

Title:	Leader's Statement	
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Leader's Statement – February 2020

1. I am not able to be at this Council meeting, for which I have sent my apologies to you all, and know, there will be important discussion on items, including of course our strategic framework and budget.
2. West Suffolk is a wonderful area which we can all be proud of and I know all have our communities and businesses at heart. The budget is about making sure we can not only continue to deliver high quality services, but also those ambitions and projects that make a real and positive difference for our residents and businesses while dealing with the financial challenges all councils face.
3. I am pleased though, not surprised, that the Halifax has just put West Suffolk in the top 50 areas in the country to live – something we already know here and promote. And the fact that Bury St Edmunds features in the Hollywood film, 'A Personal History of David Copperfield' is a testament to the work we do with Screen Suffolk and in turn brings tens of thousands of pounds into our local economy. Thanks are due to Suffolk Public Sector Leaders whose decision to set this initiative up has already seen major films come to our area and raised the reputation for our support of the creative industries here in Suffolk.
4. I welcome the news that Barley Homes has started work on the Westfield site in Haverhill to build much needed new homes. This not only brings managed development but supports the Council's services by bringing additional income. We can all look forward to seeing them built and new residents moving in.
5. We have also supported the delivery of a housing development in Brandon. By working in partnership with Havebury Housing we have helped to fund the development of six new social houses. Alongside four semi-detached homes we have secured two specially adapted bungalows

to be used as temporary accommodation for people with disabilities. This is the result of the reinvestment of the proceeds from the sale of the former council-owned building, known as the Flowerpot.

6. We have of course recently announced we are investing £99,000 on progressing a possible £1.8m upgrade to Brandon Leisure Centre. This will be spent on land and building surveys, project timelines and cost plans, to give cost certainty for West Suffolk Council in considering a seven figure capital investment in the town's facilities. This is in line with the works we have carried out with the £1.5million transformation at Haverhill Leisure Centre and the ongoing £1.8million improvements at Newmarket.
7. Our Rural as well as Environment and Climate Change Taskforces have reported to Cabinet and I am delighted to see their suggestions regarding further actions we can take. One of those suggestions was updating our vehicles to more environmentally friendly ones and I am pleased to see we have already taken that first step with the introduction to our fleet of a van for our operations that runs on electricity – charged at the new Operational Hub which itself uses solar power.
8. Cabinet considered our new Environmental Statement which shows West Suffolk Council is beating environmental targets in reducing greenhouse gas, recycling and generating energy. But as I have said before, we can always do more and are acting on the suggestions of the taskforce group.

The report showed:

- greenhouse gas emissions were down by 22.7% since 2010 – 226 tonnes less of CO2 compared to 2017.
 - Renewable energy generated by West Suffolk Council rose by 14% on last year and up by 66% since 2012/13.
 - Business mileage has dropped by 9% since 2017 and by 34% since 2010.
 - Water consumption was down by nearly 14% since 2010.
 - The Council recycled 52.4% of its office waste – up 9% on 2017.
9. It is also worth remembering that our lovely parks and open spaces, which cost around £2.4m a year to run and manage, are vital in helping support biodiversity, bringing people closer to nature as well as health and wellbeing, and achieved five national Green Flag status awards.

Housing and Rough Sleeping

10. We have once again successfully bid for money from the Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative and have been awarded more than £450,000 for 2020/21.
11. Although these figures fluctuate, the latest count shows that across the whole of West Suffolk there are now eight rough sleepers, compared to 36 in September 2018. Much of our work is on prevention and last year we prevented 393 households from becoming homeless.

12. Our council has already invested heavily in reducing and preventing homelessness together with our partners but these additional funds , alongside our own investments to secure different types of accommodation in this regard , will provide much needed help to our council support team which has dramatically reduced the number of people rough sleeping by 77%.

Community Chest

13. Cabinet has agreed £350,000 in Community Chest grants for 17 local community groups.
14. Since 2015 West Suffolk Council and its predecessor authorities have given nearly £2.1 million to community groups and other organisations as part of our families and communities work. In this year's budget around £0.5million is earmarked for locality and community chest budgets that directly help local groups and organisations to improve people lives.
15. This year the Grant Working Party, considered applications from 46 organisations and I would like to express my thanks for their very hard and good work on this.

Hubs

16. Work is progressing well on the Mildenhall Hub which is bringing together education, health, other public services and leisure into one place with modern facilities for our residents. This should not only make services easier to access but improve outcomes. It is part of our wider work, leading the public sector, in transforming how local government and services work.
17. In addition, the delivery of the ground-breaking Western Way Development has taken an important step forward following a positive independent review of its business case. This concluded that there is every reason why the development should progress provided some existing financial tests are passed. The review, by property development specialist Rider Levett Bucknall UK Ltd, is part of the safeguards that West Suffolk Council has put in place for the project.
18. The innovative multi-million project again aims to bring more closely together a host of public and other organisations and through this, achieve better value and outcomes for our residents in West Suffolk. It includes a new leisure centre to replace the one on Beetons Way, Bury St Edmunds, which is nearly 45 years old and in need of major investment.

Social Prescribing

19. Our health and wellbeing initiatives are already achieving better outcomes for people with a range of issues from mental health to gaining employment and are now being introduced across West Suffolk.

20. The LifeLink social prescribing project was initially piloted in Haverhill in 2017 following a bid by St Edmundsbury Borough Council (now West Suffolk Council) for Government funds. In Haverhill the scheme has already supported more than 350 people, connecting them to local community groups and social activities – and leading to a reduction in their GP visits as a result. In the last few months the scheme was extended to Brandon and Mildenhall.
21. Now LifeLink is being extended in and around Bury St Edmunds, Sudbury, Newmarket, Woolpit, and Lakenheath thanks to funding from West Suffolk Council, Primary Care Networks and the NHS West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group.
22. A team of 10 LifeLink coordinators employed at West Suffolk Council will work across individual areas to support participants on a one-to-one basis, connecting them to social activities, clubs, groups and local services. Benefits include meeting new people and developing friendships, feeling healthier and fitter, learning new skills and developing opportunities for volunteering and employment.
23. Once again West Suffolk Council and our partners are breaking down barriers to not only make real improvements to the lives of our residents but also reducing the burden on the NHS.

Election

24. I would also like to thank our hard-working staff who have just seamlessly delivered another election. This included the Newmarket Neighbourhood Planning referendum which was supported by residents and new councillors were elected for West Suffolk Council (Newmarket North ward), Suffolk County Council (Newmarket and Red Lodge division) and Hundon Parish Council. Congratulations to Councillors Soons, Drummond and Nimmons.

Bury St Edmunds Christmas Fayre

25. Congratulations too to all those involved in the Bury St Edmunds Christmas Fayre on winning a national award. The event, run by West Suffolk Council, which attracts around 130,000 visitors each year has been named as the Best Large Speciality market by the National Association of British Market Authorities (NABMA).
26. The award was given at NAMBA's annual conference in Birmingham with judges praising how organisers West Suffolk Council link in with the wider community and its work with partner organisations.

Budget

27. This budget is the first for our new West Suffolk Council. Despite the challenges all councils are facing from reductions in national funding we are in a strong position, both because of the work our former councils did but also because of the move to a new single council. These things, as

well as forward thinking and common sense finance, means we should be able to continue delivering high quality services alongside wider benefits such as locality funding, community chest, social prescribing and supporting local businesses and jobs.

28. I hope the above report outlines a small snapshot of just some of the ways we are delivering initiatives and services that are transformational and making a positive impact for our businesses and residents. I know we all want this, and indeed more projects, to continue but to do that - and to meet future challenges - we need to make sure we maintain a strong financial position into the future. We do have an exciting programme of projects and want to make sure we continue to deliver the best possible services while also helping our towns and rural communities, reduce our impact on climate change, continue to provide vital families and communities work, including locality grants and tackling rough sleeping and homelessness. If our businesses and local economy are to continue to thrive we must also be able to carry on those initiatives that have already seen us not only save but help support the creation of jobs locally. Our proposed budget should help enable us to do all of that.....and more.
29. It used to be that Government funding made up 70% of our budget but that is now only 30% with the revenue grant completely going this year and uncertainty over business rates retention. I know many of you hear people complain that 'my council tax pays for that' but the fact is that it only makes up around 20% of our total budget. The rest is from the investments we make (which also bring jobs or social benefit) as well as fees and charges. Government also now expects councils to look more to local taxation to meet any funding gaps.
30. We are a lean and ambitious council, but, of course, always looking at what more we can do even better. We have already transformed how we deliver services and will continue to do this to make sure we deliver in the best way, tailored to our local needs and aspirations here.
31. In looking at the budget we of course again be putting our communities and businesses first. You'll also see from the papers that any suggested rise in council tax should apply across the whole of West Suffolk.
32. Our proportion of people's total council tax bill is actually pretty small and we have an investment strategy to help support our services and reduce the financial burden on our residents (and bring other benefits to West Suffolk). Our recommendations focus on making sure the Council will continue to deliver essential services, create the right environment for jobs and economic growth, support the health and wellbeing of residents, manage development and housing, tackle climate change, protect the environment and support our rural areas.

Car Parking Review and our Town Centres

33. Cabinet has now reviewed the final recommendations made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on car parking.

34. I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this challenging and often emotive review. We look at car parking routinely – though this is the first full review across West Suffolk - and constantly look at how to best manage our car parks including how long people are staying for, the balance of short and long stay parking, where car parks are nearing capacity and other factors. Within that tariffs are just one of many mechanisms for managing demand including the turnover of spaces to support our town centre economies and access to services.
35. Our main priority always is for the continued prosperity, environment and safety of our communities and businesses, and this of course does come at a cost. The Council, for example, pays for the 'Free from 3' initiatives as well as close to £1 million business rates on its car parks. We also continue to invest in maintaining and improving our car parks and town centres and making sure they are efficient, safe and welcoming.
36. There is some misunderstanding that we "hold onto" any surplus made. As I am sure you know that money helps not only support the initiatives and costs I have just outlined but also to support services that directly help our high streets such as our markets, CCTV, cleaning and our work to support businesses.
37. We also have an excellent relationship with (and are a major funder of) the local BIDs', Destination Management Organisations. We will continue to work closely with them and the town and parish councils as well the Chambers of Commerce to not only make sure that West Suffolk continues to be an attractive place for people to live, work, shop and visit but also to make sure that the facilities needed are funded in the best, and fairest, way.
38. As ever our towns and high streets are evolving and there is always more we can do or look to improve. That is why Deputy Leader, Councillor Mildmay-White, announced at Cabinet a Town Centre Summit. We are still working up the details but I envision bringing together both local and external experts to look at the many issues that we are currently facing , and are changing, in our high streets and town centres and how we can all work together to best address them.

Councillor John Griffiths
Leader of the Council