

Council



Forest Heath
District Council

Title of Report:	Recognising the History of Forest Heath Council and Long Service Awards	
Report No:	COU/FH/19/004	
Report to and date/s:	Council	20 March 2019
Cabinet Member:	Councillor James Waters Leader of the Council Tel: 07771 621038 Email: james.waters@forest-heath.gov.uk	
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Purpose of report:	This is the final meeting of Forest Heath Council. This report seeks to recognise the history and achievements of the Council, and thank those who have contributed to its work. In debating this report, members are encouraged to put forward their own suggestions and perspectives on the work of the Council and recognise some of their fondest memories both of specific achievements of the Council and those who have helped make these achievements happen.	
Recommendation:	It is recommended that Council: 1. Thanks all who have contributed to the achievements of Forest Heath District Council since its formation on 1 April 1974; and 2. Note the commendable lengths of service of Councillors Nigel Roman, Carol Lynch, Stephen Edwards, Chris Barker, Rona Burt and Robin Millar, having each served at least 4 terms as Councillors of Forest Heath Council, and present them with a small token of appreciation.	

Key Decision:	<i>Is this a Key Decision and, if so, under which definition?</i> No, it is not a Key Decision - <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Consultation:	• None		
Alternative option(s):	• None		
Implications:			
Are there any financial implications? <i>If yes, please give details</i>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any staffing implications? <i>If yes, please give details</i>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any ICT implications? <i>If yes, please give details</i>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any legal and/or policy implications? <i>If yes, please give details</i>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Are there any equality implications? <i>If yes, please give details</i>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Ward(s) affected:	All Wards		
Background papers: <i>(all background papers are to be published on the website and a link included)</i>	None		
Documents attached:	None		

1. The Formation of Forest Heath Council

- 1.1 In 1970, the (then) government committed to a unified, simplified two-tier structure of governance in England. As a result, major reforms were proposed to local government in Suffolk, including the abolition of West Suffolk County Council and its Districts.
- 1.2 In its place arose a new structure, with one County Council for Suffolk, and seven Districts. Original proposals saw Newmarket amalgamated into Cambridgeshire, but a late amendment retained the Town within Suffolk. This provoked considerable debate in the House of Commons, most notably due to the desire of both the City of Ely Urban District Council and Newmarket Rural District Council, who wanted the Town to be in Cambridgeshire, as opposed to West Suffolk County Council, who wanted to retain it within Suffolk.
- 1.3 Eventually, the government settled on the inclusion of the former Newmarket Rural District Council and Mildenhall Rural District Council into what is now Forest Heath Council.
- 1.4 Unlike the creation of West Suffolk Council, the first elections to Forest Heath took place in May 1973, which enabled the new Councillors to have specific responsibility to set up and establish the first Council. The first meeting took place in the (then) Council Chamber, Mildenhall on 25 June 1973. Councillor T.W. Taylor was elected as Chair.

2. The early years of Forest Heath

- 2.1 Much of the early work of Forest Heath was concerned with establishing the Council, and dealing with the transfer of functions and responsibilities of the former Councils. A key topic was the location of the Council's office, and in 1979 it was agreed to construct the office on College Heath Road, Mildenhall.
- 2.2 During its final months, Newmarket Urban District Council had taken steps towards a new swimming pool and potential leisure complex within the Town. Forest Heath recognised that there was an element of fairness about this project, given Mildenhall had an indoor swimming pool. In 1974, the Council set up a committee to explore such a complex being located on George Lambton Playing Fields.
- 2.3 Concepts were drawn up, and funding committed for project architects. However, the scheme was cancelled in October 1976. In June 1977, a new public survey was commissioned to explore appetite for the project which led to funding commitments towards a new complex, with separate changing rooms on George Lambton Playing Fields. The changing facilities were complete during 1978, and the final work on the leisure centre complete in 1985.
- 2.4 Leisure was a prominent topic in other parts of the District. Forest Heath had supported Suffolk County Council in developing a new upper and middle school in Mildenhall, and in 1978 agreed to finance the expansion of leisure facilities on the upper school site, which ultimately led to the

building of the Dome leisure centre in 1984. In 1977, the Council supported the building of skateboarding facilities in Brandon, Mildenhall and Newmarket, costing £7000 each.

- 2.5 In 1984, it had been decided that it was not viable to construct a large-scale leisure facility at Brandon. However, discussion continued and in 1989 it was agreed to commit £800,000 towards construction of the leisure centre. The centre was opened in 1990.
- 2.6 Housing was a prominent topic at Council meetings. Whilst today, much of the day-to-day decision making is delegated to the Council officers, in the early days of the Council, many more decisions were undertaken by members – including the allocation of Council housing. Due to the pre-existing agreements with the Greater London Authority to allocate housing to people from London, which had led to significant development in Brandon and Mildenhall in particular, local businesses had to receive specific waivers to allow for local residents to be allowed to move into Council houses – these were only granted by the Council itself.
- 2.7 A report on the history of Forest Heath Council would not be complete without reference to the horseracing industry. Forest Heath has been proud to be home to the “Headquarters” of horseracing – Newmarket. In addition to the Palace House redevelopment, the Council has overseen the planning and development of the Town. This has caused challenge, in ensuring the right balance between the needs of the town and the industry, but also presented the opportunity to support development of the facilities such as horsewalks, gallops and, in July 1998, when the Council granted planning permission for the construction of the Millenium Grandstand.
- 2.8 In addition to the Home of Horseracing, the next largest tourist attraction in Forest Heath’s area is the Elveden Centre Parcs village, attracting hundreds of thousands of people each year. The site was open in 1989 after several years of planning and development involving the Council. On 4 April 2002, a major fire engulfed the site, which was rebuilt just over a year later at a cost of £60m.
- 2.9 From the outset, the Council recognised the importance of the strong links with the local USAFE airbases at Mildenhall and Lakenheath. Many of the pictures on display at the Council offices were presented in the first few years of the Council, and much work has been done to foster positive Anglo-American relations. Leading representatives of the Forces have been consistently welcomed at Council events, which has been very much reciprocated by the forces themselves.
- 2.10 In particular, the Honorary Commanders programme, run by the US Air Force at both Mildenhall and Lakenheath has worked to promote alliances between the local community, and encourage local community leaders to promote the work of the Air Force. Through this scheme, a number of Councillors and officers have served as Honorary Commanders, reinforcing our links with the bases.

3. Community Governance

- 3.1 Community Governance has been a prominent topic throughout the history of Forest Heath. With growth in the District, parishes were consistently meeting the threshold over which a new Parish Council would be required, including both Herringswell and Red Lodge during the 1980's. Each year, the Council ran a "village of the year" competition, and the recipients invited to Council to collect their award.
- 3.2 By the early 1990's, the development of Red Lodge in particular was growing in prominence. The dualling of the A11 around the village had unlocked the potential for significant growth, and in 1992 it was recognised that specific masterplans were required within the masterplan to resolve the challenges and opportunities presented by this development.
- 3.3 In 1987, the topic of the Newmarket boundary was again raised by the Boundary Commission, who proposed to put Exning, Newmarket, Kentford and Moulton into Cambridgeshire. Unlike before, the Cambridgeshire authorities were opposed to this move, in line with the response of Forest Heath and Suffolk County Council. These proposals were ultimately dropped.
- 3.4 The Boundary Commission then had a further proposal in April 1994 – to merge Forest Heath and East Cambridgeshire Councils to form a new unitary authority. Forest Heath opposed this on the grounds that it would be much simpler to amalgamate Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury Council.
- 3.5 In December 1994, the Commission agreed not to make changes to Local Government in Suffolk, but Forest Heath made strong calls to create separate Parishes for Newmarket, Exning and Beck Row. At the time, such changes could only be made by the Government, and by 1998 all three new Councils had been agreed. Forest Heath created its final Parish Council, for West Row, in December 2018.

4. Council Governance

- 4.1 Forest Heath was created as one of the smallest Districts in the Country. Historically, it had 25 Councillors representing 15 wards, but this was changed in 2003 so that 27 Councillors represented 14 wards. With a small number of Councillors, it has been evident throughout the Council's history that Councillors have taken a very keen and active role, sharing responsibilities and actively participating in working groups.
- 4.2 The early 1990s saw an overhaul of the way that Councils were financed. First, the Poll Tax was introduced, but its unpopularity led to the introduction of the Council Tax system. Forest Heath, unusually, was one of few Councils in the Country that was able to set a rate (excluding special items) of nil as its basic Council tax for the year. In consequence, residents of Cavenham, Dalham, Elveden, Higham and Wangford would only have to pay precepts to Suffolk County Council, their Parish and the Police.

- 4.3 In 2000, the Government proposed substantial changes to the way that Councils work. Councils were encouraged to move towards the Government's favoured options before the new legislation was passed, and so Forest Heath had initially elected to support a cabinet-leader model of governance and was preparing for this accordingly. In one of the final stages of the legislation, the Government then added a "4th option" for smaller authorities. The Council agreed to explore this option but needed to undertake a second consultation with its electorate – with suggestions of a prize draw to encourage residents to take part!
- 4.4 In March 2012, the Council agreed to move towards a cabinet structure, with the final constitutional requirements adopted in May 2012. This was designed to help bring about a more streamlined approach to decision making, as well as align the Council with the vast majority of other councils in the country, in particular St Edmundsbury Borough Council given the increasingly close relationship between the two Councils (as below).

5. The Final Years of Forest Heath Council

- 5.1 The Council's desire to undertake major projects for the good of its residents has not relented. Progressively taking a more commercial approach to decision making in response to financial pressure and to protect and improve services.
- 5.2 Throughout the 1990's, the council had looked to secure the long term future for the Palace House site in Newmarket, following a compulsory purchase order in 1992. Funding was sought to make the site secure, and in 2003-2004 the Council agreed to set up the Home of Horseracing Trust to co-ordinate fundraising efforts for the site. In 2011, a £4.2m HLF grant was secured towards major works on the site, and in November 2016, the National Heritage Centre for Horseracing and Sporting Arts was opened.
- 5.3 The early "noughties" began a time of significant change for the way that services were delivered. In 2002, moves began to transfer the Council's housing stock to a social housing provider, Kings Forest Housing. This was successfully completed following a tenant's ballot which supported the proposals. Leisure services were transferred to a trust, and kerbside recycling began.
- 5.4 At the same time, the Council was exploring options for revenues services and IT provision with Breckland Council. In 2003, this culminated in the agreement for Forest Heath and Breckland to become founder members of a Joint Committee to run revenues and benefits services which ultimately became Anglia Revenues Partnership. This is often extolled as one of the first and most successful partnerships around the Country, having expanded to add 5 further Councils serving hundreds of thousands of residents.

- 5.5 In 2013, the Council received a report that set out the opportunity to explore how the delivery of local public services could be improved by the co-location of services within a single Mildenhall Hub. This had the potential to deliver significant savings for the council and its partners, and offer improved leisure and education facilities. This project progressed, and in June 2018 the first work started on the site. The Hub is set to be opened during 2020.
- 5.5 In 2016, the Council purchased the Toggam Solar Farm. This £14m investment delivers a financial return to the Council, and has helped it to become one of the first Councils in the country to be able to identify itself as being “carbon neutral”. This purchase is now highlighted nationally as an example to other Councils on effective commercial investments, reflecting the Council’s reputation for acting commercially in the face of government funding reductions. Despite being one of the smallest Councils in the country, Forest Heath has been consistently recognised as very much “punching above its weight” in terms of its reach and ability to innovate in the way that services are provided.
- 5.6 By the time the next round of Local Government reorganisation was announced, Forest Heath had already been progressing work with St Edmundsbury Council to explore further opportunities to share services and work collaboratively. It was therefore natural for the two Councils to work together to propose a unitary West Suffolk when invited to do so by the Government.
- 5.7 Ultimately, the reorganisation again did not happen, but the close working between the Councils continued with a shared officer structure under a Joint Chief Executive, and a growing alignment on policy and decision making.

6. As Forest Heath comes to an end

- 6.1 In June 2017, both St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath Councils considered a draft business case to become a single council. The final case was agreed in September 2017, and on 24 May, the Government made the West Suffolk (Local Government Changes) Order which would create a new district-tier Council to replace the two former Councils. The powers and functions of the new Council was unchanged.
- 6.2 This report provides a few examples of some of the most prominent activities by Forest Heath District Council throughout its history. In practice, the Council has undertaken far more than can be recorded in this report. Reviewing records of the Council demonstrates that it has not just developed and delivered projects and programmes itself, but lobbied government and other bodies for change, and supported partners, community groups and local businesses to deliver benefits to the area.
- 6.3 The report itself is not intended to be a comprehensive record of the Council, but instead to highlight some key achievements and provide opportunity to give thanks to those who have made these happen. There are far too many individuals to name individually, but it is worth

highlighting the work of the many Councillors and staff members who have served to set and deliver what the Council wants to achieve; the work of local community and residents groups to support the Council and their communities; local residents, who have consistently expressed their views to the Council – whether through supporting what it wants to do or opposing it, challenging the Council's thinking; the media, who have promoted the work of the Council and also held it to account, and our partner organisations who have worked collaboratively to benefit our local area.

- 6.4 All Councillors who have been elected to the Council have contributed to its work. This report also specifically asks Council to note the commendable length of service of 6 Councillors, namely Councillors Nigel Roman, Carol Lynch, Stephen Edwards, Rona Burt, Chris Barker and Robin Millar, all of whom have served at least 4 terms on the Council, and in total have served a collective 136 years between them.
- 6.5 Members are invited to briefly comment on some of their favourite memories and achievements of the Council, and those that made these achievements happen.