

## **COUNTY COUNCILLOR REPORT MARCH 2026**

### **Government decision on county council elections**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> January, the Government announced that it had decided that this May's county council elections would not go ahead, so that the council could focus on local government reorganisation and devolution. This accompanies their decision to cancel the Mayoral Elections scheduled for May as well.

That decision on the elections to the County Council has been reversed meaning that elections in all 84 divisions will now take place on 7 May. At the moment there is no change to the decision to move the Mayoral Elections to May 2028.

This has placed the County Council in a difficult position as having consented to a statutory instrument last October to bring in devolution, it will now be asked to consent to a revised statutory instrument but right in the period just before all out elections take place. No further information has been forthcoming.

### **Local Government Reorganisation**

Government's "minded to" decision on the shape of local government in Norfolk is due to be announced in March. Exactly when no body knows so everyone is very much in the dark about what will happen next.

### **Future of care homes**

A company that runs good and outstanding care facilities is interested in buying Norfolk County Council's care company and 20 homes.

The council launched a review of its care estate last year, as its contract with Norse Care Ltd was due to end in March 2026.

Since the contract started in 2011, people's care needs have become more complex and most of the 20 care homes now require modernisation. Three of the homes have closed already but are being included in the proposed sale.

An "in principle agreement" has been reached but there is still considerable work to be done before Norfolk County Council agrees to a final deal with Stow Healthcare. Residents of the homes would continue to live there, and existing Norse Care staff would move to the new owner. Given that Springdale is part of the portfolio of homes within this contract it is expected that Stow will commit to re-opening it as a modernised care facility.

### **Budget 2026/27**

At its meeting on 17 February the County Council agreed its budget for 2026/27. With over a £2bn spend each year in revenue and capital the budget and spending plans are

complex. The Council Tax increase was agreed at 4.99%. That rate of increase was basically mandated by the Government in its grants to councils where it required councils to put council tax up by 5% as part of what is called their total spending power.

A summary of major infrastructure projects is attached.

### **Norfolk's bus service improvements deliver record growth and faster journeys**

Norfolk County Council's ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) has transformed public transport across the county, driving a 26% increase in passenger numbers since 2022 and making Norfolk a leading national example for sustainable travel.

A paper discussed at the council's Infrastructure and Development Committee on 22<sup>nd</sup> January highlights what has been delivered thanks to the £65.45 million secured for Norfolk from the Department for Transport. That includes;

- New and enhanced bus services on more than 44 routes across Norfolk, including more evening and Sunday services
- Affordable fares: capped single fares in key towns and multi-operator ticketing
- Greener fleet: 75 zero-emission buses in Norwich and 24 more electric buses coming in 2026
- Improved passenger experience: real-time information, safer waiting areas, next-stop announcements and real-time information on more buses.

Not only are we seeing record-setting and increasing numbers of passengers but customer satisfaction has also risen to 87%, bucking national trends and reinforcing Norfolk's approach to improvements in bus travel across the county.

### **Norfolk gritting vehicles have been heading out over winter season**

Norfolk County Council's winter gritting is well underway, with gritters active on A/B roads, key bus routes, and village access roads, using new tech for efficiency. The first runs of the recent winter season (late 2025/early 2026) started as temperatures dropped, utilizing the 58-strong fleet with automated salting to cover 2,200 miles of routes, supported by stocked salt barns and public grit bins.

Updates are posted on their social media using #NorfolkWinter, with a dedicated website for info, and recent campaigns even involved naming the gritters. Residents can also check this year's gritting routes using the online map on the council's website

(<https://maps.norfolk.gov.uk/highways/maps/gritting.aspx>)

If you'd want to report any gritting issues please contact the Report a Highways Problem section on the Norfolk County Council website

(<https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/article/63696/Report-a-highways-problem>)

## **Norfolk County Council Responds to Growing Pressures on SEND Services**

Norfolk County Council continues to work tirelessly to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), despite growing demand and sustained pressure on local services. The Council remains committed to improving outcomes for families, investing in local provision and working with schools, health partners and parents to meet increasingly complex needs.

However, the scale of the challenge facing SEND services is being driven by national policy decisions and long-standing underfunding. Successive Governments have expanded statutory duties on councils without providing the funding or system reform needed to deliver them sustainably. As a result, local authorities like Norfolk are left managing rising demand, workforce shortages and significant financial risk, while responsibility for fixing a broken national SEND system is effectively pushed down to the local level.

Norfolk County Council has repeatedly called for meaningful reform and fair, long-term funding to address the root causes of the SEND crisis. Without decisive action from Government, councils will continue to be placed in an impossible position, expected to deliver for families while operating within a system that is not fit for purpose.

## **Every 1p Rise in National Living Wage Costs Norfolk Council's Adult Social Care £300,000**

Norfolk County Council's Adult Social Services face significant and immediate cost pressures from changes to the National Living Wage, with every 1p increase adding around **£300,000** to the council's annual costs. These rising costs reflect the council's responsibility to fund care for some of the county's most vulnerable residents, where staffing makes up the largest proportion of provider expenditure.

While fair pay for care workers is essential and strongly supported, the scale and speed of national wage increases continue to place major financial strain on local authorities. Without matching increases in Government funding, councils are left to absorb these costs within already stretched budgets, reducing flexibility and increasing pressure on services at a time of growing demand.

## **15% uplift to foster carer pay proposed in transformation programme for council foster carers**

Foster carers in Norfolk are set to benefit from a 15% uplift in their pay, as Norfolk County Council looks to invest £1.5m annually in its fostering service in a bid to support more children in care to live with families.

Norfolk's Cabinet met on Monday 26<sup>th</sup> January to discuss the proposal, which is part of a three-year transformation programme aimed at recognising the contribution of foster carers and the vital role they play in supporting children in care to flourish.

The proposals include:

- A 15% uplift in fees for mainstream and kinship carers
- Additional uplifts for mainstream carers looking after children aged 10 and older
- Greater rewards for long service
- An expanded therapeutic support team
- Enhanced practical support

The proposals follow extensive engagement with carers as part of efforts to improve support and recruit more carers.

There is a national shortage of foster carers, including in Norfolk where there are several children currently living in residential care who could thrive with a fostering family. Research shows that living in a family environment is less traumatic and results in a much better outcome for a child in care. It also reduces costs for the local authority. A residential care placement in Norfolk costs nearly £300,000 per year, compared with £45,000 per year for a foster home. An average of 5 children per week come into care in Norfolk.

### **Council to consider additional investment of £35m in Independent Living Programme**

Norfolk County Council is considering investing a further £35 million towards its Independent Living Housing Programme.

Since its launch in November 2018, the programme has contributed capital funding towards 603 high-quality, modern apartments designed for people aged 55 and over who want to stay independent in their local communities in later life.

Rising construction costs and new regulatory requirements have impacted delivery within the original £29 million capital budget. To enable delivery of the remaining 532 homes by the programme, Cabinet is being asked to approve the additional funding. These homes will help save the council money every year by avoiding the need for people to move into residential care.

Identified demand for Independent Living housing in Norfolk reflects the ageing population, increasing prevalence of disability, and the growing number of residents wanting more independence in later life and seeking alternatives to traditional residential care.

## **Body worn cameras aid safety in Norfolk**

Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) has rolled out 160 new Axon body-worn cameras across stations in Norfolk to help improve safety and decision-making at incidents. Cameras have been issued to all fire appliances and operational officers, as well as to protection and prevention teams, fire investigation officers, the training school, and Trading Standards officers.

The Axon devices provide live streaming, location data and two-way communication, allowing footage to be shared in real time with control room staff during emergency incidents. This supports quicker, better-informed decisions, improves firefighter safety by identifying risks earlier, and helps coordinate responses with partner agencies.

The cameras were introduced in December and have already recorded nearly 100 hours of footage across more than 500 video clips.

## 1. Record Investment in Norfolk's Infrastructure

- The Council is delivering a **£1bn capital programme**, ensuring long-term investment in roads, schools, transport and resilience across all districts.
  - This is one of the **largest infrastructure programmes in the Council's history**, focused on growth, connectivity and public safety.
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## 2. Major Highways Projects Transforming Communities

The Council is also delivering the big, long-awaited schemes that unlock housing, cut congestion and boost the local economy:

### Long Stratton Bypass – £36m+

- Fully funded delivery phase underway, removing a notorious bottleneck and unlocking **1,800 homes and jobs**.

### West Winch Housing Access Road – £68m+

- A new strategic route supporting the **4,000-home** development and relieving pressure on the A10 corridor into King's Lynn.

## 3. Investment in Local Roads & Safety

- **Multi year Department for Transport funding**, providing stability for highways planning.
  - Over **£57m–£72m per year** invested in resurfacing, bridge maintenance, flooding and drainage improvements.
  - Targeted local safety schemes reducing collisions and improving pedestrian and cyclist safety.
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## 4. Better Buses, Better Hubs, Better Connectivity

Significant upgrades to support rural connectivity and market towns:

- **Diss Travel Hub – £585k**
- **Hunstanton Travel Hub – £230k**
- **£1.7m investment in Market Town Transport Hubs**
- **£300k refurbishment of Norwich Park & Ride**
- Over £49m from the Bus Service Improvement Plan improving reliability, affordability and accessibility.

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## 5. Investment in Active Travel & Walking/Cycling Networks

- Annual cycling investment rising up to **£4.4m per year**.
- Walking improvements and new crossings receiving **£1.9m–£3m per year**.
- Commitment to safer, greener, healthier routes in every district.

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## 6. Supporting Rail Accessibility

- Investment secured for step-free access and station improvements in: **Diss, North Walsham, Thetford, Wymondham** — providing safer, more accessible rail connections.

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## 7. Backing Growth and Jobs Across Norfolk

- Infrastructure programme directly supports Norfolk's growth corridors:
  - **A10/West Norfolk**
  - **Greater Norwich**
  - **A140/South Norfolk**
  - **East Coast regeneration**
- Enables new employment sites, housing delivery, and inward investment.

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## 8. Investing in Children's Future: New SEND Schools

- Government-funded capital securing **new SEND schools in Downham Market and Great Yarmouth**, part of over **1,000 new specialist places**.
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