August 2026 report for the Thredling Division from Cllr Matthew Hicks

Council sets out concerns over EcoPower Suffolk solar farm plans

EcoPower Suffolk's proposed development would cover a large area of Mid Suffolk and includes solar panels, battery storage facilities and associated infrastructure. While the council recognises the importance of renewable energy in helping to meet national climate and energy goals, it believes significant concerns remain that have not yet been adequately addressed by the developer.

The council's key concerns include:

- The loss of large areas of best and most versatile agricultural land.
- The impact of construction traffic on local roads and communities.
- Effects on the landscape, countryside views and public rights of way.
- Potential impacts on wildlife, heritage assets and the natural environment.
- Flood risk and water supply issues.
- The safety, design and operation of the proposed battery energy storage facilities.
- The combined impact of this project alongside other major infrastructure and energy developments planned across the area.

These concerns reflect a number of issues raised when the statutory consultation opened in June. At the time, Conservative councillors warned that important environmental information, including surveys on wildlife, archaeology and landscape, had not yet been published, making it difficult for residents to fully assess the proposals. They also highlighted concerns about the potential loss of almost 1,000 hectares of best and most versatile agricultural land, the suitability and safety of the proposed battery energy storage facilities, pressure on local water resources, and the cumulative impact on local communities, heritage assets, rights of way and the natural environment.

Under the Planning Act process, Suffolk County Council is a statutory consultee. Any final decision on the project will be made by the Secretary of State, not the County Council. The council's role is to assess the proposals, represent local interests and seek improvements where necessary.

Suffolk awarded £564,000 for major bus franchising study

Suffolk County Council has secured £564,000 in new Department for Transport (DfT) funding to conduct a full feasibility study into bus franchising across the county. The investment follows the high-profile roll-out of franchised bus services in Greater Manchester, alongside pilot studies in six other authorities. Suffolk is one of the first rural authorities to begin exploring whether greater public control over bus routes, fares and service levels could deliver better outcomes for passengers. Scenarios to be explored include:

- A single countywide franchise - one unified system covering all Suffolk
- A joint Suffolk-Norfolk franchise - exploring efficiencies and cross-border connectivity
- Three franchises aligned to Local Government Reorganisation - reflecting the proposed administrative boundaries
- Smaller, targeted franchises - focused on key towns, corridors, or demand hotspots
- Alternative hybrid approaches - ensuring no promising model is overlooked

Franchising is increasingly viewed as a way for councils to take control of bus networks, determining where services run, how frequently they operate, and what fares are charged. Supporters say this approach ensures routes meet the needs of passengers and communities rather than prioritising commercial returns for operators. Crucially, the funding means Suffolk can carry out all research at no cost to local taxpayers. The feasibility study will include consultation with residents, bus companies, district and borough councils, businesses and other stakeholders. Details on how and when this engagement will take place will be confirmed as the project develops. Currently, bus services in Suffolk see the county council supplement the commercial network with supported routes, community transport schemes and demand responsive services.

Suffolk County Council plans £18.9 million investment to expand SEND support

A report considered by Cabinet on July 14 recommends allocating £18.889 million of government High Needs Capital Funding to expand local specialist provision between 2026 and 2030. The investment aims to help more children access the support they need closer to home, while reducing pressure on the SEND system and improving outcomes for families across Suffolk. This new provision would be fairly spread across west, north and south Suffolk.

Over recent years, Suffolk County Council has already delivered significant growth in SEND provision, creating around 170 places in mainstream specialist settings and a further 289 places through special school expansions and satellite provision. However, demand continues to rise. The number of children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has increased by 17% in the past year, from 10,292 in April 2025 to 12,018 in April 2026. The proposed investment would provide:

- 168 new specialist places in secondary schools through specialist bases linked to mainstream schools
- 80 additional places through satellite provision connected to existing special schools
- £2 million to support inclusion in mainstream schools
- £2 million for adaptations and improvements to mainstream schools
- £1 million to develop specialist post-16 provision across Suffolk

The council plans to make use of existing school buildings where possible, helping new provision to be delivered more quickly and cost-effectively than building new schools. The programme will focus on areas where demand is highest, particularly for children and young people with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and Communication and Interaction needs, including autism.

The report highlights that increasing local provision will help reduce the need for children to travel long distances to access education, improve placement stability, and reduce reliance on expensive independent and out-of-county placements. The council says the investment will also help create a more financially sustainable SEND system while ensuring children and young people receive the right support in the right place.

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