
Council



Forest Heath
District Council

Title of Report:	Leader's Statement	
Report No:	COU/FH/18/017	
Report to and date:	Council	26 September 2018

I like to welcome you all back after the summer. I hope you all managed to enjoy some time off but I know that both Councillors and Council Officers have been working hard through the summer to make sure we support our communities.

Mildenhall Hub

I am pleased to see Mildenhall Hub progressing and had the honour to visit the site and see what the archaeologists had found.

While we have been looking into the past on the site what is interesting will be its future. We, and our partners, are delivering better facilities for the people of Mildenhall and the surrounding area. The existing facilities we have are not fit for purpose and our communities deserve better than spending money trying to repair that but not improving upon. We are investing millions of pounds in something that is unique, ambitious and exciting – and is leading the UK in bringing together services and the way we work for our communities. Ultimately it means better services for our residents and making a real difference now and in the future. I look forward to seeing work start in the near future and it opening in 2020.

Solar Farm

As we have been enjoying the good weather so has Toggam Solar Farm. It is one of the largest local authority owned solar farms in the UK and this year celebrated its second birthday by generating more than £1.3million of income. That is better than we expected. Figures for the 12 months to the end of July show that it generated 12,258MWh slightly above the 11,649 that had been estimated. That electricity sold on and into the National Grid, is enough to power around 3,300 homes and offset the Carbon Dioxide emissions from 1,500 cars. It has also helped Forest Heath establish itself as a carbon neutral council.

All of that has helped create £1.3 million of income. After taking into account the operating costs and recouping some of the capital used to buy the solar farm (in case the Council needs to invest in other things) that has meant it has generated £372,300 towards the funding of Council services, compared to a predicted £330,000.

Community Chest Open

I would like to remind Councillors that over the summer we have invited community groups, charities and voluntary organisations to apply for our Community Chest Fund. This £300,000 of funding makes a real difference for our local groups and organisations. It is available to projects that can improve the lives of West Suffolk residents by helping communities to support themselves.

Initiatives to combat loneliness, provide support networks to parents, and befriending schemes designed to break down stereotypes and bring generations closer together, have all helped West Suffolk residents as a result of Community Chest funds awarded in recent years. Since it was launched in 2015, Community Chest has also helped locally trained volunteers work with families before they reach crisis point and to help young people feel more a part of their local community.

It is part of the way we work differently to many councils in and with our localities, helping people help themselves. The results in some cases are life changing and something we should be proud of. Applications are open until 5pm Friday 28 September 2018 so please help spread the word. Decision on applications are due to be made by late December and successful bids will be paid in April 2019.

Combating loneliness

Together with St Edmundsbury Borough Council, we run a successful intern scheme. I see this as us putting our money where our mouth is in helping people in their careers. It has been good to see this summer how our interns delivered their own joint initiative and created the successful Togetherness Fayre - an event to bring communities together and combat loneliness. This followed the work of the Jo Cox Commission, helping to raise awareness of the problem of loneliness.

Studies have shown that loneliness can take a toll on both a person's physical and mental health – over 9 million adults are often or always lonely (British Red Cross and Co-op) with 3.6 million people aged 65 and over that use television as their main form of company (Age UK).

With this in mind our interns created the Togetherness Fayre bringing together local businesses and charities to showcase the work they are doing in Suffolk to reduce loneliness for all people.

We have supported a number of charities and other organisations in initiatives designed to combat loneliness. This has included funding through our Community Chest scheme, and through councillor locality budgets as well as our ground breaking Families and Communities work.

The free to attend Fayre was held on 8 August and provided a great opportunity for organisations to recruit new members, network and to spread awareness of the services on offer. It was a great success, not only in terms of helping tackle the issue of loneliness but seeing our interns from across services shine.

Landlords' forum

Earlier this month we held the West Suffolk Landlords Forum. This is part of our work to support both residents getting the right homes but also helping businesses. Landlords were able get advice about changes to the law around Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and the need for Energy Performance Certificates (PCS).

The forum also discussed the support available to help bring long standing empty homes back into use. Topics also included measures that have been put in place, such as a guaranteed rent scheme, to mitigate against the possible impact of Universal Credit on landlords and their tenants.

Importantly, those attending were also able to discuss when the need to keep homes warm during winter particularly for older or vulnerable tenants, and the support that can be accessed to help with this.

Blooming marvellous

Congratulations go to Brandon for being awarded best newcomer in the recent Anglia in Bloom awards. These awards are a great achievement and highlight the work of both paid staff and volunteers. No matter if they have an award or not they keep West Suffolk an attractive place to live and do business in. Not only does this work make sure our area is attractive, helping with tourism, but no doubt having welcome and accessible open spaces benefit the physical and mental health of our communities.

St Edmundsbury Portfolio Holder

Many of you may have heard that in St Edmundsbury Borough Council Councillor Alaric Pugh has stepped down from his post as Portfolio Holder and will not stand in May. I think we can all understand Councillor's Pugh decision who has spent 35 years in public service. Councillor Pugh has worked closely with Forest Heath and our Cabinet Members to also champion our area on a range of initiatives that have made a real difference to our communities. I'm sure you'll join with me in thanking him for his work and support. At the same time please welcome Councillor Susan Glossop who will be lead on planning and regulatory services at St Edmundsbury as well as working closely with their Leader on the Council's growth agenda.