

Minutes of a meeting of the **Council** held virtually via **Microsoft Teams** live remote meetings platform on **Tuesday 23 February 2021** at **6.30 pm**.

Present **Councillors**

Chair Brian Harvey

Vice Chair Margaret Marks

Richard Alecock	Robert Everitt	David Palmer
John Augustine	Stephen Frost	Joanna Rayner
Trevor Beckwith	Susan Glossop	Karen Richardson
Mick Bradshaw	John Griffiths	David Roach
Sarah Broughton	Pat Hanlon	Richard Rout
Simon Brown	Diane Hind	Marion Rushbrook
Tony Brown	Rachel Hood	Ian Shipp
Carol Bull	Ian Houlder	Andrew Smith
John Burns	Paul Hopfensperger	David Smith
Mike Chester	Beccy Hopfensperger	John Smith
Patrick Chung	James Lay	Karen Soons
Max Clarke	Aaron Luccarini	Clive Springett
Terry Clements	Victor Lukaniuk	Peter Stevens
Simon Cole	Joe Mason	Peter Thompson
Jason Crooks	Elaine McManus	Jim Thorndyke
Dawn Dicker	Sara Mildmay-White	Don Waldron
Roger Dicker	Andy Neal	Cliff Waterman
Andy Drummond	David Nettleton	Ann Williamson
Mary Evans	Robert Nobbs	Phil Wittam

106. **Welcome**

The Chair formally opened the meeting and welcomed all persons present including those that were viewing the meeting externally via the live broadcast, to this virtual meeting of Council.

107. **Remembrance**

Before commencing business, all members were asked to ensure their microphones were muted and observe a minute's silence in remembrance of Councillor Jim Meikle who had sadly died recently. A statement of condolence was given by Councillor Ian Shipp, reflecting Councillor Meikle's contribution during his time on the Council.

108. **Meeting Facilitation**

Leah Mickleborough, Service Manager (Democratic Services), was acting as facilitator for the meeting where support was felt necessary, and upon being invited to do so, assisted the Chair in detailing the housekeeping matters and guidance as to how the meeting would operate within the virtual setting.

109. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 December 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

110. **Chair's announcements**

The Chair reported on the civic engagements and charity activities which he and the Vice-Chair had attended since the last ordinary meeting of Council on 15 December 2020.

The Chair drew attention to the virtual event of RAF Lakenheath that he had recently attended, together with a similar virtual event held by RAF Mildenhall where representatives of Suffolk and Norfolk county and district councils had been in attendance.

111. **Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michael Anderson and Lisa Ingwall-King.

The Chair paid tribute to Councillor Ingwall-King who was currently unwell. Members joined the Chair in wishing her the very best with her recovery.

112. **Declarations of interests**

Members' declarations of interest are recorded under the item to which the declaration relates.

113. **Leader's statement (paper number: COU/WS/21/001)**

Councillor John Griffiths, Leader of the Council, presented his Leader's statement as outlined in paper number: COU/WS/21/001.

In his introductory remarks:

- a. **Councillor Jim Meikle:** In addition to the tribute message that had previously been circulated to members, and the letter of condolence that had been sent to his family, Councillor Griffiths paid further tribute to the late Councillor Meikle.
- b. **Thanks:** Councillor Griffiths once again placed his thanks on record to all staff and members of West Suffolk Council for their sterling work over the past year. He specifically acknowledged their exemplary efforts for supporting businesses and communities during the Covid-19 crisis, while continuing to deliver services.

- c. **Covid-19:** Councillor Griffiths highlighted West Suffolk's role within the Covid-19 vaccination and testing programme, including that a site in Brandon was now being utilised as a testing centre. The Council was continuing to support vulnerable persons through the Home But Not Alone initiative and individual ward members were heavily involved in local initiatives to support those in need within respective wards. Councillor Griffiths then provided a synopsis of the financial support provided to eligible local businesses from the various Government business support grants that were currently being administered by the Council.
- d. **Budget:** Councillor Griffiths drew attention to the budget for 2021 to 2022 and the proposed plans for the medium term, which was due to be considered later in the agenda. With partners, the Council would support recovery from the impacts of Covid-19 in West Suffolk, including taking the recent decision to again defer the implementation of the previously approved increases to car parking charges that had originally been due to take effect from 1 April 2020. Members were however, mindful that the Council needed to generate much needed income to provide vital services and ensure that West Suffolk continued to remain an attractive place to live, work and visit. He paid tribute to officers and members for the enormous amount of work involved in achieving a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022, particularly in such difficult and challenging times.
- e. **Environment:** Councillor Griffiths reported on the grants recently secured for West Suffolk which, working with partners, would assist local householders in making energy efficiency measures.

(In the interests of maintaining openness and transparency, Councillor Paul Hopfensperger wished to declare that he was a small business owner in Bury St Edmunds as his question related to a matter in connection with this.)

The Leader responded to the following question from Councillor Paul Hopfensperger relating to:

- a. **Brexit support:** Whether anything was being done by West Suffolk Council to highlight to Government the issues, challenges and difficulties faced by small businesses following the UK's exit from the European Union. Councillor Griffiths stated that the Council's Economic Development team were working with, amongst others, partners in the Chamber of Commerce, the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and Suffolk Public Sector Leaders regarding this issue. He referred the matter to Councillor Susan Glossop, Portfolio Holder for Growth who reiterated Councillor Griffiths' statement regarding the support that was being given to small businesses; however, a written reply with further detail would be provided to Councillor Paul Hopfensperger's question and circulated to all members.

No further questions were asked.

114. **Public participation**

Frank Stennett of an address located within the district, a member of the public, had registered to speak under this agenda item; however, Mr Stennett was unfortunately unable to attend the meeting and a member of the Democratic Services Team read out his written statement on his behalf:

Mr Stennett's statement was in connection with a range of issues which included promoting environmental initiatives and technologies as well as suggesting ways for attracting people to the high streets and markets within the district's towns.

Mr Stennett ended his statement by asking whether the Overview and Scrutiny Committee could be commissioned to investigate residents' parking, parking charges and market traders' fees in the light of Covid-19, stimulating the town centres before any fee increases would be implemented.

In response, Councillor John Griffiths, Leader of the Council, firstly thanked Mr Stennett for his statement and indicated that he would confirm his reply in writing.

In reply to the specific question, Councillor Griffiths stated that:

- In respect of car parking charges, the Council had taken the decision to once again defer the increase in charges that had been approved for implementation from 1 April 2020. These increases and schemes (such as 'Free from 3'), which were now being kept under review, were originally developed and recommended by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- The subject of Markets was already on the forward work programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and that Councillor Griffiths was looking forward to any conclusions and recommendations the Committee may reach.
- Finally, the Council with its partners, would now be turning their attention to how West Suffolk would successfully plot their own Covid-19 recovery plan now that the Government had announced its roadmap out of England's current lockdown. This would include the future of the district's town centres.

As Mr Stennett was not in attendance within the virtual meeting itself and was anticipated to be viewing the livestream instead, there was no opportunity for a supplementary question to be asked arising directly from the reply.

No other members of the public had registered to speak under this item.

115. **Referrals report of recommendations from Cabinet (Report number: COU/WS/21/002)**

Council considered the referrals report of recommendations from Cabinet, as contained within report number: COU/WS/21/002.

A. Referrals from Cabinet: 9 February 2021

1. Delivering a Sustainable Medium-Term Budget

The recommendations emanating from this item had been incorporated into the main budget setting report due to be considered later on the agenda at Item 8. No decision was therefore required at this stage.

2. Financial Resilience: December 2020

Approval was sought for the Financial Resilience Report for the third quarter of the 2020 to 2021 financial year from 1 April 2020 to 31 December 2020.

Councillor Sarah Broughton, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance, drew relevant issues to the attention of Council.

On the motion of Councillor Broughton, seconded by Councillor Clive Springett, it was put to the vote and with the vote being 58 for the motion, none against and one abstention, it was

Resolved:

That the Financial Resilience Report (December 2020), as contained in Report number: FRS/WS/21/001, be approved.

3. Financial Resilience - Strategy Statement 2021 to 2022 and Treasury Management Code of Practice

Approval was sought for the Financial Resilience Strategy Statement 2021 to 2022 and the Treasury Management Code of Practice.

Councillor Sarah Broughton, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance, drew relevant issues to the attention of Council, including that the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's (CIPFA) Treasury Management Code of Practice required that, prior to the start of the financial year the Council should formally approve a Treasury Management Policy Statement and Investment Strategy, setting out the Council's treasury management policy and strategy for the forthcoming year.

The Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2021 to 2022 was attached as Appendix 1 to Report number: FRS/WS/21/002, and the Treasury Management Code of Practice attached as Appendix 2.

The report also included additional supporting information on treasury advisors; borrowing strategy; investment strategy counterparty ratings and interest rate projections.

On the motion of Councillor Broughton, seconded by Councillor Andrew Smith, it was put to the vote and with the vote being 57 for the motion, two against and no abstentions, it was

Resolved:

That:

1. the Financial Resilience Strategy Statement 2021 to 2022 as set out in Appendix 1 to Report number: FRS/WS/21/002, be approved; and
2. the Treasury Management Code of Practice, as set out in Appendix 2 to Report number: FRS/WS/21/002, be approved.

4. Budget and Council Tax Setting 2021 to 2022 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2021 to 2025

Similarly with the first Cabinet referral outlined above, the recommendations emanating from this item had been incorporated into the main budget setting report due to be considered next on the agenda at Item 8. No decision was therefore required at this stage.

116. Budget and Council Tax Setting 2021 to 2022 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021 to 2025 (Report number: COU/WS/21/003)

Council considered the above report, which presented the proposals for Budget and Council Tax Setting in 2021 to 2022 and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2021 to 2025.

The 2021 to 2022 budget had been prepared in the context of not only the significant challenges facing local government, such as reductions in national funding streams, but also a national and worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in the UK, a number of events had occurred which had had a significant impact on all local government, including West Suffolk Council's financial position in the current financial year and these were expected to continue into 2021 to 2022. Some of these had been restrictions imposed by Government which would continue to affect the Council's investments, assets and services; and other events had been announcements of Government financial support.

The Council had played a vital role in responding to the pandemic, in supporting businesses and communities for example, as well as running essential services during challenging conditions. Further details were provided in section 1 of the report, including the impact of Covid-19 on the Council's financial position which would not be fully known for a significant time.

The medium term plans had also been prepared in the context of significant uncertainties around Government policy, examples of which were contained in section 1.8 of the report, while continuing to acknowledge the economic impact, challenges, uncertainties and unknowns of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councils nationally were expected to achieve a balanced budget through savings and producing local income to fund services due to reduced Government funding. This year, as a one off to assist with the expected continued impact of Covid-19, the Council would see an increase in funding from the Government. However, members noted this would not completely neutralise the impact expected from the pandemic. Nor would it address the financial challenges that already existed for local government following a decade of funding reductions and increases in the demand for services such as housing and homelessness support.

Despite this and the additional pressures presented by Covid-19, through prudent budgeting, a review of the Council's vacant posts, investment as well as transformation, West Suffolk Council was in a good financial position. However, while this meant a balanced budget could be set for 2021 to 2022 there were gaps to be met in later years, as set out in the report.

Members considered the report in detail, which included the following issues for securing a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022 and plans for the medium term from 2021 to 2025, together with corresponding detailed appendices:

- Section 1: Background and context, which included reference to the Council's 'Investing in our growth agenda' and the proposed transformation of West Suffolk Council
- Section 2: Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, which included reference to the Revenue Support Grant and Rural Services Delivery Grant; the new Lower Tier Services Grant; the future of New Homes Bonus; the homelessness and rough sleeping funding allocation; Covid-19 support funding; funding from the sales, fees and charges lost income reimbursement scheme; funding from the National Leisure Recovery Fund; business rates and business rates reliefs; Collection Fund deficits; funding for council tax support; and council tax referendum limits.
- Section 3: Council tax for 2021 to 2022
- Section 4: Setting the budget – 2021 to 2022 and across the medium term to 2024 to 2025
- Section 5: Capital programme 2020 to 2025 (including disposal of surplus assets)
- Section 6: Minimum revenue provision (MRP)
- Section 7: General fund balance
- Section 8: Earmarked reserves
- Section 9: Strategic priorities and MTFS reserve
- Section 10: Adequacy of reserves
- Section 11: Calculation of the council tax

Having acknowledged the issues highlighted above, Council also noted that currently, council tax made up approximately one fifth of the authority's budget (exclusive of housing benefit) and therefore only contributed to a fifth

of service delivery. West Suffolk Council charged around 11 percent of a local council tax payer's bill with the rest comprising precepts from the County Council, Police and Crime Commissioner as well as the relevant Parish or Town Council. It was recognised that any increase in council tax would place an extra burden on tax payers but it meant vital services would be protected. Covid aside, bridging the gap between income and demand remained the single biggest challenge facing local government across the country.

To help secure a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022, on 9 February 2021, the Cabinet had recommended an average £4.99 increase in Band D council tax across both predecessor areas of St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath. The budget for council tax for 2021 to 2022 and future years was based on the option to harmonise the two predecessor areas (St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath) using the average Band D rate across both predecessor areas, harmonising the council tax bills by 2022 to 2023, whilst maximising the council tax receipts to protect services and to support the Council's investment plans. For 2021 to 2022 this represented an average Band D weekly increase of 22 pence (for the predecessor area of Forest Heath) and three pence (for the predecessor area of St Edmundsbury).

Therefore, the level of Band D council tax for 2021 to 2022, was recommended by Cabinet to be set at £185.40 for the predecessor area of St Edmundsbury and £175.59 for the predecessor area of Forest Heath. Noting that just over 70 percent of West Suffolk residents were in bands A to C, these would actually see a lower increase.

Councillor Broughton drew relevant issues to the attention of Council, including commending the finance team and the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, together with staff and other members across the authority for their work in securing a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022 in such challenging and unprecedented times, and for developing plans in the medium term. She welcomed the Government's recently announced roadmap out of England's current Covid-19 lockdown and in the coming weeks, work would be undertaken to understand the impact of the national recovery strategy on the Council's own recovery plans and its key budget assumptions for the next year and beyond.

A detailed debate ensued which included a number of comments, observations and questions, including:

- a. The perceived lack of investment in Brandon by local ward members who felt that West Suffolk Council was not supporting prosperity for Brandon or delivering like for like services as appeared to be the case for the rest of the district. Issues such as new housing development (and any accompanying s106 monies), community halls and a bypass were examples given as areas that were lacking in Brandon. In response, other members stated that amongst other initiatives, Brandon Leisure Centre would benefit from an almost £2 million investment to upgrade its current leisure offer; local communities themselves had led and worked in partnership with the Council and others to bring forward new and refurbished community centres within their own areas; Brandon ward members were encouraged to actively engage in the new West Suffolk Local Plan development process and

look to overcome environmental challenges that had historically restricted housing development in the locality; and it was the responsibility of the Highways Authority or Highways England regarding the construction of a bypass.

- b. Whilst the Labour Group commended all staff and officers across the Council for their sterling work during the pandemic, and congratulated those involved for achieving a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022, the Group felt it could not support approval of the budget due to the consistent under-funding received from central Government. In response, members noted that whilst the ongoing lack of sufficient funding was not acceptable, the Council, with partners, was continuing to lobby in the strongest terms for fairer funding. In the meantime, a balanced budget had been achieved in extremely challenging and unprecedented times due to previous prudent financial decisions made by the Council.
- c. The Council's income had been severely impacted in the past year and therefore under the circumstances, this was considered by the majority of members to be the best budget that could have been achieved. No alternative budget had been presented by those that did not support these proposals.
- d. As recovery plans from Covid-19 were now beginning to emerge, the proposed budget enabled support for the recovery process and several examples were given in respect of how the proposed budget would help implement and achieve those plans in accordance with the Council's strategic framework and themes of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- e. Support provided to those in housing need, including accessing vital Government funding and the provision of much needed temporary accommodation which had particularly shown an increase in demand due to the pandemic; and the role of Barley Homes within the budget, with developments now coming forward to provide new homes, including affordable housing, as well as providing an income for the Council.
- f. Whether it was the right time to continue with the council tax harmonisation plans which had been agreed before the impact of the pandemic was known. With many residents now facing their own personal financial challenges, it was questioned by Councillor Ian Shipp, Leader of the Independent Group, whether the Council's reserves should be utilised further to balance the budget in the present circumstances. In response, members noted that in these exceptional circumstances, reserves had been used significantly to balance the budget for the current year, however this was not sustainable for future years. The Council often had to make difficult, but prudent, financial decisions and it was imperative that in time, reserves were replenished to demonstrate financial resilience and maintain sustainability.

Using West Suffolk Council, Suffolk County Council and Havebury as an example of different bodies cutting their own areas of land in the St Olaves ward, Cllr Paul Hopfensperger asked whether there was some way of rationalising the grass cutting undertaken by various partners across the district as he felt this would be more cost effective than the present arrangements. In response, Councillor Broughton stated that a written reply would be provided and circulated to all members in due course.

The majority of members acknowledged that despite the financial challenges being faced including the added pressures of Covid-19, the Council had made, and were continuing to make, successful investments in services; growth, environment-improving and health and well-being projects; together with creating efficiencies, resilience and ensuring the effective management of resources, all of which and more would enable West Suffolk Council to secure a balanced budget for 2021 to 2022 with sustainable medium term plans in place.

The motion was then put to the statutorily required recorded vote. With 59 members present, the votes recorded were 44 votes for the motion, 15 against, and no abstentions; the names of those Members voting for and against being recorded as follows:

For the motion:

Councillors Augustine, Beckwith, Broughton, Simon Brown, Tony Brown, Bull, Burns, Chester, Chung, Clements, Cole, Crooks, Drummond, Evans, Everitt, Frost, Glossop, Griffiths, Harvey, Hood, Beccy Hopfensperger, Paul Hopfensperger, Houlder, Lay, Luccarini, Marks, Mason, McManus, Mildmay-White, Nettleton, Nobbs, Rayner, Richardson, Roach, Rout, Rushbrook, Andrew Smith, John Smith, Soons, Springett, Stevens, Thompson, Thorndyke and Williamson.

Against the motion:

Councillors Alecock, Bradshaw, Clarke, Dawn Dicker, Roger Dicker, Hanlon, Hind, Lukaniuk, Neal, Palmer, Shipp, David Smith, Waldron, Waterman and Wittam.

Abstentions:

None

It was therefore

Resolved:

That:

1. Having taken into account the information received by Cabinet on 9 February 2021 (Report number: CAB/WS/21/008) including the Report by the Assistant Director (Resources and Performance) (Section 151 Officer) set out in Attachment C, together with the up to date information and advice contained in Report number: COU/WS/21/003, the level of band D council tax for 2021 to 2022 be set at £175.59 for the predecessor area of Forest Heath, and £185.40 for the predecessor area of St Edmundsbury. The level of council tax beyond 2021 to 2022 will

be set in accordance with the annual budget process for the relevant financial year.

2. Subject to recommendation 1 above, the following formal council tax resolutions be adopted:
 - a. the revenue and capital budget for 2021 to 2025, attached at Attachment A and as detailed in Attachment D (Appendices 1 to 5), Attachment E (Appendices 1 to 3) and Attachment F be approved.
 - b. A general fund balance of £5 million be agreed to be maintained, as detailed in paragraph 7.2 of Report number: COU/WS/21/003.
 - c. The statutory calculations under Section 30 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, attached at Attachment I, be noted.
 - d. The Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Police Authority precepts issued to West Suffolk Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and outlined at paragraphs 11.6 and 11.7 of Report number: COU/WS/21/003, be noted.
 - e. In accordance with Section 30(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the amounts shown in Schedule D of Attachment H be agreed as the amount of Council Tax for the year 2021 to 2022 for each of the categories of dwellings shown.
3. The Assistant Director (Resources and Performance), in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance, be authorised to vire funds between existing Earmarked Reserves (as set out at Attachment D, Appendix 3) as deemed appropriate throughout the medium term financial planning period.
4. Approval be given to the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy as set out in Attachment G.

117. West Suffolk Planning Code of Practice (Report number: COU/WS/21/004)

Council considered the above report, which sought approval for a revised West Suffolk Planning Code of Practice.

In developing the West Suffolk Council Constitution, the Shadow West Suffolk Council agreed a Planning Code of Practice. The Code of Practice operated alongside the Code of Conduct, providing guidance to all members on how they should act in relation to planning applications in their own ward, and provided additional guidance to members of the Development Control

Committee on the steps they should take to ensure planning applications were made in a fair, consistent and transparent manner.

A report issued by Transparency International in August 2020 highlighted potential risks to the planning system and encouraged authorities to adopt a range of best practice recommendations to reduce the risks of conflict when dealing with planning applications. In addition, incidents reported within recent caselaw placed emphasis on steps that should be taken to avoid potential conflicts for those members who had led on development proposals. With officer guidance, this prompted the Constitution Review Group to take the opportunity to review and update the existing Planning Code of Practice for West Suffolk.

Councillor Carol Bull, Portfolio Holder for Governance, drew relevant issues to the attention of Council, including responding to the following questions:

- a. That a presentation on the new Code of Practice could be given to members of the Development Control Committee in the near future
- b. Where officers made planning decisions under delegated authority, these were made in accordance with the officers' Code of Conduct contained in the Constitution.
- c. Residents could report planning concerns to their respective ward members, who could then take these forward on their behalf, as appropriate.

On the motion of Councillor Bull, seconded by Councillor Andrew Smith, it was put to the vote and with the vote being 57 for the motion, none against and one abstention, it was

Resolved:

That the revised Planning Code of Practice, as contained in Appendix A to Report number: COU/WS/21/004, be approved for inclusion in the West Suffolk Council Constitution.

(Councillor Mary Evans left the meeting during the consideration of this item and therefore did not vote.)

118. Calendar of Meetings 2021 to 2022 (Report number: COU/WS/21/005)

Council considered the above report, which sought approval for the proposed calendar of meetings for West Suffolk Council in 2021 to 2022.

Councillor Carol Bull, Portfolio Holder for Governance, drew relevant issues to the attention of Council, including that largely due to the uncertainties around the Covid-19 situation which had impacted on the ability to convene meetings in person, no venues had been stipulated on the calendar at present. In addition, a flexible approach was required to be taken in respect of when the Council offices at College Heath Road would be vacated. New office and

meeting accommodation would then be provided in the Mildenhall Hub which was due to open in phases later in 2021.

Other specific changes proposed to previous years' calendar of meetings, as set out in Section 2 of the report were also noted.

On the motion of Councillor Bull, seconded by Councillor Sara Mildmay-White, it was put to the vote and with the vote being unanimous, it was

Resolved:

That the Calendar of Meetings 2021 to 2022, as attached at Appendix A to Report number: COU/WS/21/005, be approved.

119. **Any other urgent business**

There were no matters of urgent business considered on this occasion.

120. **Conclusion**

On conclusion of the meeting, the Chair thanked all present for their attendance at this virtual meeting of Council. The live broadcast subsequently ended at this point.

The meeting concluded at 8.26 pm

Signed by:

Chair
