

DRAFT MINUTES OF THE WOOLPIT ANNUAL PARISH MEETING HELD ON
TUESDAY 21 APRIL 2026 AT 7.00 P.M. IN WOOLPIT INSTITUTE

Present: Dr Geake (Chair), County Cllr Mellen and 21 members of the public.

1. **Apologies for absence** were received from District Cllrs Mansel and Overett and Mrs Hammond.

2. **Minutes** of the 2025 Annual Parish Meeting having been circulated were approved and signed.

3. Parish Council Report, Dr Geake

This is the third year of the four-year parish council term and I would like to thank all the parish councillors for their work on behalf of the village this year. Three councillors stood down during the year (Liz Thomas, Nick Foster and Gayle Jenkins). Thanks go to all of them but particularly to Gayle, who has been on the parish council for eight years and during that time took on responsibility for the allotments, the flowers and plants in the centre of the village, was our liaison with the Good Neighbours scheme (essential during Covid), our rep on the Institute committee and was our main source of expertise on recruiting councillors, healthcare issues, and safeguarding. She has worked, and continues to work, incredibly hard for the good of Woolpit.

We have welcomed as new councillors Hilary Hammond, Bev King and Rebecca Tomlinson; we are still trying to recruit two more new councillors to bring us up to our full strength of nine.

In terms of long-serving parish councillors, particular thanks should also go to Michael Hardiman for his wisdom, experience and hard work over many years. This year he celebrates a significant birthday, and we celebrate his ability to spot what is needed to be done, and to do it, before anyone else has realised there is a problem.

Our parish clerk, Peggy Fuller must also be thanked. She puts into effect the decisions of the parish council, and does all the work to keep everything running smoothly. She also keeps an eye on our legal obligations and her ability and expertise is unparalleled.

I would also like to thank Julia Ewans, who stepped down as volunteer deputy clerk in November after seven years as part of the parish council in various roles including chair. Julia has done an immense amount of work on our behalf bringing the parish council into the 21st century, and she is still working on the website and the Greener Woolpit nature recovery project. Julia has also produced the very necessary update to the Neighbourhood Plan that came out this year, and she's constantly advising on liaison with our solicitors, particularly over property and leases.

And lastly, I would like to thank **all** our volunteers who help with all sorts of things including practical tasks like footpath and tree monitoring, garden maintenance and conservation work.

Now on to what we have been doing over the last year. I will start with Planning; we have commented on 24 planning applications, and passed several complaints to Mid Suffolk's Planning Enforcement team, including lighting at the EG garage,

house types at Bury Road and working hours at the building site behind the school.

Next comes traffic speeds. Our final speed indicator was put up during the year, in Green Road, and our 20mph zone is now in place.

Continuing with transport, both ends of the community path between Elmswell and Woolpit have been built, and money has been allocated by Mid Suffolk District Council to fill in the middle. The County Council are managing the project and using their contractors to design and build it; the detailed design is still being prepared.

We now have a lovely new bus shelter, largely due to the efforts of Michael Hardiman. We have also had discussions with Suffolk County Council about public EV points in the middle of the village and this work is still ongoing.

Another of our responsibilities is to make grants from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Developers pay this levy on all new house building in the village; most of it goes to the District Council and officially it is “to be spent on projects that deliver the infrastructure needed to support development in their area.” So, this pot is what will be paying for the community path to Elmswell. But a small amount comes to the parish council, and we have used it to make a variety of grants which mitigate the impact of new development:

- Bus shelter
- Woolpit Institute roof and internal works
- Cricket Club nets and internal alterations
- Primary school laptops
- Village Hall urgent refurbishments
- Greener Woolpit nature recovery, wildflower seeding project

After four years, the signs to the new car park behind the Health Centre have finally gone up, so we hope that there will be less traffic in and out of the Heath Road entrance. We also have a new car park sign for the car park opposite the church, and we have worked with Glyn Baker to refurbish the village sign.

We have been negotiating about the public amenity land that will come to us as part of the new Bury Road development. We are currently asking the developers to replace the trees that have died, and we are exploring the possibility of Sporting 87, a football club in Bury, managing a football pitch and running football teams on part of the land in conjunction with Woolpit Cricket Club. We are still hoping that we might be able to have a skate park on the southern end of the land, nearest the village.

The Parish Council also manages the allotments down at Warren Lane, via an ancient charity called **Allotments for the Labouring Poor, Woolpit**. The allotments are all currently let. Behind the allotments, we are encouraging the Greener Woolpit group to manage the former arable field for biodiversity and nature recovery. Still on nature conservation, we have contributed to a Mid Suffolk initiative for spaces that could be used for meadow management rather than turf mowing.

During the year we had a party for the commemoration of VE80, and a film night for the commemoration of VJ80. Many thanks to Nick Foster and Richard West for organising these at a cost of less than £1 per resident.

Lastly, we are about to advertise for an assistant clerk position, ten hours a week.

We pay for all this with a parish precept, which is our little sliver of the council tax you pay. This comes to £1.29 per week for the average Band D household.

4. County Councillor's Report, Andy Mellen

Council Motions

At council meetings throughout the year, my group passed two motions successfully:

- In May 2025, we proposed that the council ban the giving of prizes on council owned land and writes to the government requesting an outright ban on live animals as prizes on both public and private land. The motion referred to animals intended as pets, and excluded farm animals which may be given as prizes by farmers and farming businesses
- In March 2026, we proposed that following the revelations in the media about the 'Epstein files' and the indication that there would continue to be a high volume of press coverage on the subject, that the council release a statement of support for victims of sexual harm and exploitation, and launch a social media campaign so that survivors in Suffolk would know where they can access local advice and support via Ipswich charity Survivors in Transition

My group also proposed several other motions throughout the year which were voted down by the Conservative councillors in the chamber:

- In March 2025, we proposed that Suffolk County Council gain accreditation as a 'Council of Sanctuary' to welcome refugees and displaced people, ensure that services work together to provide support to them, and to establish more 'Schools of Sanctuary' in the county to teach children why people come to UK and how to treat them with kindness and empathy. Currently there is only one school of sanctuary in Suffolk, whereas Norfolk has thirteen. This was voted down by the Conservative councillors on the basis that this would create extra cost for the council
- In July 2025, we proposed that the council change its procedures to make it easier and simpler for residents and communities to adopt safer speed limits, including 20mph speed limits. The Conservative administration rejected the motion on the grounds that it was preparing a review of this process already (see details below)
- In December 2025, my group tabled a motion proposing that the council recognise the Rights of Rivers in Suffolk, including to be protected from pollution, to flow freely, and to recover from environmental harm, and that the council should work with districts, boroughs, local communities and national agencies such as the Environment Agency and water companies to advocate for healthy rivers and improved water quality. The administration voted this down on the basis that rivers flowing freely suggested that flooding should be enabled, which was not really what the motion was proposing.

Local Government Reorganisation

This year has seen a number of developments in terms of council structure and plans for the future. Following the announcement of Local Government Reorganisation in December 2024, councils in Suffolk had to submit plans to the government in September 2025 stating how many unitary councils should be set up in Suffolk after county councils, district and borough councils are dissolved in 2028. This means that the services provided by different councils in Suffolk would all be provided by one council for a specific area. Suffolk County Council submitted a proposal to the government for one unitary council for the whole of Suffolk via their 'One Suffolk' campaign. District and borough councils in Suffolk worked together to agree a proposal for three unitary councils in Suffolk: Western Suffolk, Central and Eastern Suffolk and Ipswich and Southern Suffolk, which includes the county town and Felixstowe. At the end of March 2026, the government announced that this was the option they wanted to go forward with. The next step will be for elections to the new councils, which will be held in May 2027. The new councillors will then 'shadow' existing councillors for a year until the new authorities are 'vested' from 1 April 2028.

Devolution and the Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral Authority

Concurrently with rearranging the councils is the process of devolution in the region. The government announced in December 2024 that a mayoral authority would be set up for Norfolk and Suffolk, with mayoral elections held in May 2026. The mayor and mayoral authority would have responsibility for strategic planning, transport and economic growth for the region and would include some members from local councils, but with the mayor having the deciding vote on decisions. In December 2024, the government announced that the mayoral elections would be delayed until May 2028. Following the announcement in February 2026 that the county council elections in May 2026 were back on, the leader of Norfolk County Council announced publicly that devolution was 'off' in Norfolk. However, the reinstated county council election means it may be a completely different set of politicians in Norfolk and Suffolk taking this forward. Currently, the plan is for the mayor to be elected in May 2028 and everyone in Norfolk and Suffolk will have a chance to vote.

Libraries Brought Back in House

Following last year's report, the county's library service was brought back in-house at Suffolk County Council from 1 June 2025. Cabinet agreed to put aside £1.8m for the transition period, with the service expected to be back within budget by the second year. As at December 2025 it had spent £0.6m of this fund, with most of the remaining funds already committed. Since taking the service back into SCC, the council has also undertaken a restructure in the libraries 'central team' which has made savings of £340k per annum in staff redundancies. Front line staffing and volunteering numbers remain the same, with most library users stating when surveyed that they had not noticed a difference in the service provided. Library 'Friends' groups continue as normal, with all funds raised by the Friends being used to benefit their local branch. Those working in libraries have had to undertake the annual training modules which all Suffolk County Council employees have to complete, and also learn how to use the council's HR and finance processes, which is a lot of change initially. In addition, although the council initially honoured all terms and

conditions of employment, from April 2026 employment terms and pay will be harmonised with council standards and pay scales. The transition was reviewed at Scrutiny Committee in March 2026 and during the meeting the libraries team also laid out their volunteer recruitment plan and governance systems for the new service (how it will be overseen). The library service is now part of the council's Public Health and Communities directorate with oversight from the Suffolk Community Libraries Strategic Group which has members from the council and the libraries service.

Council Budget 2026-27

In February 2026, the council set out and voted on its budget for the coming financial year, including its intention to take the maximum 4.99% increase in council tax. Even raising council tax to the maximum, it will still have a budget 'gap' of £5.9m this year which it will have to fund from council reserves. It set a £46.5m target for savings across the council, with more planned in further years to keep the council financially sustainable. The main cost pressures are for social care in adults and children's services, which the council has to provide by law whatever the cost. Future savings will need to be made to service the council's predicted budget gap for 2027-28, which it estimates will be £23.4m.

The council also has an enormous debt for provision of services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities held under the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). This is described as a 'negative reserve' as the council is allowed to hold the debt, with the government recently providing an override for it until the end of March 2028 and an agreement to fund 90% of each council's DSG debt later this year. This will still leave the council with many millions of DSG debt though, and it will keep rising until the council is dissolved in 2028. The council predicts that its DSG deficit will be -£356.4m by 31 March 2028. It also spends millions on interest costs for the DSG debt which affects the council's borrowing ability and its financial resilience.

The government hopes that the spiralling costs for councils everywhere will be mitigated by the Local Government Reorganisation process. This means that from 2028 there will only be three councils in Suffolk to fund rather than six.

Net Zero Financial Savings

In January 2026, the annual Net Zero Carbon Budget report was brought to Cabinet to assess the progress of the council towards its carbon reduction goals. Previously the council had an ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030, although as the council will cease to exist in 2028 it has adjusted its target to 63% of carbon emissions by 2027-28. The Cabinet agreed that any new measures for carbon reduction during the remainder of this term would have to provide in-year financial savings for the council to be considered. The council's Net Zero work has so far provided £4.8m of savings by reducing electricity and gas use, which is incredibly important at a time when the council is struggling to remain financially resilient. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountability, which is the UK professional body for accountants in the public sector, judges that a council has healthy financial reserves if the amount in its Unallocated Reserves fund is at least five per cent of the year's net expenditure budget, and if the reserve did drop below this threshold, the finance officer for the council (Section 151 Officer) would require remedial action. For 2026-27, five percent of the council's budget is £42.499m, with the amount in Unallocated Reserves

being £44.436m. This means the threshold has been met, but only just: the difference is only £1.937m, which means the £4.8m of savings made by the council's carbon reduction initiatives have been critical for financial survival. In terms of the savings made, these include changes to heating controls in Endeavour House in January and February 2025 where gas use was reduced by over 42% without impacting electricity use, reducing energy costs for the council by £30k each year, and a car park solar array established at Beacon House, comprising three solar canopies with bifacial panels and batteries to capture excess power for use in the building, this is expected to save more than £50k a year.

Suffolk Roads Rated Red by UK Government

As you may have seen in the press, the government recently released RAG (Red, Amber, Green) ratings each county based on how effectively they use the government's highways maintenance funding and the condition of their roads. Suffolk's road maintenance was rated as Red, the worst category. This has struck a chord with residents in the county, who have been clear that they agree and want the quality of Suffolk's roads to improve. Suffolk County Council's administration, however, has denied that the rating is accurate, saying that overall, the condition of Suffolk's roads are rated Amber, with the overall Red rating being arrived at because the Department for Transport did not include in its assessment £10m of highways funding that it brought forward from the 2025-26 financial year and invested early in a resurfacing programme in 2024-25. The council has met with the Department for Transport to press for the Suffolk rating to be raised to Amber, pointing out that Department for Transport data shows that only 3% of the county's A roads is in poor condition, which is better than the England average. In addition, in December the council received £2.9m from the Department for Transport's Incentive Fund, which rewards authorities with a record of good performance in highway maintenance. The wet weather since Christmas has caused a lot of damage to roads in Suffolk and the council has been active on social media to provide updates to residents and information on how they make their decisions on which potholes and defects they prioritize. The council's Highways Maintenance Operational Plan is published on the SCC website and details the size and depth of potholes and the number of days it will take to repair them, based on size and depth. If the council has repaired a defect in line with its published criteria, then claims made for damage to vehicles are not likely to succeed.

New 20mph Policy

You may recall that last summer, my group proposed a motion at council to make it easier and simpler for local communities to reduce speed limits, including 20mph areas. The Conservative administration voted down our plans, claiming that they were already planning to review their processes and would bring this back for agreement at a later date. At Cabinet on Friday 9 January, the new 20mph speed limit policy was tabled and approved and is now in place for speed limit change requests. The aim of the new policy is to make the process for communities to apply for a 20mph speed limit easier and more streamlined. From now on, any application for a new 20mph limit in an area where recorded average traffic speeds are 28mph and under is likely to be approved by the council. The local county councillor must also be in favour of the change, and

there should be majority support from residents. My group pointed out that the new requirement to prove majority support for the new speed limit was likely to make the process more onerous for town and parish councils rather than less, as the new process states that local engagement should be carried out to gauge support, for example a survey or consultation of residents living in the area or along the stretch of road where on the change is proposed. Any new 20mph limits will also still need local funding to be in place, unless the scheme aligns with a council programme as part of the Local Transport Plan. The new policy is based on recording speeds as follows:

- Below 28mph – likely to be accepted, with a speed limit sign only, although signs warning that a 20mph zone is ahead may be required
- Between 28 - 32mph - unlikely to be acceptable with signing alone. Gateway signing and traffic calming throughout the area may be required
- Above 32mph - Unlikely to be acceptable without extensive traffic calming measures such as road humps, plus night-time lighting. It would also be subject to a Road Safety Audit

Suffolk Minerals and Waste Plan

In December 2025, preparation arrangements were agreed at Cabinet for the county's updated Minerals and Waste Plan, which is now five years old and due for renewal. The plan looks at the county's needs and decides what planning measures need to be taken to meet them – for example, aggregates such as sand and gravel which are necessary for housebuilding. As the government has announced high targets for housing in Suffolk, the county will need more of these materials in future. As the Local Government Reorganisation process means that Suffolk County Council will likely not exist by the time the plan is due to be adopted, the decision made by Cabinet was to undertake all the preparatory work for the new plan and gather evidence for it, so that the new authority/ies who have to publish the plan will be well-placed to put it in place later.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy Approved

In September 2025, the council's Cabinet voted to approve the new Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which was produced following a public consultation on the draft strategy between April and June 2025. The strategy is a new requirement for the council, and sets out priority species and habitats for nature conservation in the county, giving advice on how different habitats can be improved by landowners to protect and encourage nature. Most of the area mapped out for Suffolk's nature priorities is private farmland, and the strategy does not make habitat improvement mandatory, but the officers who have produced the strategy will now work with farmers and landowners to support them and work to find investment for the measures outlined in the strategy. Landowners can use areas mapped in the strategy to produce 'units' of biodiversity for purchase by developers, as developers will be required to meet the government's new Biodiversity Net Gain requirements which state that all development should be increase biodiversity by a minimum of 10%. The units of biodiversity do not need to be on the site of or near the development.

The new strategy should also help Suffolk County Council to improve the land it owns in the county, for example County Farms, and local planning authorities will have to take account of the new strategy when development is considered. In the

future, mayoral authorities like the one currently planned for Norfolk and Suffolk will be in charge of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for their area. Following Cabinet approval, the strategy was shared with neighbouring authorities, Natural England and local partners like district and borough councils and the Broads Authority for their feedback.

New Funding for Buses and Sustainable Travel

In June 2025 we heard that the council had been given a grant of £8m from the Department for Transport for improving bus travel in the county during 2025-26, of which £2.8m was for service improvements and £5.2m of capital funding for improving bus stops, priority measures for buses on busy streets or upgrades to vehicles.

In December 2025 we heard that Suffolk had been awarded £27m of funding for bus services from the government's Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG), this can be used for routes, ticketing or improving infrastructure like bus stops and shelters. Previously known as the Bus Services Improvement Grant, communities and parish councils in Suffolk will be able to suggest improvements in their area and 'bid' for funding via the Suffolk on Board website.

The council has also been awarded just over £12m from Active Travel England to promote sustainable travel in the county. This can be used to invest in footpaths, cycle lanes and other infrastructure. Examples of how this funding has been used recently include pedestrian crossings in Bridge Street and College Road by Ipswich waterfront, and improved cycle routes including from Ipswich Hospital to the waterfront area, Nacton Road in Ipswich, Main Road in Martlesham, and within Woodbridge as part of the town's current active travel project.

Cllr Mellen advised that he was not seeking re-election at the forthcoming SCC election. He was thanked for all his hard work for the parish over the last five years.

5. District Councillors' Report, Sarah Mansel

Local Government Reform

Following Government's announcement that unitary councils will be created across the whole of England, it has now been decided that Suffolk will be split into three unitary councils. Parts of Mid Suffolk will be in all three areas. Woolpit and Elmswell will be in the Western Suffolk area.

Suffolk County Council elections are being held on May 7th 2026 and there are expected to be elections for the new unitary councils in 2027. Elected unitary councillors will not take on all their powers and responsibilities until 2028 so there will be a year of overlap before the existing council structure is fully handed over.

The formation of the Strategic Authority covering both Norfolk and Suffolk with a directly elected Mayor has been delayed, and we are expecting elections for the Mayor to also be held in 2028.

Budget

The District Council's share of Council Tax is to be raised by 2.99%.

This rise is unavoidable as the Government has now linked future grant monies to the assumption that the share of council tax has risen, so if we had not taken a small increase this year we would be facing a "cliff edge" of funding in the near future.

In addition to the day-to-day provision of council services and activities, the 2026/27 budget includes funding for a wide range of programmes, including:

- Implementation of the new food waste collection scheme
- Enhancements to our current waste depot in readiness for this, plus further support for recycling education
- Cost of living support
- Council Tax Support scheme
- Grants programmes for towns and rural communities outside of Stowmarket
- Investment in leisure centre maintenance
- Stowmarket sports facilities delivered through the SHELF Project, plus support for wider Stowmarket regeneration
- Support for the Cosy Homes insulation scheme which has been expanded to help residents obtain solar panels
- Grant funding for nature recovery and community biodiversity groups
- Support for new footpaths and cycle ways
- Completing the build of the Stowmarket Innovation Gateway
- Expansion of the area's temporary accommodation (which avoids homeless residents being put into bed and breakfast accommodation and saves on costs going to private providers).
- **Recycling and Waste**
MSDC has been working on the Better Recycling scheme which will be fully launched in June. Food waste will be collected weekly and additional items such as soft plastics and tetrapaks will be able to be recycled. A second (blue) recycling bin has now been delivered to all homes across the district as well as the smaller food waste bin and caddy. The blue-lidded bin will be for glass bottles, jars, tetrapaks, plastic bags, cans and plastic bottles. Paper and card will go in the existing green-lidded bin.

Nature recovery

A new scheme was launched in January offering small grants up to 2K and larger grants up to £50k for projects that protect and expand wildlife corridors and habitats within the district – including tree planting, wildflower meadow creation, or other environmental initiatives to safeguard natural spaces for future generations. Organisations such as environmental groups, schools and town and parish councils can apply. MSDC also introduced a new £525,000 fund to support ambitious nature recovery, flood mitigation and water management projects across Mid Suffolk. The fund opens for applications next week. The Catchment and Landscape Nature Recovery Grant promotes larger-scale, collaborative initiatives which could span multiple sites and landowners. With a focus on river catchments, it will support projects that benefit communities as they address biodiversity loss, with a particular emphasis on priority habitats and species. It will also support natural flood management, as well as projects to improve water quality and security. Mid Suffolk District Council has purchased almost eight acres of land in the heart of Stowmarket to preserve it as a future riverside haven for nature and wildlife for future generations. The land, between Takers Lane and the River Rat, adjoins the council's existing open space at

Pikes Meadow – unlocking potential for a new riverside walk, connecting Combs Ford and Gipping Way.

Planning and Housing

The Government introduced new increased housing targets earlier this year so MSDC made a decision to update the existing part 1 Local Plan which included the planning policies, and to include a new settlement hierarchy and allocated sites. Work is still ongoing, making good progress. A 'Call for Sites' took place and a map of submissions has been published. Submitted sites do not benefit from any presumption of development. Officers are now assessing those sites against planning policy, constraints, evidence and deliverability criteria.

Supporting the community

Although MSDC approved CIL funding for the Elmswell-Woolpit community path in June 2024, Suffolk County Council are still working on the final designs. It is hoped that these will be complete within the next 10 months.

We supported the following projects in Woolpit from our Locality Budget 2024-25:

- Woolpit Village Hall – stage lighting, CCTV and Wi-Fi.
- Woolpit Institute – Dance mat, new chairs and tableware
- Woolpit Drama Club – microphones
- Woolpit Cricket Club – Bar oven
- Woolpit PC – defibrillator to be installed at the Bull.

We would like to thank the Parish Council for all their work throughout the year.

6. Reports from Village Organisation

Reports were given by Lynn Grant (Luncheon Club), John Guyler (Tudor Rose Singers), Rita Burr (Woolpit Museum), Dr West (Woolpit Institute, Sir Robert Gardiner Almshouse Trust, Woolpit Cricket Club, Health Centre, Poor Lands Trust), Rev Sarah Hall (St Mary's Church), Zena Davison (Woolpit WI) Angus Wainwright (Greener Woolpit), Alwyne Handshaw (Woolpit Festival) and Gordon Skinner (Woolpit Carpet Bowls),

7. Any Other Business

It has long been rumoured that Woolpit White bricks were used to build The White House in Washington; however it is 99.9% likely that they were not.

The meeting closed at 8.09 p.m.

Signed.....

Dated.....

