parked on a yellow line close to the Barn Street build out where the road is narrow can create a bit of havoc regardless of signs. To my mind the data from the survey tells us little. Residents’ observations may be useful but aside from initial complaints when the signs were first removed – which are to be expected – there have been few further formal complaints that I am aware of. If removal of the signs is not making a huge difference, it is worth doing both for aesthetic and economic reasons – since making the temporary build outs permanent will be much cheaper without signs.

20mph

Lavenham’s 20mph scheme design is out for consultation. I have already said that although it does not cover every road in the village as I would like, it is probably the best we can get from Highways – given the council’s current restrictive policy on 20mph speed limits. These criteria insist that lots of money is spent on kerb build outs in areas that do not comply with their strict criteria about average speeds. So wider 20mph would need more money from the community. As a rough idea, the Bildeston 20mph scheme is going to cost £28k with just signs and no build outs (plus £8k design costs). NB the Lavenham scheme will not begin before the highways contractor Kier ends its contract on 1 October but the hope is that the project management will remain with the same Kier employee who will be transferred to the new contractor.

Libraries funding

Back in February, the Green, LibDem and Independent group on Suffolk County council proposed amendments to the administration’s budget that would allow some extra finance for the county’s libraries. This was rejected by the Conservatives because they said it was unnecessary. However the cabinet has now agreed to find £960,000 from the council’s reserves to plug a funding deficit within the library service until the expiry of the current contract with the service in July 2024. There is as yet no plan as to how libraries will be funded after that.

Coping with growing water demand as climate change strikes

There have been mounting warnings about our water supply and the health of our rivers in Suffolk as climate change makes rainfall less predictable and as more and more housing, agricultural and industrial development increases demand.

Water Resources East stated in Nov 2022 “Unless action is taken, increasing water scarcity will constrain agricultural production and curtail economic and housing development, impacting the region’s future prosperity and endangering the East’s iconic chalk rivers, peatlands and wetlands.”

Essex and Suffolk Water is currently consulting on a proposal for a moratorium on mains connections for new businesses until 2032 in the Hartismere area of north Suffolk. The water company objected to a recent application for new chicken sheds because it said it had no more capacity to supply extra water.

This month (16th May) the cabinet agreed to a new policy to guide its response to applications for reservoirs and desalination plants. The council’s officers said developers needed to see that the council had a clear position in relation to water and “climate adaptive infrastructure projects”.

My political group is concerned that building desalination plants will add to climate emissions and accelerate the problem. We believe a better way of tackling this issue is reducing water demand, rather than trying to boost supply.

Votes fill potholes!

The Conservative county council leader used the council’s annual meeting following local elections in which Conservatives lost control of four district councils across Suffolk, to admit that the council need to do more. He announced that they were spending an extra £10 million over the next 20 months, to try to fix potholes in side roads, outside the A and B category roads. We have been told by officers that this money for maintenance is likely to be borrowed. The current annual roads maintenance budget, agreed with new contractor Milestone which begins work on 1st October, is just £11 million. It appears that this is a one off announcement made in response to what Conservatives heard on the doorstep in local district council elections. However, while welcome news, our political group is concerned that a sticking plaster approach of occasional announcements will not be enough to address a continuing problem beyond 20 months.

Bildeston Food bank

The Bildeston food bank is a useful barometer of local need and the cost of living crisis. It is currently looking after a record 35 families - that's 103 people, 42 of them are under 16. Donations by individuals are down approx. 75%. They are receiving support from financial donations, the three local shops on our patch (Hitcham, Bildeston and Monks Eleigh Community Shop), Morrisons and Suffolk County Council. They delivered 500ltrs of heating oil to 14 families last winter and expect to do similar this coming winter.

It is now working in partnership with Social Services, Adult Social Care, Child Social Care and other agencies.