
Council



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Leader's Statement	
Report No:	COU/SE/16/001	
Report to and date:	Council	23 February 2016
Documents attached:	None	

1. Unsurprisingly, this council's budget and level of council tax dominates the agenda and I look forward to councillors' contributions to the debate at our full Council meeting especially as, for the first time in six years, a small rise in council tax is being recommended.
2. People are often surprised, and indeed unaware, that St Edmundsbury's share is only one-eighth or so of their total council tax bill. Over the years this council has achieved a tremendous amount for the borough through foresight, significant savings, investment (especially in the local economy), partnership working and support for our rural and town communities. Now, to continue the services we provide, alongside investment in quality of life for our residents, support for local business and our homes, jobs and communities priorities, I believe we need to ask for a little more – £3.42 a year.
3. The increase Cabinet is asking councillors to support will not, by any means, make up for the year-on-year cuts in our Government funding. Indeed, to expect council tax payers to bridge that gap is unrealistic and we will continue to focus on behaving even more commercially, identifying efficiencies (especially through partnership-working) and, in some cases, identifying services where it is appropriate that only the user pays (such as the new garden waste collection service).
4. We are, of course, already doing this, and have done so for a number of years. When we first started to look at the 2016/17 budget we faced a budget gap of £1.9 million, which is 5.6% of our total expenditure of £33.9 million (excluding Housing Benefits) for the year. With a considerable amount of hard work, with councillors and staff working together, we have bridged that gap by further reducing costs in our services. And that gap, it is worth remembering, was after we have taken account of the £4 million a year we are achieving through shared services with Forest Heath.

5. Our concentration on increasing income is very much part of the devolution agenda because that is firmly focused on growth. When it comes to government, arguably we live in one of the most centralised systems in the Western world and what devolution is about is bringing that control and responsibility down to more local levels. But which level – regional, county, district or parish – depends on what we're dealing with. When it comes to decisions about investment in infrastructure such as major roads it usually makes sense for these to be held at a strategic level. Building strong, sustainable communities, the delivery of key projects, such as the Mildenhall Hub or Eastern Relief Road, supporting families, adult social care and health needs to be as local as possible.
6. Sadly, the apparent Government focus on the importance of local decision-making does not seem to apply to local justice. I, alongside everyone in West Suffolk I am sure, was very disappointed by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) announcement that the Bury St Edmunds Magistrates Court is to close. However, the MoJ has left a window of opportunity slightly open, by saying that it will explore options suggested by us and other local stakeholders. On behalf of our residents we will be pursuing our alternative for the court services as part of our vision for the redevelopment of Western Way.
7. It was with considerable surprise that St Edmundsbury heard from another Government department recently, the Ministry of Defence (MoD), which has stated it will dispose of the RAF Barnham site for housing. This had never been suggested to us at any point but since that announcement we have worked very hard on building a relationship with the MoD which I hope will minimise such surprises in the future. The MoD has now told us that it doesn't have any firm plans, immediate or otherwise, regarding the future use of the site and recognises the heavy planning constraints that would need to be taken into account before any future use is decided. Certainly it does not consider the site a priority for redevelopment but we have received a commitment that, as the local planning authority, St Edmundsbury will be fully engaged in any future plans. We will endeavour to ensure that all Members, relevant partners and the local community are kept aware of any further news regarding timescales and plans.
8. The additional six-week consultation about the proposed West Suffolk Operational Hub closes a few days before the February 2016 full Council meeting and it will be very interesting to see what further comments West Suffolk's residents have said throughout that time. A great deal of research was made available for public scrutiny and we have asked whether people agree with us or not that bringing operational facilities together on to a single, shared site makes sense and, if so, where it should be. We have listened, and now those responses will be carefully considered. We will publish a Consultation Report when that consideration is completed and we have answers to the questions posed during the consultation.

9. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who came along to the very well-organised and attended drop-in events, and the public meeting, and to thank ward members for encouraging people to take part. Thank you to all those who have sent in their responses – your time and thoughtfulness is appreciated.
10. Finally, and with a great deal of pleasure, I would like to congratulate all those who have worked so steadfastly on the incredibly complicated project to deliver the Eastern Relief Road. For very many years the road has been one of this council's ambitions – and at times it threatened to become simply a dream, or even a nightmare – but now it is set to become a reality. This is a road that enables the Suffolk Business Park to come alive, with up to 14,000 jobs and 500 homes. Building a road sounds simple, yet it has taken years of patience, skilful negotiating and cajoling – even perhaps threatening, at times – to get every partner finally on to the same, signed up and committed, page.
11. St Edmundsbury stepped in when it became apparent that the market wasn't going to deliver the necessary infrastructure. Not only did we put in £3 million of our own funding, but Suffolk County Council came in with £2 million and the New Anglia LEP with a further £10 million. Everyone – Taylor Wimpey, Churchmanor, Rougham Estates – also agreed the road was vital but the complications, and consequent legal requirements, at times made things seem almost insurmountable. Like all worthwhile challenges, this has been frustrating and fraught at times, but I am confident that tremendous progress will soon be made – watch this space, and I would again like to thank everyone involved who has helped to make this happen.

Councillor John Griffiths
Leader of the Council