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# Council



**Forest Heath**  
District Council

<b>Title of Report:</b>	<b>Leader's Statement</b>	
<b>Report No:</b>	<b>COU/FH/18/002</b>	
<b>Report to and date:</b>	<b>Council</b>	<b>21 February 2018</b>

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## **Lakenheath**

Many of you may have read in the news suggestions by Mid Norfolk MP George Freeman that Lakenheath has a lot of poverty and deprivation and should be a new town. I think all of you in this room will agree with me that Lakenheath is a unique village with great community spirit and while nowhere is perfect the picture painted in parliament is not one that I recognise. It is our duty as local councillors to take a lead in these situations and champion the views and aspirations of our council and community. As you know we have taken a great deal of time to work with Mildenhall communities to plan for when the base moves, while currently suggestions are that the USAF are committed to continue to invest in Lakenheath which will be home to the new F35 aircraft. I have written an open letter to the media to explain my views and an additional one to the MP inviting him to meet me.

## **District Councils' Network**

It was an honour to be invited to take part on a panel of Local Government colleagues, including East Suffolk, at the District Councils' Network. I spoke about how communities must be at the centre of transforming what we do. It is not just about making budgets balance but greater benefits for our residents and businesses. What was clear is that we are ahead of many authorities across the UK in what we have been doing. Indeed we were highlighted in the Secretary of State's speech, in which he said he was delighted to make the announcement and support Local Government in its ambitions to transform. He praised the leadership shown in West Suffolk which has built on shared services to focus on what is best for local communities.

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I was pleased to be in the room and hear personally that the Secretary of State has supported our compelling case for a single council and highlighted our authorities. We are now leading the UK in transforming local Government and are likely to see our order appear in front of parliament very soon. This is an amazing opportunity. This is not the merging of two councils, but the creation of one new one. Looking across both of our councils, there is much that unites us and many lessons to learn and benefits to gain from each other in the creation of West Suffolk Council. We share aspirations and an outlook that has seen us invest in our communities and the economy to protect services and provide prosperity. We have seen the commercial benefit of investing in the solar farm and the Omar site, as well as the benefits from the bold aspirations and decisions around the Apex in Bury St Edmunds and engaging with our communities to masterplan the future of West Suffolk and manage growth. There are massive opportunities for councillors and partners across West Suffolk and beyond to bring their expertise together to work across boundaries, both service and geographical, to deliver economic growth and a prosperous future for all our hardworking residents. I would like to thank everyone who has been part of this journey and look forward to working with you going forward.

## **Local Voice**

The Council has been carrying out some initial engagement with residents and local organisations, as well as Parish Councils, to help us look at ward boundaries for the new West Suffolk Council. From the beginning I have been clear that local people should be at the heart of our design and that we engage with our communities. I am pleased that we can use the information we are gathering to help serve our communities in a better way and I would like to thank everyone who have taken part.

## **Budget**

Today we will be discussing our budget and how we continue to face future challenges but importantly continue to protect services, invest in our economy and support our communities. We can be proud of our financial record as a lean authority that is not making the cuts we see elsewhere and investing in schemes such as the Toggam Solar farm. That has already brought in over £300,000 income and will in the future bring around £700,000 a year as well as helping us be carbon neutral. We have always known, even with the commercial investments we have made, continuing to deliver our day to day services and freeze Council Tax in the face of the Government Grant being abolished by 2020 is unsustainable. Indeed we have never been about just keeping the lights on and running basic services. Like many councils across the country we are having to put up Council Tax, but this not only protects the services we have without making cuts but means we can invest even more into supporting local initiatives such as the continuation of the locality budgets.

## **West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy**

Today we will be looking at the West Suffolk Growth Investment Strategy. This is an important way to deliver our ambitions and our budget. It was pleasing to see at the District Councils' Network Annual Conference how we are recognised as a national success story, which the Government has recognised in our talks with them about the new single council. Something that often sets us apart from other councils is our clear ambition and vision to meet the financial challenges, protect services and invest in our communities. While many councils are making cuts, we have been investing in and managing growth to not only provide income but also social and economic benefits for our communities and businesses. This strategy will help guide us and help us better seize opportunities to create jobs, homes and prosperity. It tells investors and developers that we are a council that is supportive of business but also we want to see a mix of benefits for our communities.

## **Outstanding and Healthy West Suffolk**

I was really pleased to see health and care in West Suffolk have a week of good news last month. I think you will all join me in congratulating our partners and staff at West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust after they received a well-deserved rating of outstanding from the Care Quality Commission. This is the highest rating they can achieve and puts the hospital as one of just seven general hospitals in England, and the only one in the Midlands and East region to hold that achievement. Well done to all the staff and volunteers at the hospital that serve the residents across West Suffolk and provides outstanding care. We work closely with our NHS colleagues and have our own role to play in helping support the health and wellbeing of our communities. For example, the decision to back taking over the ownership and running of Brandon Country Park supports health and wellbeing in our area.

Also congratulations to Mildenhall Lodge, in St John's Close, which was also rated as outstanding by the Care Quality Commission. The report highlighted the quality of care and innovative ways and facilities the Lodge has including Sinbad – the home's much-loved dog.

## **Working with Landlords**

West Suffolk has a zero tolerance on unsuitable and inadequate housing for any of our residents regardless of situation and circumstance. I believe it is all our views that home is where the heart is – it is more than just four walls and a roof, it's a place to be safe, and to watch our families grow. That is why we are working closely and supporting legitimate landlords to ensure the availability and suitability of homes to meet growing demand while targeting in a new way rogue ones. Private landlords play an important part in helping meet our local housing need. So in January we launched, together with St Edmundsbury Borough Council, the West Suffolk Landlords Forum to help provide support. This is part of the practical way we are supporting them. At the forum they can find out and

keep on top of the latest changes to the law and to the benefits system, as well as how they can access the various grants available. Landlords also get the chance to find out more about our own West Suffolk Lettings Partnership which runs a guaranteed rent scheme.

Legitimate landlords also need our help in cracking down on those who do not follow the law or guidance. This is why we are looking at adopting new powers to combat rogue ones. These rogue landlords should not be allowed to profit from illegal practice which hurts our residents, especially the vulnerable, when law abiding businesses do the right thing. The focus of the new policy is on tackling and dealing with the very worst private landlords, and deterring any bad landlords from starting to operate in West Suffolk, while working with those that wish to grow the sector through much needed, better quality housing. We have begun consultation and engagement on the new enforcement routes that provide Local Housing Authorities with the option of civil penalty fines, rent repayment orders and banning orders for non-compliance with certain offences.

Enforcement remains the last option and we always prefer to provide support and advice, but we will not tolerate landlords operating outside the law.

### **World Thinking Day – helping our youngsters**

I am really pleased to see how our locality budgets are making a difference to our communities. In the next few days more than 200 children from all sections of Guiding, Scouting groups, Girl Scouts of America and Boy Scouts of America will be in Mildenhall to celebrate World Thinking Day. As some of you in this room know the event has been given funding from several grants by Forest Heath District Councillors and the Suffolk Community Foundation.

I read in the paper that event co-ordinator Abigail Gilby said: "Without the funding this event simply could not have happened. This event will provide so many opportunities to all the children and I am looking forward to see them all making new friends. It's what Guiding and Scouting is all about." I think that speaks for itself.

Forest Heath and West Suffolk is a place full of communities looking out for one another and being good neighbours. Bringing our different communities together, especially our younger residents and our area's future is part of that ethos. I wish them a successful event that is being held at St Mary's Church of England Academy this Saturday.

### **Thanks**

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all members and staff for their continuing support and hard work in continuing to make our West Suffolk the unique place that it is – a place to grow your family and business – and loved by us all and admired by so many.