

SUDBURY TOWN COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF SUDBURY TOWN COUNCIL
HELD IN THE TOWN HALL ON FRIDAY 21ST MARCH 2025 AT 6.30PM

Present: Miss A Owen – Mayor of Sudbury, in the CHAIR
Mrs M Barrett Mr A Osborne
Mr N Bennett Mrs J Osborne
Ms J Carter Mr T Register
Mr S Hall Mr A Stohr
Mr J Jeagar Mr A Welsh

In attendance: Mr C Griffin – Town Clerk
Ms L Smith – Babergh District Councillor
Mr P Faircloth-Mutton – Suffolk County Councillor

1. APOLOGIES AND APPROVAL OF ABSENCES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Graham, E Murphy and N Younger.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Councillors Ms J Carter, Mr A Osborne, Miss A Owen and Mr T Register declared that they were also Babergh District Councillors.

Councillor Ms J Carter declared that she was also a Suffolk County Councillor.

3. DECLARATIONS OF GIFTS AND HOSPITALITY

No declarations of gifts or hospitality were received.

4. REQUESTS FOR DISPENSATION

No requests for dispensations had been received.

5. MINUTES

The approval of the previous minutes was moved to the end of the meeting so that the PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL section could be discussed in detail.

6. TO DISCUSS THE CLOSURE OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT AND IMPACT ON THE SUDBURY ARTS CENTRE.

About 60 members of the public attended the meeting. The Mayor started by asking everyone to be positive about the way forward, although members may not have all the answers. She then read out statements about the closure of the Bridge Project from the following organisations;

- Babergh District Council (attached at page 228).
- The Bridge Project CEO (attached at page 229).
- The Churches Conservation Trust (attached at page 230).

County Councillor P Faircloth-Mutton then spoke about the County Council's reaction to the news that the Bridge Project was closing. He paid tribute to the wonderful work that the Bridge Project had done for many years to support local people, which would leave a lasting legacy. He was working with the adult care services team and children's care service team to commission new services to ensure unbroken support for the current clients. He assured members that the social services team would maintain contact with all those who had been in receipt of county council care provided by the Bridge Project. Although he did not know the details of any efforts by Essex County Council for those who lived across the border in Essex, he believed that they were equally engaged.

The Christopher Centre had offered short-term free use of their facilities for the Bridge Project to help them as they went through this difficult time.

The lead tutor at the Bridge Project explained how she had tried to explain the closure of the Bridge Project to the 42 students and their families supported by the Bridge Project. Many were in the room, and they formed a close family with an effective internal support network. These people felt devastated by the closure of the Bridge Project.

County Councillor J Carter encourage all the members of the public to get in touch with the district and county councils to emphasise the need for the services provide by the Bridge Project and the critical need to re-establish these services in Sudbury at the earliest opportunity.

Members of the public emphasised the duties of the trustees to ensure that charities were well run and that a forensic examination of the financial collapse of the Bridge Project should be undertaken to identify the lessons of this failure.

The befriending Scheme explained that they would try to help and could offer some spaces for taster sessions. They might also be able to take over CREATE in the Borehamgate precinct and keep the current staff employed there.

The temporary administrator at the Hive said that he believed that his trustees would be prepared to offer assistance to Bridge Project employees with accommodation at cost.

RESOLVED

To write a letter of support to the Churches Conservation Trust expressing the Town Council's support for their efforts to keep the Sudbury Arts Centre in St Peter's open without any break in operations.

To write a letter to Suffolk County Council expressing the Town Council's support for their efforts to maintain seamless delivery of the social support services to the Bridge Project clients.

To write a letter the Charity Commission expressing the Town Council's concern that such an import local charity could reach financial collapse without any warning and asking that an investigation take place into how this was allowed to happen.

To use the Town Council to provide a focal point for offers of support in these areas;

- **To help provide continuity of Bridge Project services in Sudbury.**
- **To hold the trustees and managers of the Bridge Project to account.**
- **To make sure that local concerns were clearly represented to the administrators.**

This would be by sending contact details to info@sudbury-tc.gov.uk at the Town Hall. Those with specialist accounting or auditing skills could be particularly helpful.

7. TO DISCUSS THE SUDBURY LIBRARY SITUATION

The Mayor asked Councillor J Osborne to introduce the item on the Suffolk libraries as she had asked for it to be on the agenda to provide the councillors and the public with the opportunity to discuss the situation.

County Councillor P Faircloth-Mutton then spoke about the County Council's cabinet decision to bring their library service back in house. He explained the legal requirement for a competitive procurement process under the 2025 Procurement and Contract Regulations. The procurement had been terminated because the sole bidder (Suffolk Libraries IPS Ltd) had proposed substantial changes to its original bid, including a 30% reduction in opening hours. This constituted a material change to the contract scope, making it non-compliant with procurement regulations. Every library across the county would have been affected.

County Councillor P Faircloth-Mutton confirmed that there had been a consultation in 2024 and about 6,500 responses had been received, many from Sudbury. This again was a legal requirement of the procurement process.

The current county council promised that they would maintain the current level of library service at all Suffolk libraries with no reduction in opening hours. They would also invest more in mobile libraries and digital services. They could not promise what would happen after the next election, because it depended on who was elected, but, if re-elected, they would maintain the library services. No administration could bind its successors, so it was not possible to promise what a future council would do.

Members expressed their frustration with the process, which they felt had not included sufficient consultation. Many wished to see this cabinet decision called in for review by the full membership. County Councillor P Faircloth-Mutton confirmed that the county council had taken legal advice from a King's Counsel and that many of the alternative proposals by Town Councillors would not comply with the law.

County Councillor P Faircloth-Mutton confirmed that the County Council owned the historic Corn Exchange, used as the library building in Sudbury, and had taken note of the maintenance issues raised by Councillor M Barrett and would repair the damaged masonry and restore the façade. The County Council's decision was also supported by UNISON as it protected the jobs and conditions of all the current staff. The volunteers were valuable members of the library team, and the County Council encouraged them all to remain involved with their local libraries. As each local friends group was unique, the County Council would engage with them about the particular needs of their library.

RESOLVED

To extend the meeting by 30 minutes.

A Sudbury Library employee expressed her thanks for the efforts by Cllr Barrett to have the building repaired. However, she was concerned that the County Council could not promise what would happen after the next election, when it was likely that there would be some form of new unitary authority. This created uncertainty for the staff, but the Sudbury library staff would work with the County Council to deliver the best possible service for local users.

A member of the public asked detailed questions about the financial and administrative changes that would be required to make the transition from the current Suffolk Libraries IPS Ltd to County Council control. These were answered by Cllr Faircloth-Mutton.

RESOLVED

To write to the leader of Suffolk County Council to express the Town Council’s opposition the decision by the cabinet to bring the library service back in house when the current contract ends on 31st May 2025.

RESOLVED

EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC (WHICH TERM INCLUDES THE PRESS)

That pursuant to the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 s.1(2), the public be excluded from the meeting for the business specified in item 5 as the publicity would be prejudicial to the public interest by reason of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted.

5. MINUTES (Continued)

The Mayor asked for two additions to the draft minutes, which were agreed, and then their accuracy was put to a vote.

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the Full Council meeting held on 11th March 2025 be confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

The business of the meeting was concluded at 9:13pm.

Chairman

Statement on The Bridge Project by Deputy Chief Executive of Babergh District Council

Many of you will be aware of the closure of The Bridge Project in Sudbury and seen the reports online and in the media.

We share the deep concern of the community about the impact of this, and I wanted to update you on what we know, plus provide some additional background information.

The charity announced on Friday 14 March it is closing because it is no longer financially sustainable. It will cease trading on 29 March and be liquidated in mid-April.

The most pressing concern is for service users and the meals on wheels service it provides. Suffolk County Council is working closely with the staff and trustees of the charity, along with other stakeholders, to identify alternative service provision as quickly as they can.

In terms of Babergh District Council's work with the project, we have supported it over many years. We recognise how much its services are cherished by those who use them, and by the community who value them.

- This has included practical support, grant funding (including £7,000 revenue funding in April 2024 and £5,000 in September 2024 to enable them to increase their Finance Officer capacity), and a rent-free period for its pottery studio at Borehamgate.
- The charity had a £100,000 Community Infrastructure Levy grant approved in 2023. This was so it could connect its new building to utility services - including mains water and sewage system, and the National Grid.
- We have paid around £28,400 of this in two instalments - the first (£12,489) dating back to May 2024, and the second (£15,891) in January this year.
- The payments were made after all the usual due diligence, including site visits to inspect the work which had been carried out. CIL monies are only paid on the completion of work. The remaining £71,600 will obviously not now be paid.
- While we hope the building can still be used for public good, its future is not within our control – we will have to wait to hear from the administrators.

The Bridge Project had flagged financial challenges in September 2024. However, we received assurances, up to and including the award of CIL monies in January, that they were able to trade out of their problems.

We have done everything we can to help, and offered practical support, while being responsible with the limited funds we have available.

The Bridge Project has also been running Sudbury Arts Centre at St Peters. This will now be a matter predominantly for the Churches Conservation Trust, which owns the building and is the recipient of the Lottery grant to support the Centre. We will remain in contact with them and will update you when we know more about what this means for the centre.

We share the deep concern in the community over the charity's collapse, and will keep you updated.

Statement by The Bridge Project Interim Chief Executive Officer

I understand that you are holding an extraordinary meeting on Friday evening, I am sorry I can't be there but I feel it is crucial that our team has the opportunity to communicate with you. It's important to ensure that the extensive work being done behind the scenes is fully understood, so that assumptions are not made about the input needed from STC or the wider community.

We absolutely value and deeply appreciate the incredible support shown by the community. It's genuinely heartwarming to see how much The Bridge has touched not just those we directly support, but also their families and the broader community. This isn't to say that we don't need continued help—we absolutely do. However, it is essential that you and the other councillors are well-informed about the hard work and dedication that has gone into navigating this challenging time, as we all come to terms with the current situation.

Although I've only been in this role for a few weeks, I know the students, our meal delivery customers, and the staff very well—they are, and will always remain, my utmost priority.

We are collaborating closely with a trusted local partner and are cautiously optimistic that we can secure ongoing support for our students. There is even the possibility of maintaining a base at Borehamgate under a new organisation, which would provide continuity of service with several of our current staff members. While I'm unable to provide further details at this stage, I want to assure you that this has been my absolute focus.

We are also working in close partnership with the Churches Conservation Trust to ensure that any disruption at Sudbury Arts Centre is kept to a minimum. Both partners are working at speed towards no closure of the site, adopting a 'business as usual' approach, with the existing staff team retained by the CCT to enable them to continue to grow the site for the community and visitors to the town.

In terms of our meal delivery service, I have been working closely with Aspect Living, and I'm pleased to report that they are able to take on all of our meal delivery customers. We are currently finalising the necessary data-sharing processes to facilitate this transition.

As we navigate this challenging time, we sincerely ask for compassion towards our team, our service users, and the families impacted. I am concerned that the meeting on Friday could become an outlet for frustrations and anger from both community members and councillors, rather than fostering a productive discussion. While I fully acknowledge and understand the depth of these emotions, it is vital that the focus remains on supporting the individuals who rely on our services and the staff who continue to work tirelessly under difficult circumstances.

Your understanding and support are invaluable as we work to achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone involved.

Media Release by the Churches Conservation Trust

The Future of Sudbury Arts Centre

It was announced on 14th March 2025 that The Bridge Project, who have been a delivery partner at St Peter's Church, Sudbury since November 2023 are to cease trading at the end of this month. St Peter's Church has been in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust (CCT) since 1976 and in that time the charity has worked alongside The Friends of St Peter's (FoSP) to welcome thousands of visitors through the doors.

CCT Chief Executive, Greg Pickup, says: *'We were saddened to learn of the closure of The Bridge Project, which has provided an invaluable service to the community of Sudbury over many years and has been a tenant at St Peter's for the past 18 months. CCT remains committed to a sustainable future for St Peter's Church and will be working with the team at Sudbury Arts Centre, as well as the many local people, groups and the network of locals committed to supporting The Bridge during this transition period.'*

CCT is working hard to maintain the successful running of St Peter's as Sudbury Arts Centre, whilst also considering the requirements of stakeholders and partners including the main project funder, the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). This will enable the smooth running of the site, with the aim of keeping the doors open to ensure business as usual.

In addition to this, there are complicated financial, operational, legal and HR issues to consider which CCT has been taking advice on, and which may take some time to work through. CCT cannot confirm any concrete future operating plans until relevant stakeholders have been consulted and a plan agreed.

CCT is committed to St Peter's and the continued successful operation of the site, a key aim of which is working behind the scenes is to try and minimise the disruption caused to the running of the building by the closure of The Bridge Project. CCT is unable to say what this will look like yet but will make an announcement on this as soon as possible.