

## Leader's statement

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### Leader's Statement – December 2020

- As I write this, the news of a vaccine beginning to be rolled out for COVID-19 is everywhere. It is something I think we can all be thankful for, and perhaps the best Christmas present possible for many. Christmas is of course a special time for family and friends and, perhaps particularly this year, for thinking of others. It is perhaps also appropriate to raise a glass to the wonders of science and the hard work of so many that has gone into, and continues our fight against COVID and to produce and deliver the needed vaccines and medicines. But we must also remember the many families across the UK, and in West Suffolk, who will not be able to celebrate Christmas as they would normally. There may be an empty chair at the table this year or someone in hospital due to this deadly pandemic. The virus has not gone away and there is still a long time before life can return to anything near it once was.
- I know and applaud the dedication you, together with our staff, have put in to serve, protect and help our communities and businesses. It has not been easy been and some of you have also been personally and directly affected more than others by COVID-19. Our staff have given their all this year, and continue to do so magnificently, in responding to the pandemic while continuing to deliver the services we all depend on. Over the year I have highlighted just some of the many cases they have dealt with in helping businesses access grants or the more vulnerable getting help. Thinking and giving of yourselves for others is what sums up not only the spirit of Christmas, but that of West Suffolk Council.
- So my Christmas wish this year is to give thanks for all the inspiring examples of selflessness we have seen in our communities while also remembering those who are no longer with us or are vulnerable. There is still much we need to, and can all do, over the coming weeks and months to protect one another and reduce the risk of spreading the infection.

### **Award winning**

4. I am very pleased to say that West Suffolk Council has scooped three national awards.
5. The West Suffolk Operational Hub has won the National Construction Award for Best Community Engagement and a Merit Award for Physical Achievement from the Institute of Civil Engineers, East of England.
6. While our Democratic Services Team was crowned Team of the Year by the Association for Democratic Service Officers.
7. Huge congratulations to these projects and teams as well as all those involved in delivering them. It is huge feather, or feathers, in our cap. These awards are always a team effort and demonstrates just some of the many high-quality services and initiatives we deliver across the Council.
8. And finally, the first West Suffolk Council Staff Awards took place virtually on 9 December, and I was both impressed by it and very pleased to be able to thank all our staff on behalf of councillors. I was inspired by the approximate 250 members of staff who attended to support and recognise each other. The words thank you do not express the gratitude we as members and the public feel for the job they have been doing and continue to do.
9. Well done to all the award winners and nominees, and thanks again to everyone at West Suffolk Council for your dedication.

### **Stricter COVID regulations**

10. Since we last met, new stricter regulations were brought in nationally and we have emerged, for the time being at least, in Tier 2. Once again the Council reacted quickly to translate the guidance and responsibilities issued by government so that we could continue the services we were allowed to, and help our communities access the support they need. We were there through the Home But Not Alone initiative to provide help as well as helping businesses access Government funding. Through this time we have helped businesses access around another £2.5 million from November's Local Restrictions Support Grant and the first phase of the Additional Restrictions Grant (which has now closed). This meant, once again, quickly redeploying staff to help deliver these initiatives as well as using the expertise and information we had gained earlier in the year which enabled us yet again to hit the ground running.
11. Markets have remained open throughout this time and continue to go from strength to strength. I am pleased to hear that in Haverhill, as just one example in West Suffolk, the Friday market is as busy and popular as it has ever been with more footfall and traders than seen before.
12. Our parks and open spaces also remain busy and of course provide inter alia a vital place for people to exercise during these times.

13. We all owe thanks to all our staff and councillors who helped make that happen.
14. I know that many are disappointed in our being placed in Tier 2 when we have done so well to keep infection rates down. The good work of turning around the rising figures in Moreton Hall, for example, showed the power of public services and the community working together so well here. While I understand the reasoning and the fact that COVID does not stick to geographical boundaries I very much hope that by continuing to look out for one another we will see further easing of regulations in our area as soon as possible.

### **Business**

15. As well as the grant work that I have mentioned above, the Council has been working closely with traders and others to help them meet guidance and even open new businesses during this time.
16. Also, in a bid to help tackle unemployment in the region, West Suffolk College and its partners have taken the decision to extend their youth employment programme to people of all ages who are unemployed or at risk of redundancy due to COVID-19.
17. In 2019, The One Step Closer scheme was commissioned by West Suffolk Council and co-funded by us, Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Public Sector Leaders to support young people aged 16 to 24 in West Suffolk who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) towards their career goals. Early in 2020, Babergh District Council and Suffolk County Council followed the great work that One Step Closer had started and created a new scheme for young people in the Babergh District.
18. Both projects have seen their dedicated Talent Coaches support and mentor over 500 16 to 24 year olds into Apprenticeships, jobs and further education. Due to rising unemployment rates in all age groups, both schemes will now be made readily available for people of any age who are seeking employment, education or training.
19. Despite the current climate, the college apprenticeship recruitment is hitting new heights with the team having placed over 500 apprentices into roles with employers since the pandemic hit back in March.
20. I think this is another great example of how our Council goes that extra mile to work with partners to help our communities and support growth in skills and jobs in our area.

### **Leisure**

21. Even before the pandemic I think we all recognised the need for people to stay healthy and our leisure centres have been at the forefront of this. That need is even greater now with COVID ever present and the evidence around the benefits of staying fit and healthy in both mind and body.

22. The leisure industry, like many, has been hit hard by COVID-19 and the regulations around what can remain open and not least by our own charity, Abbeycroft Leisure, which manages the council's five leisure centres.
23. To help them, Cabinet recently agreed to vary the terms of a £1 million loan facility in response to these ongoing pressures as a result of COVID-19.
24. In July, the Council agreed the facility to support Abbeycroft's cashflow, while awaiting the outcome of lobbying Government for promised funding for leisure trusts
25. Following extensive open book conversations and a deeper understanding of the financial impact and shape of recovery, the amendment has been made to a £500,000 tranche of the secured loan, and extending the facility from six to ten years.
26. I hope you will all agree that a strong and varied leisure and sports offer will be even more important than ever as we seek to recover from this pandemic protecting and improving people's health and wellbeing. As lockdown ended last time, we saw a strong return to leisure centres and although they had to close again, we know our residents really value what they offer.
27. Almost half of all council-provided leisure facilities across the country are run by leisure trusts, which despite having been severely affected by lockdown and other COVID-19 measures, still await the details of the £100m funding package promised from central Government. We, with other councils across the country, continue to lobby Government to release the detail of this much needed (and now long overdue!) funding.

### **Winter Accommodation**

28. The cold weather we are experiencing is a salient reminder, if one was needed, of our continued work to reduce homelessness in West Suffolk. While we have reduced numbers we know that this time of year is particularly difficult for those who are homeless and our team continue to do excellent and, at times, very challenging work, to get people off the streets or provide help with other agencies where they can.
29. That is why emergency accommodation across West Suffolk has been increased to ensure there are enough beds to cater for homeless people this winter while also maintaining COVID-19 safety measures.
30. The Council has increased its temporary and emergency accommodation provision over the past few years. We also continue to use temporary accommodation provided by registered providers in addition to accommodation which is ring-fenced for rough sleepers. As you know we have invested in and been successful in securing Government grant

funding to provide additional accommodation, including extra hotel rooms for the winter months.

31. In the summer the Council secured the use of 15 temporary cabins to house people who may otherwise be out on the streets, and these will remain in use over the winter whilst alternative housing is found for residents. These have been particularly useful during this year to help meet COVID guidance.
32. The Council is also continuing to try to engage with people who are still rough sleeping in West Suffolk and to encourage them to take up the support and accommodation available.
33. I would also echo the words of Councillor Sara Mildmay-White – we have our teams and provision in place for the winter, and we would once again ask anyone who sees or suspects someone is rough sleeping, that they report it to [www.streetlink.org.uk](http://www.streetlink.org.uk). That sends an alert to the Council's Rough Sleeper Support Team who, if they are not already doing so, will look to speak to and work with the rough sleeper, and help them with accommodation and support.

## **Environment**

34. **Haverhill Recycling Centre** - As some of you may already know Suffolk County Council has announced they are now investigating the feasibility of building a new recycling centre for Haverhill at the existing Waste Transfer Station at Homefield Road. This they will do alongside us and FCC environment. If this goes ahead it will of course be another step change in recycling provision but without the need to go up steps, unlike the current facilities, making it easier and safer for people to use.
35. The Waste Transfer Station operations would continue to take in waste from homes and businesses from parts of the West Suffolk Council area, for bulking and transporting onwards for reprocessing. This means that we can continue to keep waste miles down and hopefully with this new recycling centre encourage more people to recycle and re-use.
36. If given the go ahead, the site will be larger which should mean the facility will not close its gates when skips are being changed. This is a big improvement on current facilities where it causes queuing and engine idling etc.
37. **Green Homes** - Here in Suffolk, and particularly West Suffolk, we have a strong track record, both individually and as partners, in addressing climate change. Thanks to an initiative led by West Suffolk residents in the county are set to benefit in two ways following recent Government announcements about its Green Homes Grants.
38. The Green Homes scheme, which is designed to help make homes more energy efficient, offers vouchers to households to get energy saving work

done and also invites councils to bid for funding to run home energy efficiency projects.

39. A Suffolk consortium bid, again led by West Suffolk Council, has been awarded over £1 million from the Department of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy for five projects to be installed by 31 March 2021.
40. The window for making this bid and for delivering the projects was extremely tight. But, because all partners collaborated so well and because it is a priority for us all, these schemes were ready and we were happily successful in securing the funding.
41. The funding will help insulate 50 owner occupied and privately rented park homes in West Suffolk, insulate and install renewable heating in 48 socially rented properties in Babergh and Mid Suffolk, retrofit external insulation in two properties in East Suffolk, install solid wall insulation in 10 properties in Leiston and Sizewell and install insulation and heating measures in 73 social housing homes managed by Flagship Group.
42. By making homes more energy efficient, residents could be warmer, save on fuel bills and, of course, do their part in reducing carbon emissions.
43. In addition, the Prime Minister has announced that the Greener Homes voucher scheme for homes has been extended to March 2022, giving households an extra year to apply for up to £5,000 towards energy saving measures. Please feel free to share this link with residents <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-for-the-green-homes-grant-scheme>
44. **Markets** - I was pleased to visit an excellent community project which aims to reduce food waste and save families money and has teamed up with both Bury St Edmunds market and Bury Rickshaw.
45. Traders on the market have been donating left over fruit, vegetables and bread to The Best Before Project. The food is collected and transported at the end of every Wednesday market by the charity Bury St Edmunds Rickshaw and is then sold at low cost by the not-for-profit organisation - a good size shopping bag can be filled for £1.
46. We, together with our traders, have been looking to reduce food waste, and the opportunity to work with the Best Before Project and the Rickshaw charity is an inspiring solution.

### **Mildenhall Hub**

47. Work continues at pace at the Mildenhall Hub, despite COVID-19 restrictions.
48. Whilst it is difficult in these times to take you around the site physically I hope you will take the opportunity, if you have not already to look at the film made by R G Carter, the construction firm that is building The Mildenhall Hub.

49. The Hub brings together a modern new school for Mildenhall College Academy, new leisure facilities including bigger pools, plus a health centre, library, advice centre, children's centre and desk space for Suffolk Police, West Suffolk Council, the NHS, including Public Health England.
50. R G Carter had hosted a number of tour events prior to the pandemic and recognised that there was particular excitement around the new school and leisure facilities. It produced the video to share not just with project partners, but also local residents, so they can see for themselves that the Hub is progressing and will be in use in 2021.
51. You can See the video at <https://vimeo.com/480248277>
52. Please also go onto our website to see the creative work of students from Mildenhall Academy on hoardings around the hub thanking Suffolk keyworkers and the NHS.
53. Students from the academy, due to relocate to the hub next year, took part in a competition to design posters for use on hoarding artwork at the site.
54. Twenty-five designs were chosen and printed for display as part of a collaboration between the Academy, R G Carter and Suffolk Says Thanks, an initiative to celebrate everyday acts of kindness.

### **We Remembered**

55. I wanted to applaud everyone, including our own staff and Chair, who helped ensure that remembrance events went ahead last month in a COVID safe way.
56. It was extremely important that veterans and communities could find ways to mark the occasion but in a way that protected them – as many were vulnerable themselves – and of course to help reduce the risk of spreading the infection.
57. Although I know the events that were held were different to what we might normally expect many councillors, local councils across West Suffolk, staff and organisations found ways of remembering them with dignity.
58. Many of these events were also made available for the first time online and watched by people, doing their bit to take part while protecting others.
59. I think this is a great example of the spirit of our West Suffolk communities – our strong ties to the past and respect for those who have served their country while looking for ways to help and support one another and embracing new initiatives to do this.

## Transport

60. I am pleased to report that the Secretary of State has listened to many local voices and found that four West Suffolk rail foot crossings should be saved from closure, two years after the original public inquiry.
61. As many of you will know Network Rail had moved to bulk close a number of pedestrian rail crossings across the county including Weatherby crossing in Newmarket, Higham and Higham Ground Frame between Barrow and Newmarket and Cattishall crossing to the east of Bury St Edmunds.
62. The Planning Inspector's findings now published by the Secretary of State, find that all four West Suffolk foot crossing closures should be removed from the Network Rail order.
63. The Planning Inspectorate held a public inquiry into the matter in 2018. Suffolk County Council and West Suffolk Council together retained the services of a barrister to contest the closures, while the Ramblers Association was among others objecting.
64. The status of the Weatherby crossing was explored at 2018 inquiry, but whether or not it is a public right of way fell outside its scope and the matter remained to be resolved. Suffolk County Council, which maintains the definitive map of public rights of way, was supportive of including it, but Network Rail objected. This led to a further public inquiry being held in October 2020 led by Newmarket Town Council, with West Suffolk Council supporting this action and contributing to legal costs.
65. I am delighted with this outcome, which was built on knowledge of the impact closure would have on local people's lives. In these days of sustainable travel, we successfully argued that the distance and gradient of the proposed diversionary route in Newmarket was too far and too steep and would oblige people to get back into the car. The Cattishall crossing gives access to open countryside for Moreton Hall residents, and a brand new development has also been planned around it.
66. I want to thank all those involved in this which made sure the right decision was made.
67. **Have your say** - West Suffolk residents, and in particular those travelling to Cambridge from Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket, are being asked to comment on Greater Cambridge Partnership's proposed transport improvement options for people accessing Cambridge from the east.
68. Referred to as the Cambridge Eastern Access project, Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) is consulting on five options, including improved rail services on the Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket to Cambridge line which could see a twice hourly service instead of the current hourly service. The consultation, which is open until 18 December, is an opportunity to comment on options proposed. Option B3 is of particular interest as it

references the long term rail opportunity which could include new and re-opened train stations, as well as more frequent train service on the Cambridge to Ipswich line.

69. As you know West Suffolk is part of Cambridgeshire's housing market and travel to work areas and it is vital our communities and you have your say.
70. I am also pleased to see that Greater Cambridge Partnership is focusing on improving transport to the east of Cambridge. It is important to recognise that traffic congestion originates much farther out than the Cambridge eastern access area and, consequently, the impact of trips from and to West Suffolk should be considered.
71. The consultation closes at midday on Friday 18 December 2020.
72. **West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust** - By the time you read this you may well have heard that West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust (WSFT) confirmed (on 10 December) that it has selected Hardwick Manor as its preferred site for a new healthcare facility.
73. The Trust was recently confirmed as one of 40 across the country to receive funding for new build projects from the Government's Health Infrastructure Programme.
74. Four potential sites were investigated by the Trust and rated by technical experts including surveyors, planners and highways professionals. Views and feedback were also gathered from public, staff and patient representatives, such as Healthwatch Suffolk, Trust members who represent patients and staff, and the hospital union. Elements such as transport links and the impact on the local environment, as well as room for potential growth and affordability, were just some of the factors that were considered. It led to Hardwick Manor being proposed as the most suitable location.
75. Of course, any plans going forward will go through the normal processes.

### **Local Plan**

76. There is still time to look at our virtual exhibition for the West Suffolk Local Plan Issues and Options consultation and have an input about local issues that affect you.
77. Thousands have already logged onto our online exhibition to look at the issues and options document which examines a range of planning matters including options for growth, a new settlement hierarchy, sites with development potential, the natural and historic environment, housing, transport, retail, leisure and wellbeing, employment, rural communities, climate change and horseracing.

78. We want you and our communities to have their say in what is important for us all in West Suffolk up until 2040. The local plan consultation is open until 5pm on 22 December. #YourFuture #YourSay

**Art**

79. Once again West Suffolk is on the arts and culture map nationally. In association with Brandler Galleries, our own Moyse's Hall Museum is excited to invite you to 'share a moment' with a unique collection of modern art created by some of the world's best-known artists, including: Banksy, Tracy Emin, Damien Hirst, The Connor Brothers, Blek Le Rat, Pure Evil, Rachel List and Kaws.
80. The exhibition will be supplemented by a range of workshops, live art demonstrations, talks and other events all themed around the concept of 'moments'. Running Sunday 14 February – Sunday 30 May 2021. Advance booking is essential.
81. It is yet another example of how we punch above our weight in a range of areas and can still put on exhibitions even through COVID.

**And Finally,**

82. I just want to say thank you again for all your hard work this year and for that of our staff. 2020 has been a challenge and things will continue to be so. There is of course now genuinely some light at the end of the tunnel but we all must still play our role in keeping infection low. Stay safe and have a Merry Christmas, and all the very best to you and yours for a much happier New Year.

**Councillor John Griffiths  
Leader of the Council**