

This time last year when annual parish meetings were being cancelled and postponed and I don't think any of us thought we would still be subject to covid restrictions a year on. I certainly didn't think I would still be hearing warnings of an increase in cases – that was what I heard last Monday from Suffolk's Director of Public Health Stuart Keeble when he raised concerns about increasing cases of covid among the over 60s at Ipswich Hospital.

I expect many of us attending the APM tonight have had our first, if not second vaccinations but please remember that we must still follow the guidance.

Amid all the loss, heartache and challenges of the pandemic there have been some amazing achievements – on a national scale the vaccine programme has been outstanding. As we heard last week there will be a booster programme in the autumn.

Locally the response in communities has been inspirational – residents, voluntary groups, and local businesses stepped up to care for our vulnerable residents – - thank you for all you have done to look out for one another.

In my work at the county council I have seen how the challenges of coping with the pandemic have brought people together. My role is cabinet member for children services, education and skills. The whole children's services and schools sector came together at the start of the first lockdown to chart their way through such very uncertain times.

Foster carers went to astonishing lengths – including one family where the foster carer with the child they cared for moved in with the family who were seeking to adopt the youngster so that although the final decision of the courts was held up by covid that precious time for the child to bond with their new family was not lost. Our social workers have selflessly put the children in care first. In response to a covid outbreak in one of our residential children's homes three members of staff lost no time in offering to move in full time to see everyone safely through the isolation and recovery period. To me it is no surprise that Suffolk's children's services team is rated outstanding by Ofsted.

Often at annual parish meetings I speak about school attainment – we won't actually get any verified data on SATS, and fully marked GCES and A Levels until January 2023. What we do know in Suffolk is that – as happens across the country – there is a gap on the day children start at school between those children from disadvantaged homes and their peers – they can be as much as 18months behind. However, bright the child and however brilliant the teaching staff it is really hard to start school aged 5 so far behind and catch up with your peers.

Suffolk has long been a high employment low wage economy. I am determined that all children in Suffolk be given all the support they need to gain the qualifications and skills they to reach their full potential to get well paid work. This is why the county

council has signed up with the National Literacy Trust to run a 10 year project to get Suffolk reading. Groups like Home Start Suffolk, Suffolk Mind and Suffolk libraries are taking part and the first hub will open this summer in Haverhill.

Suffolk County Council was among the first councils to declare a climate emergency, pledging to be carbon neutral by 2030. There are a range of projects underway such as the offer to install EV charging points at village halls; the planting of 200,000 trees and extending the county's network of roadside nature reserve verges.

The county council's budget for the coming year is nearly £600m. It spends about 75% of its funds on caring for people – vulnerable residents and children in care. By 2031, a fifth of Suffolk's residents will be aged over 70. We will harness new technology and support our care workers, so elderly residents can live independently at home for as long as possible. We fund 250,00 hours of homecare each. If residential care is the only option, the county's care homes are among the best in the country with 90% of providers rated good or outstanding by the Care Quality Commission.

Aside from education the other topic I routinely discuss with you at the APM is highways. It's been a dreadful winter for potholes – one of the wettest winters on record and the winter gritters have been out regularly since the autumn. SCC is now spending £1m on pothole repairs – please keep do keep reporting them. The council is also doubling its budget for highways and drainage this year and will hire in specialist staff and equipment. Various projects are being looked at locally.

This is my last meeting with you and I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for you warm welcome and help over the years.

It has been a pleasure and a huge privilege to be the County Councillor for the Clare Division and to get to know so many of you. I wish you all well for the future

Mary Evans

Clare Division Suffolk County Council