**County Deal for Norfolk**

Last December, Norfolk County Council and the Government signed an in principle agreement to transfer key powers and funding to Norfolk - a level 3 county deal. This includes a £20 million per year investment fund, plus additional powers and funding.

A County Deal would mean:

* Having a Council Leader who is directly elected by the public, enabling Norfolk’s voice to be heard by the Government
* Targeting funding and resources to Norfolk’s own priorities
* Unlocking housing and employment sites
* Investing in the skills we need and attracting and retaining key businesses
* Opening the door to more – further powers and funding in future

Following public consultation earlier this year, ongoing engagement with partners and further negotiations with the Government, the following was agreed at Councill on 12 December to keep the whole devolution project on track:

That the Deal should be accepted but that the election for the Directly Elected Leader should be held alongside the county council elections in May 2025 instead of 2024 to enable the widest possible engagement with the electorate.

The other big advantage is that the newly announced Level 4 of the devolution framework will be available to combined authorities, combined county authorities and local authorities with an implemented Level 3 deal including a directly elected leader in post Norfolk would have the opportunity to start negotiations for “deeper devolution” of further powers and funding through a new ‘Level 4’ Deal.

**Norwich Western Link update**

Cabinet took the decision on 4 December that this major infrastructure project for Norfolk progresses to crucial next steps in its development including submitting a planning application.

It is now expected that initial works will start in late 2025, with the start of the main construction works in summer 2026, and the road open for use in 2029.

The revised budget for the project is now £273.9m, an increase of £22.8m from the previous budget agreed in July 2022. However, the Department for Transport have indicated that they could provide funding of up to 100% of the costs set out at the OBC stage, which stood at £251.1m. If the government provided £251.1m of funding, the local contribution required towards the overall cost of the project would be £22.8m which is less than previously anticipated - even with the overall budget increase.

**Bus service improvements update**

It has been just over a year since Norfolk County Council received £49.55m of funding from the Department for Transport (DfT) to improve bus services across the county and there have been many improvements made across Norfolk.

Latest figures show that passenger numbers have increased throughout the year with the number of fare-paying passengers now exceeding pre-covid levels, during which passenger numbers across Norfolk and the UK fell dramatically. Approximately £12 million of the DfT funding was allocated to providing new or expanded bus routes and increased service frequencies on key routes, including more evening and weekend services.In Norfolk, overall bus passenger numbers have increased by 18% in the last year, with the number of fare-paying passengers now at 107% compared to pre-pandemic baseline figures. Norfolk is bucking the trend, as nationally, bus usage figures are at between 89% to 98% of pre-pandemic levels.

**Travel Norfolk update**

The Travel Norfolk website and journey planner can help plan journeys this Christmas. With local, accurate and real-time public transport information, the site offers a one-stop shop for people wanting travel information for Norfolk and finding a travel mode to suit them.

To find out more about more about the journey planner and to plan festive journeys, visit [travelnorfolk.co.uk/festivetravel](https://www.travelnorfolk.co.uk/festivetravel/).

**Herring Bridge to open for river traffic**

Herring Bridge in Great Yarmouth came into operation for river traffic from 7am on Monday 27 November 2023.

All river users must follow the new procedures for requesting passage from this time. These are available on Norfolk County Council’s website [here](https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/major-projects-and-improvement-plans/great-yarmouth/third-river-crossing/herring-bridge-operations).

This major milestone for the project will allow final works required to the bridge deck and the full commissioning of the lifting structure to be carried out.

**School transport for children with Special Educational Needs**

Norfolk County Council is backing a call from the County Council’s Network (CCN) for an urgent cash injection to support home to school transport.

A link to the CCN report and findings is available [here](https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/spiralling-send-transport-budgets-threaten-financial-sustainability-of-englands-largest-councils-report-reveals/).

It sets out the financial pressures that councils are facing in their transport budgets, particularly in large, rural councils like Norfolk.

The report details how councils are increasingly having to use taxis and other high-cost transport to take children with special educational needs and disabilities to school, partly due to increasingly complex needs and growing demand for specialist places.

The report finds that councils have undertaken innovative and effective savings programmes in school transport but (as experienced in Norfolk) they are swimming against a tide of rising demand and inflationary costs, so any substantial efficiency savings are wiped out within months.

The report also sets out a series of recommendations to address cost pressures, including capital investment for councils to create more specialist school places (which Norfolk is already doing with its £120m investment programme), consideration of introducing a national means-testing policy, so that families above a specified income threshold are required to make a financial contribution to home to school transport, and to ensure that SEND tribunals do not rule on cases until there is full consideration of transport costs.

In addition, the council has just recruited two new specialist participation officers, who will work directly with children and young people with SEND, as well as train other professionals to engage with children with a diverse range of needs.

**West Winch Housing Access Road**

Cabinet agreed on 4 December to give officers the authority to finalise and submit the planning application for the West Winch Housing Access Road in King’s Lynn.

The West Winch Housing Access Road will serve the West Winch Growth area which will see up to 4,000 new homes built over the next 20 years. The proposed route connects the A10 to the A47 along a new 1.5-mile road. The road would join the A47 via a new roundabout and the A47 would be dualled between Hardwick and the new road.

The County Council recently submitted their latest business case to government which would see a significant proportion of the £84.47m project costs met by the Department for Transport. The project has been assessed as ‘high value for money’ according to the Department for Transport’s criteria. Developers will contribute £14.6m towards the cost of the road which is set out in the [Strategic Infrastructure Delivery Plan.](https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/what-we-do-and-how-we-work/policy-performance-and-partnerships/policies-and-strategies/strategic-planning-and-infrastructure)

**Give a gift to Norfolk’s young people this Christmas**

All people across Norfolk are being encouraged to give 16-17 year olds in care a gift this Christmas as part of Norfolk County Council’s annual Christmas Appeal.

Organised by the Children’s Services Department, the campaign aims to give every child in supported living a gift, ensuring that young people have at least one present to open this Christmas. These young people rely on the support from their social worker and usually have very few gifts at Christmas time.

To encourage people to shop local where they can, this year’s appeal has partnered with local businesses.

The closing dates are:

* 11 December 2023 for gifts and vouchers from the three local businesses
* 20 December 2023 for voucher donations

More information on the campaign, the local businesses and how to make voucher donations can be found [here](https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/what-we-do-and-how-we-work/campaigns/christmas-appeal).

**Norfolk Fire and Resue Service**

A recent annual awards ceremony recognised the efforts of Norfolk fire fighters, fire staff, their friends and families and community partners and volunteers, showing how everyone has a unique part to play in making the service great.

A total of 16 awards were given in nine categories with a wide range of achievements including saving a village from the clutches of wildfire, helping transport a horse mannequin called Brandy, and restoring a fire station flower garden.

More information about the individual stories of these awards, which were sponsored by Norfolk Safety CIC and Brancaster Parish Council, are available on our [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/NFRSPage).

**DIY WASTE**

From New Year's Eve (December 31), residents will be able to get rid of a certain amount of DIY waste for free at the council's recycling centres. People can take a maximum of 100 litres of DIY waste or one single item with a maximum size of 200cm by 70cm by 75cm for free. The 100 litres must fit into two 50 litre bags.Each household is allowed four free visits with DIY waste every four weeks, but anything beyond this will still be charged at normal rates.

**Autumn Statement 2023**

Regrettably the statement did not include any significant new additional funding for local government to address the ongoing funding pressures facing local authorities although there were some support measures:

**Business rates relief support**

A business rates support package worth £4.3 billion over the next five years to help high streets and small businesses.

The package comprises a rollover of 75% retail, hospitality and leisure relief for 230,000 properties and a freeze to the small business multiplier. Around 230,000 retail, hospitality and leisure properties will receive the 75% relief, up to a cap of £110,000 per business, on their business rates bills for 2024-25.

**Funding for nutrient mitigation schemes**

£110 million of funding to support Local Planning Authorities to deliver high quality schemes to offset nutrient pollution through the Local Nutrient Mitigation Fund, unlocking planning permissions that are otherwise stalled.

The investment may help ease the issue of nutrient neutrality which has held up house building, particularly in Norfolk, over the concerns of nutrient pollution on waterways

**Raising the cap on the local housing allowance**

The cap on Local Housing Allowance will be lifted to the 30th percentile of local market rents while Universal Credit and other working age benefits will be boosted by 6.7%, aligned with September’s inflation figures.

These increases may help to support vulnerable people, ease pressure on local services and reduce demand for temporary accommodation.

**Extending support for Homes for Ukraine sponsors**

‘Thank you’ payments are being extended into a third year for Homes for Ukraine sponsors across the UK. They will remain at £500 per month and reflect the ongoing generosity of hosts in supporting those who have fled the war.

**Boosting Britain’s access to nature**

Ahead of COP28 the government has announced a new package of measures that includes launching a search for a new National Park, 34 new landscape recovery projects, new forests and funding to help more children get outdoors and into the great British countryside.

The new [landscape recovery projects](https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/29/round-two-projects/) involve over 700 farmers and landowners across England. The list includes 2 projects in Norfolk that had demonstrated pioneering ideas to reverse the decline in nature and support the sustainable production of food:

* The West Norfolk Nature Network
* North-West Norfolk Coast Project

Further details available about the government’s new package of measures available [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-to-boost-britains-access-to-nature-ahead-of-cop28).