

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Leader's Statement</b>	
<b>Paper No:</b>	<b>COU/WS/20/007</b>	
<b>Paper to and date:</b>	<b>Council</b>	14 July 2020
<b>Documents attached:</b>	<b>None</b>	

## Leader's Statement – July 2020

1. As I write this I am looking forward once again to seeing you all, albeit virtually.
2. A great deal has happened to put it mildly since we last met at Full Council and the changes, challenges and indeed pain which our communities and businesses have gone through, and are still experiencing, are immense. What has also shone through however, has been the dedication, support and community spirit which makes West Suffolk such a very special and good place to live and work.
3. Throughout this, West Suffolk Council has, as usual, been at the forefront. We have risen to many very unexpected and difficult challenges and worked in ways and at a pace that has been impressive, flexible and innovative. The Council has also, of course, played its role in the national response, delivering what Government has asked of us, and much more.
4. At the same time, we have never lost our core values of supporting our communities and businesses while delivering high quality services.
5. Our staff have been, frankly, magnificent – and even that word does not adequately describe their efforts for and dedication to the people we all serve.
6. As I will highlight in this report, and despite a reduction in our own human capacity and personal challenges (thanks to COVID-19), they have helped businesses continue to trade, or reopen, as well as accessing and delivering millions of pounds of Government grants. They have linked with thousands of volunteers and hundreds of organisations, including town and parish councils, to help get medicine, food and support to the most vulnerable. We have also housed those in need and homeless, while

continuing to keep parks open, and emptied more than one million bins...to mention just some of so many things.

7. I know that councillors have also been working very hard to support this, while leading and assisting the response to COVID-19 in their communities.
8. We have all had to learn different skills, including holding a plethora of virtual meetings! Many have themselves been vulnerable, or comforting and providing help for others who are. In recent days we have even become highway planners to help shops open, while reducing the risk of COVID-19 spreading.
9. This, of course, includes staff and councillors who have either not been well themselves or shielding. But their dedication and courage meant that most continued to find ways, if and when possible, to continue with their work and help us all.
10. I have been both impressed, and often amazed, by the many examples of not only what we as a council have been doing, but also the efforts of our communities and businesses. So many individuals and groups making real differences in our and their areas deserve our gratitude and thanks.
11. You only need to look at the many films that since lock-down have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times to see what our staff, businesses and volunteers have been doing.
12. The thanks our council, staff and councillors have received from residents has been overwhelming. The number of messages of support, signs taped to bins, windows and walls as well as waves and smiles have gone a long way to keep morale up. We have also acknowledged this in many ways, including regularly lighting the Apex and Abbey Gate in Bury St Edmunds blue for NHS staff, key workers and carers.
13. It has been a long journey, but it is not over. Not only are we still responding and helping with the response to, and recovery from this pandemic but we are now playing our part with partners to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 through test and trace...
14. As a County we continue to pressure Government to seek the financial support we need to help cover what we have been doing, but also going forward. A campaign I very much hope you will all support. While Government funding to date has helped some of this additional COVID-19 related activity, and will not be covering it all, it has a lot more to do in this respect.
15. However, what has been very clear is that the decision to create a single West Suffolk Council was a good and fortuitous one. It has made us far more sustainable and robust while remaining sufficiently fleet of foot to meet the tailored needs of our local communities and businesses – something a much larger or smaller organisation would have perhaps struggled with.

16. It also occurs to me that although many of you know what we have been doing, and we have also been doing our best to keep the public up to date (and I have provided you with regular updates which I hope you have found useful), it may not have been laid out in a single public report.
17. Therefore, below is a summary of just some of things that have happened since the stay at home guidance in March. I have broken it down into services, businesses and communities.

## **Services**

### **Contact Centre**

18. Once lockdown was announced our staff, wherever possible, were working from home using technology and procedures we had happily tested earlier in the year as a precaution.
19. This saw our own contact centre operate immediately and entirely out of people's homes, and many other councils have since asked us to help them achieve this. This "virtual centre " has dealt with around 12,800 calls in that time, with 1,344 of those on the Home But Not Alone Line.

### **Bins**

20. In the first 48 hours of the stay at home guidance, our staff capacity was very severely reduced which meant we had to eventually pause brown bin emptying and close markets. We have now brought back the garden waste (brown bin) service and indeed improved it to be more robust, thereby reducing the likelihood of us having to stop it again, changing routes to reduce mileage and help the environment, while future proofing it for both current and predicted growth.
21. Our bin crews remain deservedly popular with the general public who have been thanking them in a number of ways. The signs and messages of support have now outgrown our notice boards and are stuck on the windows of the Operational Hub.  
[https://twitter.com/West\\_Suffolk/status/1260231855938375680?s=20](https://twitter.com/West_Suffolk/status/1260231855938375680?s=20)  
<https://youtu.be/4To4-D6vd98>
22. The crews, who have emptied more than one million bins since lockdown, have also been giving back with, for example, one little boy getting a truck of his own after constantly waving and smiling at his local team.  
<https://youtu.be/2qDKYkPkl-4>
23. They were also given hundreds of chocolate eggs for all they had done from the NHS.  
<https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/news/prws2104202001.cfm>

## Markets

24. We are also now again running markets across West Suffolk and working closely with traders and with new, stricter rules to help reduce the spread of infection while supporting our residents and business. During this time, we lobbied for traders to be included in the Government grant system, which resulted in them getting extra financial help. In addition, not only did we give advice on how they could run alternative delivery services – such as ice cream vans delivering frozen food in the Newmarket area, but publicised their businesses as well. This did so well for one trader he had to ask us to stop as he could not keep up with the orders. Cabinet Office have now used us as a case study. Markets will of course continue to play an important part in helping our local high streets and economy recover.

<https://youtu.be/rrmRWq6ouQs>

<https://youtu.be/VTgrBHP7IvY>

<https://youtu.be/dwdFfV7qVzE>

## Housing

25. West Suffolk Council has worked hard to fulfil the Government's 'Everyone In' policy, ensuring people who were rough sleeping or in shared sleeping accommodation were provided with self-contained accommodation, thus reducing the risk of COVID-19 infection. This led to an unprecedented demand for temporary and emergency housing for people in need of support. Since the stay at home guidance was issued, we have provided emergency accommodation for more than 155 households and individuals.
26. This has been extremely challenging (and going above and beyond for some, as the Government asked us to) and finding suitable places was very difficult, but successful - even more so, as you would expect with many concerned having considerable personal issues and tough individual circumstances.
27. Prior to the pandemic, the Council had, through support and accommodation, already reduced the number of people rough sleeping down from 36 to eight. Currently, as I write, the Council has around 149 households in temporary or emergency accommodation, including 30 families and 105 single people or couples, plus 14 rough sleeper beds. This compares to 83 households in June 2019.
28. During the last few months we have managed, as have other councils, by making use of empty hotels as well as B&Bs. But many of these hotels are now beginning to start operating as commercial businesses which means the rooms will no longer be available to the Council to use as temporary or emergency accommodation.
29. Alongside all of this, the Council anticipates more people could become homeless when the moratorium on evictions ends in August, while

furlough pay reducing from July and ending in October may also see more people struggling to pay their rent or mortgages.

30. The Council has anticipated this, and has taken steps to make sure 15 more temporary homes are available for up to six months to help prevent people going back onto the streets and reducing further COVID-19 risk. These are on our land and have water and electricity, as well as staff on site. While we recognise that they are not ideal, these homes we are providing offer an immediate option, following recent government announcements, and are available now. In the longer term, the support of registered housing providers, more house building and more partnership working with private landlords - amongst other things - will all be required to help meet the anticipated demand for homes.

### **Parking**

31. To help our key workers and volunteers, we initially made our car parks free, and any parking enforcement was targeted at keeping streets clear so emergency vehicles could get through as part of the COVID-19 response. Since the change in guidance from Government on the re-opening of businesses we have brought back parking charges but at the old tariffs (rather than previously agreed higher ones) with free permits for NHS and some volunteers who are critical to responding to COVID-19. We are obviously keeping this under review as guidance changes and the use of car parks rises, as well as the wishing to help our local businesses. The income from car parks helps pay for the £1 million bill in business rates arising from them as well as services such as CCTV, maintenance and cleaning which is of course important for our town centres. We have also reintroduced charges for parking at our open areas and country parks to help manage them, particularly as they became busier. We are also seeing more enforcement against illegal parking in our towns and villages.

### **Meetings**

32. We are adapting to new ways of working and have already had virtual online public meetings, including Cabinet as well as Development Control Committee – and now Council. While we still have much to learn, the Local Government Association has written to us complementing the Council on our running of these virtual meetings and highlighted our practices are amongst the best in the country. Thank you to all that have made this possible.

### **Leisure**

33. Our Leisure Centres are currently closed with a skeleton staff. Abbeycroft has been helping people keep fit with online help, but the continued closure of these facilities is having a major economic impact on them and we have now provided them with more than an extra £150,000 to help the centres through this. We know they will be vital for the mental and physical wellbeing of our communities as we recover from the pandemic

and people can, once again, use leisure centres. At the moment the Apex Box Office is also closed until Government guidance changes.

### **Parks and recreation**

34. Our parks have remained open throughout the pandemic, which has assisted the health and wellbeing of our communities. We have seen them become much busier, but visitors have happily been responsible and generally kept to social distancing. While our museums have been closed, we have released regular information films to help teachers and those home schooling on a range of topics appropriate for the curriculum. Hopefully by the time we next meet our museums may be open again, but with social distancing measures.

<https://youtu.be/3Yn5e3V9C1Q>

<https://youtu.be/2yYpMddXimM>

35. As I write this we are in the process of re-opening our playgrounds. This not only involves changing signage but also checking them all for safety.

### **Environment**

36. Despite the pandemic, we have been able to continue our work to help the environment. As you may remember, I set up a cross-party Environment and Climate Change Taskforce at the same time as we declared a Climate Change Emergency. They have been meeting and are due to bring their findings forward to Cabinet this month. In the meantime we are increasingly using electric equipment such as a van and new, more environmentally friendly tools. We marked World Environment Day with the news that West Suffolk Council's solar farm recorded its best month so far in terms of the amount of renewable energy it is generating. May saw it produce 2007MWh of electricity – its best performing month so far - and the equivalent of powering 600 homes for an entire year. We are more than playing our part in the national ambition of no coal fired power being used, and there were periods in May where 65% of the country's power demand was being generated by renewable sources.
37. The sunny weather helped our solar farm produce 27% more electricity than forecast for April and May.
38. We are also cutting verges less in certain places to help wildlife and carefully choosing plant types to help bees and other pollinators. This builds on our existing work in our parks and open spaces for biodiversity.
39. West Suffolk Council monitor air quality at 70 locations across the district, with most of these located in town and close to major roads. Although it was anticipated that pollution would reduce during lockdown, the amount it has reduced by was not. New analysis shows that compared to the same period last year pollution levels were approximately 45% lower across

West Suffolk for April, with the worst polluted sites being less than half of that recorded last year.

40. I and the Council remain dedicated to continuing to help the environment where we can, and to build on what has already been achieved.

### **Work continues**

41. Despite lock down we have been able, under new guidance, to carry on with many of our projects. Construction on Mildenhall Hub has resumed and is now making good progress again. Equally we were able to start work on the new skatepark for Newmarket. I am also pleased to say that the new tennis courts in Abbey Gardens have been able to open.

### **Businesses**

#### **Creating Safer Places**

42. West Suffolk leads on the creating Safer Places cell for Suffolk and, working with local BIDS, stakeholders, town and parish councils, is introducing changes in our towns to help businesses open. We have publicised these changes and introduced new measures in our towns as well as continued help for businesses to follow national guidelines and to help reduce the rate of infection. This includes new signage and social distancing markers as well as reducing pinch points. The plans are on the Council's website as is a business pack with signs and information for everyone to use. Understandably our staff have had to act quickly as Government intentions were announced and then guidelines followed later. Our intention has always been to do our best to help businesses open safely while preventing the further spread of COVID-19. We have been able to give advice to businesses, and I know some Councillors themselves have been out helping with this in our streets and helping shoppers.

#### **Grants**

43. Once the Government announced the fiscal package to help companies, we prioritised resources and redeployed staff to help businesses and deliver payments on the Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail, Leisure. To date we have paid out over £35.5m under these schemes, helping more than 2,850 West Suffolk businesses.
44. We have also created and started paying out on the additional more recent (and smaller) "discretionary" scheme, which we lobbied for, to include market traders, charities, bed and breakfasts where Council Tax but not Business Rates is paid, and small businesses in shared space or premises where they are not the Business Rate payer - providing additional funding for some businesses that were not eligible before.

45. The funding for this is limited – and we have prioritised the four types of businesses asked for by Government, which actually gives us no real room for any real “discretion”. Although Government asked us to start dealing with applications from the beginning of June we were able to start a week before and as a consequence as I write we have now paid out £1.4 million to a further 200 businesses and organisations.
46. We have also been helping businesses in other ways for example by easing planning regulations around deliveries so they can get the goods they need for customers.  
  
Government East has used us as a case study:  
<https://twitter.com/HMGEast/status/1250444659731636224?s=20>
47. We have worked with the LEP on putting forward projects in West Suffolk for Government funding and with Greater Anglia to see work agreed for the station in Bury St Edmunds.

### **Community**

48. We have also redeployed staff to handle calls for the Suffolk wide Home But Not Alone initiative to get food, medicine and vital support to the most vulnerable. Our Families and Communities approach put us in good stead for this, and we were able to quickly mobilise or connect with more than 660 volunteers, groups and organisations in West Suffolk. They have been at the forefront of this work to support our communities and we are working closely with many to give extra support or help to look at funding opportunities going forward.
49. What has been heartening is also to see that many of these groups want to continue this work even after the recovery. Below is just one example of a Haverhill group that we are working with talking to BBC Radio Suffolk.  
[https://youtu.be/G\\_cRwc65m6c](https://youtu.be/G_cRwc65m6c)
50. It is perhaps astonishing that since 30 March our handlers have dealt with more than 1,500 calls on the Home But Not Alone line. As you know these calls are on a range of issues from people needing food, medicine and support, including those coming out of hospital and those who feel isolated. These calls can be highly distressing, and I would thank and pay tribute to staff for how well they have been dealing with them. Like our work with businesses we redeployed staff to help with this – some who were shielding themselves but volunteered to help from their homes.
51. You can see and hear in the below films about what some of the groups and staff have been doing.  
<https://youtu.be/8E-6hSsf9o>  
[https://youtu.be/Rmr\\_IUHqy2k](https://youtu.be/Rmr_IUHqy2k)  
<https://youtu.be/2k4NYqCt-jc>

52. The band of volunteers who stepped forward to make this possible ranged from individuals, charities, community organisations, businesses as well as parish and town councils. Many of you in this meeting have also been involved. We recognised this work as part of Volunteers' Week and our staff have also been thanking the many volunteers:

[https://twitter.com/West\\_Suffolk/status/1266018702882979841?s=20](https://twitter.com/West_Suffolk/status/1266018702882979841?s=20)

Leaders of the Suffolk public organisations and Suffolk Resilience Forum also said thank you:

[https://twitter.com/West\\_Suffolk/status/1268919584058413057?s=20](https://twitter.com/West_Suffolk/status/1268919584058413057?s=20)

53. While the focus of this briefing has majored on just some the services delivered by our dedicated staff it would be wrong for me to not recognise the commitment and work of the 64 Councillors who make up this Council. You often act as facilitators, community connectors, problem solvers and sometimes simply a friendly face and comforting word. We structured the Council to support this through our Families and Communities Team and by increasing the locality budget by an extra £32,000 to a total of more than £211,000 this year in recognition of the additional capacity needed in our communities to respond to COVID-19. You councillors are often the ones visiting and taking calls or answering emails late into the evening as well as rolling up your sleeves in your communities to solve problems and help your residents. The Council would not be the same without the commitment and time provided by so many of our Councillors who of course know their wards and residents better than most
54. I hope this report gives you a flavour of just some of the things West Suffolk Council has been, and is doing, to support our businesses, residents and communities.
55. I am - I think rightly - proud of the crucial part we all play, and have played, for the people we serve and the delivery of services and these initiatives, as well as the asks made of us by Government. Once again thanks to all who have done, and continue to do, a magnificent job. COVID-19 has been extremely challenging for us all, and it has not gone away, but things would have been worse, and be even more difficult, without this.
56. I must end on a sad note. Many of us have suffered the loss of friends, family or acquaintances to this miserable pandemic in the last few months. We mourn them all.
57. In addition, in the last few days we have also sadly lost both a former Mayor of St Edmundsbury, Cllr Stefan Oliver, and the founder and Chairman of Berkeley Homes, Tony Pidgley. Both men were remarkable, good friends to West Suffolk, and will be fondly remembered and much missed. I have written to their families expressing our condolences.

**Councillor John Griffiths**  
**Leader of the Council**