

Notes from friend's trustees meeting on 16th May 2023

Our funding situation

For the last year or more, a feature of these meetings has been Suffolk Libraries' challenging financial situation. The funding we receive each year from SCC is less now than it was in 2012 when we were divested. Effective fundraising and income generation has enabled us to continue to develop the service over the years, but the significant increase in costs over the last year or so, coupled with the impact of the Covid pandemic on income, means that the amount of money that we need to generate ourselves to continue as we are, is unachievable. We had started planning for how we would save the money needed to enable us to survive, with substantial changes to the service being the only way of doing this.

However, we have also worked hard to highlight to the council the value of what we do, and a few hours before our meeting, Suffolk County Council agreed to provide us with additional funding to enable us to continue operating as we are currently until the end of our contract – currently scheduled for August 2024 – without the need to make changes to the service.

The following briefing was shared at the meeting:

Library services protected as Suffolk County Council approves additional funding.

Suffolk County Council has today underlined its commitment to library services in Suffolk, as it approved plans to increase its funding to Suffolk Libraries, to enable the service to continue operating at its current level, until the end of the contract in July 2024.

Suffolk Libraries currently receives £5.9m per year from Suffolk County Council, however the service is forecasting a deficit of £60k per month from April 2023. The service has cited increases in service costs, a reduction in income opportunities following the Coronavirus Pandemic and rising inflation, as causes of the deficit.

This means it is no longer possible for the service to continue operating at its current level of service, within its current contract value.

At today's meeting of Suffolk County Council's Cabinet, the council has approved plans to absorb this cost pressure, funding Suffolk Libraries an additional £720k per year, through to the end of the current contract in July 2024. This additional funding will support Suffolk Libraries to continue delivering its highly valued services to Suffolk Residents.

CLLr Bobby Bennett, Cabinet Member for Equality and Communities, said: "We recognise the important role that Libraries play in the community, they offer so much more than just books; providing community spaces which bring people together, to learn, socialise, read, and take part in activities.

"We are proud of the work Suffolk libraries do, which is recognised nationally, and we are committed to supporting the service to maintain this high standard.

"This is why Suffolk County Council is increasing its funding to Suffolk Libraries, to support them to continue delivering the outstanding service they provide for our residents."

The council has previously made a commitment to continue to support Suffolk Libraries. At Suffolk County Council's full council meeting in February, the council agreed to fund an additional £250k in the first quarter of the 2023/24 financial year to help with the increased costs Highlighted by Suffolk Libraries. This £250k for the first quarter of the year is included within the overall figure agreed by Cabinet today, of an additional £720k for the 2023/24 financial year.

The council also supported Suffolk Libraries with £155,000 for initiatives to support residents with Cost of Living and support for Digital Inclusion in the 2022/23 financial year.

In addition, the Council continues to successfully access Section 106 funding to support ongoing building developments required to ensure buildings are fit for purpose and support service delivery.

Bruce Leeke, CEO of Suffolk Libraries, said: *“We are delighted that Suffolk County Council has agreed to provide us with additional funding for the remainder of our current contract. Our direct library costs have significantly increased over the last few years and the pandemic impacted our ongoing fundraising and income generation initiatives. This has combined to create a budget deficit which would have made it difficult to maintain the same comprehensive service for the people of Suffolk without additional support.*

“Since 2012, we have been nationally recognised for delivering innovative and forward-thinking services which reduce inequality and improve community wellbeing, whilst saving a significant amount of public money.

“We have a very positive and supportive relationship with the county council and this decision shows that councillors appreciate the responsiveness, skill and passion of our colleagues working at the heart of every major community in Suffolk.”

Obviously, we’re really pleased and relieved that the council has reached this decision. Given the financial climate, and the significant financial pressures that councils are under across the country, we weren’t expecting SCC to be in a position to increase our contract sum. However, we have worked hard to ensure the council is aware of how important our libraries are in supporting communities across Suffolk as well as how efficiently we operate and the value for money that we provide – it’s fantastically positive news that SCC has recognised that, and we are very grateful to them for this. It will also mean that we won’t need to provide you with depressing updates about our financial situation at these meetings!

Contract renewal

There was a question on what the latest situation is regarding the renewal of the library contract. This is due for renewal in August 2024, when there is expected to be a tender process. This process has not yet started and there are no updates at the moment, other than that SCC are looking into the possibility of extending the contract to the end of March 2025 so that the renewal is in line with the start of the financial year.

Election to the board

Debra, Chair of Suffolk Libraries, spoke about the AGM later in the year and the fact that we will be looking for friends’ group members to stand for vacant board positions. She said that people only need to be members of groups to be eligible – not necessarily trustees. She urged interested people to put themselves forward, and for groups to try and encourage suitable people in their communities to stand for election. She stressed that it’s a lot of fun being on the board!

Sharing funding ideas

We talked about the examples of fundraising activities and initiatives that friends’ groups shared via an online form last year. Daniel has collated the submissions into a spreadsheet which can be found on the members website here <https://slmembers.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Friends-fundraising-examples.pdf>.

Daniel shared this example of a project in Debenham, which highlights the diverse and innovative ways in which friends’ groups help their community, and raise money:

“Howard, with the help of his wife, organised a “Heavy Metal Day” in July 2022 at the primary school, whose site we share, to raise funds for the library and the school. The proceeds of this were allocated as 75% for the Friends of Debenham Library and 25% for the primary school. He negotiated with the scrap metal merchant to deliver a large skip and collect the various sorts of metal after the event, and with a charity that takes unwanted bicycles. He printed leaflets for the 850 houses in the village and arranged distribution by the Friends. He arranged collection in the village for large items and for people who could not bring their scrap, enlisting volunteers with cars and trailer. He and our library manager arranged refreshments for the

volunteers. Some more valuable items he sold on eBay. Altogether over £1,900 was raised for the Friends of Debenham Library, and there was considerable environment benefit in recycling metal, car batteries, copper, brass, aluminium, electrical appliances and so on, which might otherwise have gone into landfill. The primary school were not involved in the organisation but allowed us to use their playground for the event and benefited by about £700.”



How do you run successful events when you have a small library?

This was a question posed by Nick from Lakenheath, who talked about how other groups in Lakenheath embraced the recent coronation putting on successful events, whereas the library struggled.

- Colin from Lavenham talked about the successful events they've run with their patron, Tracy Borman. If you can get someone well known with 'pulling power' on board who's willing to appear at events, this can be really successful!
- Helen from Long Melford talked about their successful fayres, such as the Christmas fayre which raised £800. They have people who donate items, such as cakes, preserves, and plants, which all prove popular. They also run a lucky dip and raffle, for which they source free prizes. There's a fair amount of effort involved, but it's worth it!
- Amy from Kessingland spoke about their successful fish and chip quiz nights which now attract 60 people – they've had to move into a bigger room!
- Richard from Thurston talked about how they team up with other groups in the village to put on events – they share the profit with them, but also benefit from a wider audience as well as their expertise. They hosted a band in the village hall among other things, and are currently planning a BBQ with the local scouts who have the equipment and experience to run a BBQ.
- Liz from Kesgrave talked about doing things that keep the income ticking over, such as selling bags of fudge in the library and books sale shelf in the local supermarket, both of which generate a decent steady income.
- Diane talked about an initiative run by the friends of Oulton Broad Library which was successful at engaging local children. During the summer holiday last year, they ran a 'book trial' at the

same time as the summer reading challenge. Fifteen children's books about holidays 'escaped' from the shelves of the library to visit 'friends' around the village. The escaped books were displayed in the windows of the buildings they were visiting, and a trail map showed their locations which children could buy from the library. Over 50 children took part, seeking out which book was at which location and enjoying a walk around Oulton Broad. This activity was also part of the Get Suffolk Reading passport and brought to the library many families who were not already members.

Co-op vouchers for Warm Rooms

Nick from Lakenheath said that they had received a Co-op voucher to buy items for their 'warm room' – however, there are different Co-op businesses, and the vouchers weren't eligible in their local Co-op. Amy from Kessingland suggested that they could send the vouchers to another library that's close to an eligible branch and they could spend the voucher and send the items back to them using our internal courier service. She had had the same problem, so Framlingham library staff helped them out in this way.

PAWSitivity update

Daniel said that 20 friends' groups contributed to the PAWSitivity, with the total amount donated £4,130, and he thanked groups for their support. This shows that our friends' groups are increasingly willing to contribute to Suffolk Libraries fundraising efforts, particularly if the request relates to something tangible, rather than just a general donation.

Friends' groups applying for funding.

Daniel spoke about friends' groups applying for grants, following requests from a couple of groups. Firstly, I think it's worth considering the level of funding that friends' groups might apply for. I think that, in most cases, it's likely to be in relation to fairly small amounts of money. There are a couple of things that limit what friends' groups are likely to be able to apply for:

- 1) Most friends' groups are unincorporated charitable associations, which means they are limited to £5,000 income per year. This means that any large grants could quite easily take them beyond that limit and mean they'd have to adopt a more formal structure.
- 2) The most likely area of significant expenditure relates to buildings – but funders rarely award grants for building projects where the applicant doesn't own the building, which means friends' groups would not be eligible to apply.
- 3) Funders often don't fund something if they perceive that the grant would be paying for something that would previously have been covered through statutory funding.

So, on the basis that friends' groups are mostly likely to be applying for fairly small amounts of money, I have a few pieces of advice.

- Only apply to funders where the application process is relatively straightforward. You don't want to spend ages on a complex funding application for a small amount of money.
- It's usually best to try and find funding to pay for a project that you want to do – not to find a project that fits in with a fund that you've discovered as you can often find it's not really possible to make it fit and you end up with a weak application.
- Only apply if you definitely meet the criteria. There will usually be lots of applicants that do meet the criteria applying, so you will be wasting your time.
- If you're unsure, phone up the funder (unless the funder explicitly states that they don't take phone calls!) and explain what you're looking to fund – they will usually give you an honest steer as to whether your project is eligible.
- Make sure that your application is outcome focussed – so it's not about exactly what you're going to buy – it's about the benefits that they are going to bring to people.

Where can you apply for funding?

When applying for fairly small amounts of money, I would suggest that funding through local councils is the most likely source.

- Locality budget
- District and borough councils
- Parish Councils

I would also suggest signing up to Community Action Suffolk's funding portal which gives details of lots of potential grant funders: <https://www.idoxopen4community.co.uk/suffolk/>

I believe you can sign up to receive regular email updates about available grants.

What about applying for large sums of money?

I would have thought it's unlikely that a friends' group would apply for a large sum of money – say, over £5,000 – and where they are considering doing so, I would suggest they discuss the project with their manager and Suffolk Libraries so we can agree together how best to approach it.

Additional points about applying for funding

Nick from Lakenheath is also on the parish council there, and he said they receive requests for funding. He gave a recent example of a 4-page application they received which did not specify how much money they were applying for or outline exactly what the benefits of the project are – two things that's important are covered in funding applications.

The point was also made that recipients of funding should thank the funder and ensure that they promote the fact that they've received funding from them.