

## Devolution

Just before Christmas, the government put out a plan for local government reorganisation and restructuring that has sent the entirety of Suffolk and Norfolk into a spin, along with many other parts of the UK. Proposals include elected mayors for large areas (in our case Norfolk and Suffolk together) and unitary authorities that combine the functions of District and County councils, and eliminate the layer of representation that is currently district councillors. Since these are the people closest to the actual places you live, and elected to serve small groups of villages rather than large areas, this seems a way of taking power away from local places and centralising it in large authorities, rather than real devolution.

There is an option for councils who are keen to progress these changes quickly to apply for a fast-track restructure, including postponing this year's May elections so that new councillors could be elected for the new authorities once the new structure has been approved. Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils are holding emergency meetings this coming week to discuss whether to apply for this fast track process. I shall be opposing that idea, since I believe that we should not extend the time of people elected four years ago, and prevent the people from electing the representatives they want now. The people elected four years ago do not have a mandate to make these massive changes for Suffolk and Norfolk. People need to have a say in what happens, and that is best done by having elections.

If the Council votes to request the fast track system, it is not particularly likely that the government will say yes, since we are so far from even beginning to work out what the new local government unitary authorities would be like. The discussions will clearly take some years to reach any conclusion, and then there are many practical difficulties about actually transferring the staff and offices etc.

We shall know what the Council votes to request, on the 9<sup>th</sup> January, but we shan't know what the government says about it till later.

## Buses

Norfolk has just received an allocation of £15.9m for one year (2025-2026) to improve local bus transport. The funding allocation is split £7.4m capital and £8.5m revenue. This comes on top of the £49.5m we won for 2022-2025 (the highest award of any non-metropolitan authority).

With the original allocation our officers worked closely with bus operators. These are what they did:

- Introduced new services, added evening & Sunday services, increased frequency of buses;
- Built new improved waiting areas – gold stops and travel hubs;
- Introduced more real-time information screens at stops and a QR board at every stop;
- Introduced a £1.50 fare cap in King's Lynn, Thetford and Gt Yarmouth and a 25% discount on weekly, monthly and group tickets;
- Introduced bus priority measures like bus lanes and junction improvements.

Together with the DfT's £2 bus fare cap (now sadly rising to £3), Norfolk has achieved a 16% increase in passenger journeys over the last year. Passenger satisfaction has gone up to 87% (from 78% in 2023). We've got some fantastic new electric buses which are quiet and clean and with superb passenger information. Norfolk is doing better at all this than most places nationally.

The new £15.9m allocation will allow officers to plan for more of this, but since it is only a year's allocation we need to spend it on things that can be delivered by March 2026 and the money going into revenue initiatives (e.g. more frequent buses) would either need to be sustainable after March 2026 or we'll need to find other funding to keep them going.

Council officers would like to hear our ideas on what would help with encouraging you and other local people to use the bus and make it easy to do so – is it evening services, better waiting areas, more bus priority measures for example? They need to build our delivery plan to send to the DfT by the end of March 2025. I'd like to hear your suggestions by the last week of January.

One suggestion we made recently was that all rural bus stops should have a few cycle racks nearby to help you get to and from the outlying hamlets that aren't on the bus routes and leave your bike safely. Bus shelters combined with cycle parking might be good for young people going to school and college. Later buses home so that workers can return after a day's work in Norwich would be useful. Parking provision at Long Stratton to enable people to park and ride has also been suggested by some parishes.

Please think about what would make you try the buses and what for, and let me know what would help and what stops you doing that at present!

## Health

Public Health's annual Ready to Change campaign launched on 30 December, to encourage Norfolk residents to sign up to a 30-day health challenge. There is a simple online self-help tool using behaviour change science to support improvements to health.

You can choose a challenge from this list of five:

- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Eating healthily
- Being more active
- Drinking less
- Quitting smoking

For 30 days you get email updates full of expert advice, guidance and support to help you reach your goal. Once you've completed your challenge, you're encouraged to maintain the healthy lifestyle longer term. The tool is available throughout the year.

Ready for a new you in 2025? Sign up at [www.readytochange.co.uk](http://www.readytochange.co.uk).

## Info from Central Government

Bird Flu (avian influenza) government update, new cases in Norfolk

A rising number of cases of bird flu have been identified in Norfolk. Guidance on how to prevent it and stop it spreading is available [here](#).

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*3<sup>rd</sup> January 2025*