

Annual Report to Wicklewood Parish Council

Period covered: April 2025 – March 2026

Presented by: Richard Elliott, District Councillor

1. Introduction

I am pleased to present my annual report to Wicklewood Parish Council, reflecting on the last twelve months while also looking ahead to the year to come.

The past year has been one of **delivery locally**, but also one of **significant and accelerating change** across local government. Decisions taken nationally on council funding and structure are now having direct implications for how district councils operate and how communities are represented.

Throughout the year, my priority has remained clear: to **stand up for our villages**, to ensure local voices are heard in strategic decisions, and to make sure South Norfolk remains financially responsible, well-run, and focused on protecting services through a period of change.

2. Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan (VCHAP)

The Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan has been one of the most demanding and locally significant issues over the last twelve months.

I am particularly pleased to report the Independent Inspector's modifications including the **successful removal of one of the proposed housing allocations in Wicklewood** from the final version of the Plan. This was a major achievement for the village and reflects sustained engagement, formal objections, and firm but constructive challenge throughout the process.

While housing growth remains a national policy requirement, this outcome ensured Wicklewood was not subject to **disproportionate or inappropriate development pressure**, and it demonstrated clearly that **well-evidenced local representations can and do influence outcomes**.

3. Neighbourhood Plan: Shaping Future Growth Through Community-Led Planning

As Wicklewood looks ahead to its long-term future, the production of a **Neighbourhood Plan** is becoming increasingly important.

Neighbourhood Plans are **one of the most powerful tools available to villages**. They give communities a formal, statutory role in shaping where development should

go, what it should look like, and how growth can be balanced with the character and infrastructure of the village. Once adopted, a Neighbourhood Plan carries **full weight in planning decisions**, providing clear local policies that must be taken into account by developers and inspectors alike.

This importance is only set to increase. Work on the **next South Norfolk Local Plan** is expected to commence in the coming period, against a backdrop of **significantly higher housing requirements nationally** and a renewed policy focus on directing development into village and rural areas. Communities that do not have an up-to-date Neighbourhood Plan in place risk seeing decisions driven primarily by district-wide policy, rather than by locally agreed priorities.

I am therefore keen to stress that **substantial grant funding is available** to support neighbourhood planning. Through South Norfolk Council, funding can cover **the majority of the costs** associated with producing a plan, including professional support, evidence gathering, consultation, and examination. This significantly reduces the financial burden on the Parish Council and makes the process both realistic and achievable.

I would strongly encourage Wicklewood Parish Council to **embark fully on the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan** and to see this as an investment in the village's long-term voice and resilience. Just as importantly, the success of any plan depends on **active local involvement**. Broad participation from residents, community groups, and local businesses is essential to ensure the plan genuinely reflects local priorities and enjoys strong support when it is examined and put to referendum.

Neighbourhood planning is, at its heart, about **community-led planning**. With development pressures increasing and strategic decisions being made at higher levels, now is the right time for Wicklewood to set out clearly **how it wishes to grow, and on its own terms**. I will continue to support the Parish Council and local residents in taking this work forward.

4. Council Finances and Council Tax – The Year Ahead (2026/27)

Funding reductions, national reform, and Local Government Reorganisation

Looking ahead to 2026/27, South Norfolk faces one of the **tightest financial environments for many years**. This reflects the **combined impact of major national funding reforms and the uncertainty created by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)**.

4.1 Council tax for 2026/27

For 2026/27, South Norfolk Council has agreed a **£5 increase** in the Band D district council tax, taking it to **£180 per year** (a **2.86% increase**).

It is important to put this into context:

- South Norfolk's share is **just 7% of the total council tax bill**;
- the majority continues to go to Norfolk County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner;
- and even the **maximum permitted increase cannot compensate for the scale of funding being removed or restructured by central government**.

4.2 A significantly changed national funding system

From 2026/27 onwards, South Norfolk is operating under a **new three-year national settlement**. Key features include:

- a **Fair Funding Assessment** that shifts resources away from districts like South Norfolk towards areas with higher deprivation indicators;
- the **abolition of New Homes Bonus**, which had previously supported growth councils;
- a **reset of business rates**, removing historic growth and pooling benefits; and
- the rolling-in of specific grants, reducing certainty and transparency.

While the 2026/27 budget can be balanced, the **direction of travel is clearly downward**.

4.3 Planning under Local Government Reorganisation

At the same time as these funding changes, South Norfolk is planning for **abolition and replacement by a new unitary authority in 2028**.

This creates additional pressures:

- direct transition and programme costs;
- reduced capacity to plan long-term savings;
- and the need to maintain "business as usual" services while redesigning structures.

LGR requires councils to be **more cautious, not less**, at exactly the moment when national funding flexibility is reducing.

4.4 What the forward projections show

Council forecasts indicate:

- **sharp reductions in grant funding from 2027/28 onwards;**
- effectively **flat-cash settlements**, even as inflation continues;
- and increasing pressure to find savings simply to stand still.

The message for the year ahead is therefore clear:

financial discipline in 2026/27 is essential if services are to remain resilient through reorganisation and beyond.

5. Capital Programme – Investment with Discipline (2026/27)

Focused delivery ahead of reorganisation

Despite these financial constraints, South Norfolk will continue to invest in essential infrastructure and community assets. However, the capital programme for 2026/27 has been **deliberately reshaped** to reflect funding pressures and the approach of LGR.

5.1 Scale and structure

For 2026/27, the Council has approved a **net capital programme of approximately £16.9 million**, forming part of a front-loaded programme designed to prioritise delivery **before reorganisation takes effect**.

Speculative or low-certainty projects have been removed, leaving a programme based on deliverability and strategic necessity.

5.2 Key priorities for the coming year

The programme focuses on:

- **Health and leisure infrastructure**, including major schemes at Wymondham (Ketts Park), Diss and Framingham Earl;
- **Primary care provision**, notably the new Hethersett GP surgery;
- **Waste and environmental services**, including vehicles, bins, and depot infrastructure;
- **Public realm and community spaces**; at Wymondham Town Centre, and
- **Digital and IT resilience**, supporting efficient service delivery during transition.

These are investments aimed at **maintaining service quality and avoiding higher costs later**, not optional extras.

5.3 Funding constraints

The programme is funded through a carefully controlled mix of grants, limited borrowing (mainly for waste infrastructure), capital receipts, and significant use of reserves.

Given the post-2026/27 revenue outlook, capital spending has been structured to **avoid creating unsustainable future revenue pressures**.

5.4 Capital planning and stewardship

A key principle behind the programme is responsible transition: ensuring South Norfolk enters reorganisation **with assets maintained rather than liabilities deferred**, so communities are not disadvantaged by short-term decisions.

6. Local Government Reorganisation

During the year, the Government confirmed its intention to replace Norfolk's existing councils with **three new unitary authorities from 2028**.

This represents one of the most significant changes to local government in decades. While there may be long-term opportunities to simplify structures, there are real risks of decision-making becoming **more remote from rural communities** if the transition is not handled carefully.

Throughout this process, my focus has been on safeguarding **local identity, parish engagement, and service continuity**.

7. Norfolk County Council Elections – May

Against this backdrop, the **Norfolk County Council elections in May** take on added importance.

County Council decisions affect highways, education, adult social care, and infrastructure — services under pressure at the very moment structural reform is being implemented.

At a time of such change, there is a strong case for elected Members that provide an **experienced and stable administration**, focused on continuity, sound finances, and protecting frontline services during the transition.

8. Supporting Residents and Casework

Throughout the year I have continued to assist residents across a wide range of issues, including:

- planning applications and enforcement matters;
- waste and environmental concerns;
- housing and homelessness prevention;
- benefits and council tax support.

This casework remains one of the most important (and rewarding) aspects of my role, ensuring residents receive timely support and that issues are pursued properly within often complex systems.

9. Working with Parish Councils

I would like to thank Wicklewood Parish Councillors for their continued engagement and constructive working relationships.

Regular dialogue with Parish Councillors strengthens representation, ensures local concerns are raised effectively, and helps achieve better outcomes for residents.

10. Closing Remarks

The last twelve months have delivered real outcomes for our villages, including:

- the removal of one large housing allocation;
- securing funding for a Neighbourhood Plan;
- disciplined financial planning ahead of funding reform; and
- a focused capital programme protecting key infrastructure.

As we move into a year of significant transition, my priority remains clear: **to ensure Wicklewood has a strong voice, resilient services, and fair representation during a period of national change.**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this report.

Cllr Richard Elliott

13 April 2026