
Council



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Leader's Statement	
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Documents attached:	None	

1. The end of 2015 is just around the corner and it seems to be arriving at breakneck speed. I don't know every detail of what other councils have been up to but here in West Suffolk we have been so busy with such a wide range of projects that it's sometimes easy to forget just how much we have achieved.
2. Analysis of the Government's autumn statement indicates that borough and district councils will be worse off than before, although I welcome the news about extra funding for social care. This, however, is not a new situation for us. Over many years at St Edmundsbury we have shown ourselves to be innovative, focused on our local economy and doing our very best for the local communities that we serve. The terrific response to the Haverhill Town Centre masterplan consultation, the continuing prosperity of Bury St Edmunds town centre, due in no small part initially to our development of the arc and Apex, the grants for projects in our rural areas, these are just some straightforward examples of where we are making real differences to communities while providing the services they need and expect.
3. We can't, of course, go on 'doing more with less' for ever. We have made significant changes to the way we work, as the regular joint meetings, shared policies and decisions with our Forest Heath neighbours prove and which deliver year-on-year savings in the millions. It is, however, not enough. That is why it is so pleasing to see the tremendous amount of hard work that councillors and staff are putting in to our commercial agenda, where we are thinking and acting differently so we can generate more of our own income and rely less on handouts from the Government – and we all know those will continue to dwindle in the coming years. We need to stand on our own two feet as far as possible, and that is a real challenge not just for us to do, but to help those who live and work here to understand. Councils are changing everywhere, as are we, and that means our communities need to change alongside us as well.

4. An excellent example of where we are taking things into our own hands is the decision by the West Suffolk councils and Suffolk County Council to set up a housing company together. There are other housing companies, but we believe we are the first across two tiers of local government in a rural area. Real challenges lie ahead before we see the first people moving into homes delivered by the company, but I am confident it can deliver on its early promise and I'm looking forward to work starting on new homes as a result.
5. We have had also some excellent news in recent weeks with the confirmation of two Enterprise Zones, the Suffolk Business Park on the outskirts of Bury St Edmunds and the Haverhill Research Park. We have been working closely with the New Anglia LEP and the Greater Cambridgeshire, Greater Peterborough LEP on these bids and I am delighted to say that hard work has paid off. It will mean that we will be able to offer business rate discount incentives to encourage businesses on to both areas, in turn creating new jobs for many of the local communities that we represent. There is still a final piece in the jigsaw in terms of the actual detail from the Chancellor of the Exchequer's spending review but we are looking forward to the delivery of these exciting projects for Bury St Edmunds, Haverhill, West Suffolk and beyond.
6. And as if all the work on a range of projects, as well as internally improving our systems and processes, isn't enough, there's the devolution agenda. I hope councillors have found the weekly updates useful, notwithstanding the constantly changing agenda, from hour to hour sometimes, let alone day to day. We have a strong Suffolk bid, to which we have worked hard to forge new partnerships and incorporate Norfolk's strengths. However, while this has been welcomed by the Government I have consistently said that we must maintain our focus on the benefits to be gained by "double devolution" and bringing Cambridge into any devolution 'deal' as well – an ambition that I'm pleased to report is now increasingly mentioned by ministers and civil servants as well. The Government has given us more time to work on detailed proposals and there is still a long way to go, with many more changes, no doubt, along the way. I will of course do my best to keep you updated as things evolve further.
7. At our last council meeting we said a very fond farewell to a Director and at our next meeting we will be welcoming a new one, Jill Korwin. Jill joins us in the new year and brings with her a wealth of extremely useful experience gained at Suffolk County Council. I look forward to welcoming her to West Suffolk when she starts with us on 4 January 2016.
8. Not surprisingly, with only a few days to go, many people's attention is turning towards the Christmas festivities and break. Before then I would like to take this opportunity to thank every member of West Suffolk's staff and every councillor for their hard work and commitment throughout the past year. There are always difficult times and decisions to be made, and the pace doesn't flag but I am constantly impressed by both staff and councillors willing to tackle new things, overcome obstacles and make things better wherever they can – and for that I send my grateful thanks to you all. I also wish you all the very best for Christmas and the new year.