

Norfolk County Council updates 04/07/2025

New fund for local projects launched

Local groups across Norfolk can apply for funding through the newly launched Norfolk Community Fund. The Norfolk Council grant scheme is designed to support grassroots organisations at the heart of every community.

Each of Norfolk's 84 county councillors has been allocated £5,000 to distribute within their division, ensuring that funding decisions are made by those who know their communities best.

With an estimated 10,000 voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations in Norfolk - including 3,500 registered charities and 6,500 informal groups - the fund aims to provide a vital boost at a time when many are facing financial pressures.

Local groups who could benefit from a grant are encouraged to contact their local county councillor with details of their project and the funding needed.

The fund offers grants between £200 and £2,500 to support projects that promote things like social inclusion, volunteering, and community engagement.

Further details and how to apply are available on the county council website [here](#). (The site also includes a link to find out contact details for county councillors).

Options assessment work for a Norwich Western Link

Norfolk County Council has laid out plans to assess options for a Norwich Western Link, to tackle growing traffic issues and improve travel to the west of Norwich.

The County Council's cabinet will be asked to approve the options assessment work, which would include a public consultation, when they meet on Monday 7 July. If approved, options that would be assessed would include improvements to the existing road network, public transport and active travel proposals (such as measures to support walking, wheeling and cycling) as well as new single and dual carriageway routes.

The Council's previously submitted planning application for a 3.9-mile dual carriageway road between the A47 and Broadland Northway was withdrawn in January after the Council were unable to resolve an objection from Natural England relating to barbastelle bats. The Council has been in discussions with the Department for Transport (DfT) over the next steps for the project. DfT agreed in principle, subject to the completion of their processes, to funding of £960k, or two-thirds of the overall estimated cost of £1.43 million of the options assessment work.

The report on the Norwich Western Link project will be considered by Norfolk County Council's cabinet on Monday 7 July 2025.

Further details are available in our press release [here](#).

Norwich Castle Museum – Castle Keep opening date announced

Norwich Castle Keep will re-open on 7 August 2025.

The Keep has been completely reimagined as part of the Norwich Castle: Royal Palace Reborn project, bringing Norman England vividly back to life. The redevelopment project has received £13m from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and support from Norfolk County Council.

When it reopens, the Keep will transport visitors back 900 years to the heyday of Norman England when Norwich was medieval England's influential second city. Visitors are encouraged to explore:

The recreated medieval palace with floors and rooms that have been meticulously reinstated and are fully furnished, bringing alive the sights and sounds of the Keep.

The UK's most accessible castle, with step-free access from basement to rooftop battlements – a first in its 900-year history.

The Gallery of Medieval Life: A British Museum Partnership will showcase nearly 1,000 medieval artefacts.

Immersive, multisensory experiences that bring the Norman palace to life.

Priority booking with a Norfolk Museums Pass opens: Thursday 17 July

General booking opens: Thursday 24 July

Further information about the Norwich Castle, Museum and Art Gallery is available [here](#).

Special Schools – update

A building project in Swaffham, which will create 27 new special school places and a new school for 224 children with SEND, recently celebrated its topping out ceremony.

The Fred Nicholson School relocation project will provide state-of-the-art facilities. The new school will include 17 classrooms, dedicated sixth form and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) areas, and specialist spaces for life skills, sensory immersion, and physical development. It is due to open in spring 2026 and is part of plans to deliver new special school places through expansion projects.

Over the past five years, Norfolk County Council has:

Built 3 new special schools, creating a combined 358 new school places

Expanded existing special schools to create a further 289 more places

This is a 41% increase in the number of special school places in Norfolk.

The council is awaiting a Department for Education decision on a further two new special schools in Downham Market and Great Yarmouth which would deliver another 270 places.

Consultation – new bus lane to reduce delays on Hardwick Road King Lynn

Norfolk County Council is inviting residents and road users to share their views on a proposed new bus lane along the A149, Hardwick Road, as part of its ambitious Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP).

The proposal would see the introduction of an inbound bus lane between the railway bridge and Horsley's Fields, a section of road plagued by congestion during peak hours. The aim is to significantly improve bus journey times and reliability by easing traffic delays between the A47 Hardwick Roundabout and Southgate's Roundabout.

People are encouraged to take part in the public consultation, open until 21 July 2025. If the scheme gets the go-ahead, construction is expected to begin in early 2026.

To take part visit www.norfolk.gov.uk/hardwickroad.

National Updates

Ten-year health plan for England: fit for the future

The Government has published their ten-year health plan Fit for the Future: 10-year plan for the NHS, with a focus on shifting care into communities with new Neighbourhood Health Services. The plan has three key themes: switching from analogue to digital services, a greater emphasis on prevention, and a move away from care in hospitals towards community-based provision. Key proposals include:

Neighbourhood Health Services to be rolled out across the country, bringing diagnostics, mental health, post-op, rehab, and nursing to people's doorsteps

Neighbourhood Health Centres to house services under one roof, open at evenings and weekends

Rebuilding the NHS to train thousands more family doctors, transform hospital outpatient appointments, and provide personalised care plans for complex needs

GOV.UK.App - beta version launched

A Government app intended to "cut life admin" has been launched. The gov.uk app is in beta form and accessible on smartphones for people aged 16 and over. It is intended to be the main mobile hub for many citizen interactions with the government, but not the NHS or HM Revenue and Customs.

The topics it covers are benefits; business; care; driving and transport; employment; health and disability; money and tax; parenting and guardianship; retirement; studying and training; and travel.

There are plans to add features, including the AI chatbot GOV.UK, personal notifications and reminders. It is also expected to integrate with the GOV.UK Wallet that is currently in development.

Local bus services - National Audit Office report

A report by the National Audit Office (NAO) says that local bus services in England have continued to decline despite attempts by successive governments to improve services and increase bus usage. The report warns that rural and suburban areas face a "cycle of decline" whereby services are withdrawn because of low demand, which leads to a further fall in passenger numbers and more cuts.

The NAO says that the Department for Transport needs to ensure that its funding and policy interventions are enabling the outcomes it wants.

Good practice by Norfolk County Council is cited in the report -for improving the passenger experience by introducing QR codes to provide real-time information on mobiles, and for monitoring usage at each bus stop to assess if it needs screens.

Review of Parental Leave

The Government has launched a full review of parental leave and pay, to better support working families and help children get the best start in life. The review will look at all types of leave – including maternity, paternity and shared parental leave – with the aim of making the system fairer and easier to use.

Changes to Ofsted inspection teams

Following feedback from last year's Big Listen and the recent consultation on inspection reform, Ofsted has announced a new structure for inspection teams in schools and further education, focusing on improving consistency.

The changes mean that following the introduction of the renewed education inspection framework in November 2025 all schools and FE inspections will be led by inspectors with higher levels of expertise and the teams will contain at least one inspector with directly relevant experience.

Education, Health and Care Plan figures

Data recently released this week from the Department for Education shows that the number of pupils this year in receipt of an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has now reached over 638,000. Across England, this number has more than trebled since 2017. Last year there were around 154,000 requests (an average of 423 requests a day). Around 90,000 new plans were issued.

The government has committed to reforming the SEND system and will set out details in the Schools White Paper, expected in the Autumn.