

Leader's statement

Report number:	COU/WS/21/012	
Report to and date:	Council	28 September 2021
Documents attached:	None	

Leader's statement

1. I would like to welcome back everyone after this summer break and hope you managed to have some time off with friends and family. I also know that many Councillors and staff will have spent a lot of this time continuing to serve our communities and delivering services.
2. There has also been much going on internationally, nationally, and locally and West Suffolk is playing its part in or is having to meet challenges caused by this. From dealing with COVID-19 and the recovery of our businesses and communities to events in Afghanistan, County Deals, how Social Care is to be funded, tackling the climate change crisis and more – West Suffolk has a role to play.
3. As ever we are rising to those challenges some of which I will outline below, as well as continuing to deliver improvements and high-quality services for our residents.

Funding

4. We continue, as you would expect, to keep a tight watch on funding and the impacts of COVID and other national initiatives. You will all have heard the announcement by Government on National Insurance (NI) and the needs of the Social Care system which we are of course acutely aware of. Indeed, through many of our services, especially housing and families and communities, we play our part in the social care system and in helping those most vulnerable in our society. I am sure you will have also seen that all businesses and public bodies have to part fund this NI rise too. We are looking at the consequences of this alongside all the other financial issues we face and, as these become clear we will include it as part of the budget making process going forward.
5. The Spending Review will also set out the plan for how public spending can deliver the people's priorities over the next three years.

6. The Chancellor has this month launched Spending Review 2021 (SR21), which will conclude on 27 October 2021 alongside an Autumn Budget and set out the Government's spending priorities for the Parliament and public services.
7. The three-year review will set UK Government departments' resource and capital budgets for 2022-2023 to 2024-2025 and the devolved administrations' block grants for the same period. This should give us a better idea of our budget over the next three years.

Afghanistan

8. No one who has been watching the news could have failed to be moved by the pictures and stories from that war torn country and the plight of the refugees.
9. I am sure, like me, you would have wanted a way to help those in need, which is why I liaised with officers and fellow leaders from across Suffolk about the collective support we could give. West Suffolk and indeed the wider county prides itself on its community spirit and willingness to help those most in need, and I know this spirit will shine through; Suffolk Public Leaders have issued a joint statement regarding our support and role.
10. We've already helped a small number of Afghan interpreters and their households to resettle in Suffolk and area committed to welcoming more households in the coming days and weeks as part of our Afghan resettlement activities, in addition to ongoing work to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and other refugees entering the UK.
11. Our thoughts and actions are not only with the refugees, but also of course with those who served in Afghanistan not least because West Suffolk is and has been home to many service personnel. For some, the pictures and news would have brought back hard to deal with memories and possible mental health issues; I would urge them to seek help from the relevant public and voluntary agencies that are there to support them.
12. Because the numbers of people coming to Suffolk is relatively small at the moment, there is currently no requirement for items to be donated. However, this situation might change, and we are asking people who think they might be able to help to contact us collectively as Suffolk councils in the first instance.
13. If so, please email afghanrefugeesupport@suffolk.gov.uk if you think you might be able to help.

County Deal

14. You may have also seen in the news that the Government are looking at devolution again through County Deals.
15. The Government wrote to councils in July 2021, setting out its ambition to make available to county areas the kind of devolved decision-making powers and public funding currently enjoyed by larger cities and urban areas. It's part

of the Government's 'Levelling Up' agenda and will see a White Paper published in the coming months.

16. In response, public sector leaders in Suffolk have jointly released a statement and have advised Government that we welcome early discussions with Ministers about a possible deal for Suffolk.

17. In a joint letter sent to Rt. Hon Robert Jenrick MP, the leaders of all of Suffolk's six councils and Police and Crime Commissioner Tim Passmore, said:

"Suffolk has already demonstrated its credibility as a place where Government will find strong and ambitious delivery partners.

The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) group has a track record of effective partnership working. These robust relationships enable more innovative ways of working, including exploring opportunities for devolution as part of a County Deal.

Suffolk is an ideal place to help Government demonstrate how levelling up can work in diverse geographies. Suffolk has a strong offer to make to Government and we would welcome early discussions with MHCLG Ministers to explore proposals for a County Deal ahead of the White Paper being published."

18. Suffolk has always been at the forefront of working together as public sector bodies, and you only have to look at our work over COVID, the hubs and social prescribing to name but a few, to see it in practice in West Suffolk. We have always been about outcomes and finding the best way to deliver rather than hampered by boundaries be that physical or organisational.
19. We are waiting to hear back from Government but as this progresses, I will make sure you are kept informed.

COVID-19

New PCR Centre

20. A new COVID-19 PCR testing centre is now open at our old depot in Olding Road, Bury St Edmunds, as part of our wider and ongoing support of tackling COVID-19.
21. This offers PCR testing and operates from 8am to 8pm, seven days a week and has been opened to provide a service in the west of the county following the August 16 rules change around self-isolating.
22. The site is a walk-through test centre but members of the public arriving in a vehicle can park on site and proceed on foot to the test centre building. Parking is free while attending the centre.
23. This new facility will help to meet the anticipated increased demand for testing now that fully vaccinated close contacts, and those aged under 18, no longer

have to self-isolate after being around someone with coronavirus and are advised to take a test instead.

24. This is an NHS Track and Trace facility and does not offer testing for people returning from travel overseas who must continue to follow the rules depending on which country they have been to.
25. PCR testing is carried out on people who are showing symptoms of coronavirus such as a high temperature, a new, continuous cough and a loss or change to their sense of smell or taste.
26. It is also used for people who:
 - Have been in contact with someone who has tested positive
 - Have been asked to get a test by a local council or someone from NHS Test and Trace
 - A GP or other health professional has asked them to get a test
 - Are taking part in a Government pilot project
 - Have been asked to get a test to confirm a positive result
 - Have received an unclear result and were told to get a second test
 - Need to get a test for someone they live with who has symptoms
27. Booking is strongly advised and can be done online or by calling 119.
28. Home PCR testing kits can also be ordered via 119.

Helping businesses

29. Businesses across West Suffolk and the wider county are being urged to keep COVID-19 safe and follow guidance as well as remembering their legal duty to staff and customers.
30. This is part of the successful #AddKindness campaign being run by the Suffolk Resilience Forum across the county. Materials have been available for businesses to remind people who use their or other premises across Suffolk to follow local guidance and help keep businesses open.
31. With the relaxing of guidance and some laws, Public Services and Public Health want to make sure businesses are aware of their duties and provide help if they can.
32. West Suffolk Council have been helping businesses with advice and we will be running a new campaign to encourage people to support their local businesses and stay safe.
33. Businesses have a duty of care under law to their staff and customers and need to make sure they have the right protection and procedures in place. Links to that advice has been shared with many and can be found at [Working safely during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - Guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19)
34. Other useful information can be found at Suffolk Growth which draws together all the guidance from Government and has been developed with

Environmental Health Officers, Licensing, Police and Trading Standards - [PowerPoint Presentation \(filesusr.com\)](#)

35. People using local businesses, visiting tourist attractions, and using hospitality services are also asked to spread kindness and not COVID-19 by following local guidance and where they are able to wash hands, wear masks and leave space.

On the market

36. Our markets are helping to support economic recovery as well as the mental and physical wellbeing of residents. They are also often the way young traders or new businesses start and get a chance to grow their enterprises.
37. I am pleased to report that young traders from West Suffolk markets have been named among the best in the country, winning national awards.
38. The competition was open to 16-30-year-olds and eight young traders had been selected to represent the East of England following a regional competition held in Bury St Edmunds.
39. Two of those from West Suffolk representing the region won their categories in the national competition held by The NMTF (National Market Traders Federation) in Stratford Upon Avon.
40. Sam Green who trades on Bury St Edmunds and Clare markets won the Best General Retail category for his key cutting and shoe repair business Bethmonte.
41. And Sophie Clarke from Sophie Clarke Designs in Mildenhall won Best Arts and Crafts with her hand-woven interior products and homeware.
42. I know we would all congratulate Sam and Sophie, as well as all those who took part in the wider event and the six other local finalists who can be found trading on our local markets.
43. The Council is making all of the eligible young traders aware of the MENTA start-up grant which is funded by the Council, and which helps new businesses get established.
44. I am also pleased to see our Makers Markets doing well across West Suffolk with the introduction of a new one at Bury St Edmunds. This is supported by the Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund (SIGIF) following a successful bid by the Council in March this year.
45. I would also like to thank those Councillors who are currently taking part in the Market Review and know this will help strengthen our successful and vital markets.

Former Post Office goes green

46. Further restoration work and environmental improvements are being made to the front of the former Post Office in Bury St Edmunds town centre over the coming months.
47. This is just part of our work to support local business and the environment. Anyone who visited the site would have seen the impressive engineering feat to protect the Victorian front at 17 -18 Cornhill in Bury St Edmunds, while the rest of the building (much of it built at a later date) was demolished. A steel frame was then built and connected to the front allowing the façade retention system to be removed in July.
48. Restoration work is being carried out alongside the installation of new windows to aid the energy efficiency of the building which will include solar panels and be heated by an Air Source Heat Pump (ASHP).
49. Once completed next year, West Suffolk Council's redevelopment on the site will include two ground floor commercial units with 12 flats above. It will also bring the historic frontage back into economic use, deliver a wider walkway at Market Thoroughfare and create a new business front onto St Andrews Street South. These are all things that members of the public asked for in some of the 8,000 public comments that shaped the town centre masterplan adopted by the Council in December 2017.

Supporting our children

50. I was delighted to see that a summer programme of events helping around 1,300 children across West Suffolk has been highly successful and I know was ably supported both by local councillors and our MPs.
51. The Summer Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) events has seen eligible parents and carers throughout West Suffolk helped through a free holiday clubs programme for children and young people over the school summer break.
52. The Government's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which was available throughout the region this summer, was backed by a nationwide investment of up to £220 million. This aims to enable children and young people to enjoy fun activities with friends and learn and develop new skills.
53. The free programme of activities, coordinated locally by West Suffolk Council, is targeted at those who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals. Most events also had spaces which could be paid for by families who are not eligible for a free place.
54. A range of exciting activities has been held across the whole of West Suffolk and has involved a number of partners, including Abbeycroft Leisure and other councils. It is part of our Families and Communities work.

Mildenhall Hub

55. As I write this, we are only days away from the community opening and celebration of the new Mildenhall Hub. If you have not visited, I hope you get a chance soon to see first-hand the difference this investment in Mildenhall and surrounding area is making. This is truly partnership working at its best and already we have seen the fruits of that (with for example, Mildenhall Police working with us to locate a vulnerable missing person). It is also fitting this is a community event as I know that this nationally ground-breaking initiative is about breaking barriers – and turning our ambitious vision into reality – to provide the best services and outcomes for our residents and businesses.

Park Life

56. I am pleased to report that VisitEngland's Annual Visitor Attractions Survey for 2020 (published 19 August 2021) lists Bury St Edmunds Abbey Gardens and Abbey Ruins as the fifth most visited free attraction in the country.
57. Our 14-acre town centre attraction welcomed some 1,021,048 visitors last year and was the only attraction outside of London in the top five.
58. It is also interesting to note that St Edmundsbury Cathedral also featured in the Top 10 free attractions in the East of England, while Ickworth House, Park and Gardens is listed as number five in the Top 10 paid attractions in the East of England.
59. The Abbey Gardens, like our other parks and country parks, including our newest one at Brandon, have won a Green Flag this year. Indeed, West Stow is often used by television and film companies as well as events put on by our own Council. Abbey Gardens, home to the remains of the Abbey of St Edmund, will be celebrating its 1000th anniversary throughout 2022.
60. These results not only reflect the hard work of our staff and council on the upkeep of our historic assets, but the part they and we play in attracting visitors, and the wider benefits to the West Suffolk economy.
61. Our parks are vital in many other respects including for people's mental and physical health which has been so important during the pandemic. Equally they have supported our environmental aims with the planting of wild meadow and more plants to help pollinators.
62. I would also urge anyone spurred on by Emma Raducanu's victory in the US Open to try the new tennis courts!

Haverhill on tour

63. The world's top cyclists will return to Suffolk in 2021 as the county and West Suffolk hosts the final stage of the Women's Tour in Haverhill for the first time en route to Felixstowe on Saturday 9 October. It will be the first time that Suffolk, which aims to be England's most active county, has hosted the final stage of race since 2014.

64. This stage, which was set to be a part of last year's Women's Tour prior to its postponement owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, was initially unveiled at the Port of Felixstowe in January 2020.

Taxi review

65. Independent surveys of taxi drivers, wheelchair users, other disabled people and people who have mobility issues but would not identify themselves as being disabled, have begun in West Suffolk.
66. These are part of a review agreed by Cabinet last year into its taxi policy handbook, specifically the clause covering Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles (WAVs). The Council was recently presented with letters of concern by taxi drivers from across West Suffolk about this part of the policy and is looking to work with drivers to improve communication between the trade and the licensing authority.
67. The two surveys are being conducted by independent consultants LVSA (Licensed Vehicle Survey and Assessment) to offer both drivers and those responding to the accessibility survey and will be sent to a number of disability groups in West Suffolk as well as Age UK, with the assurance of anonymity when the results are fed back to the Council.
68. Both surveys will close on Monday 4 October at 5pm and while I understand there may have been some teething issues to start with, I believe these have been ironed out and would urge people to take part.

And finally

69. I would like to again thank everyone for their work during these continuing uncertain times to support our communities and businesses. We continue to deliver high quality services and investment in the recovery and prosperity of our communities and businesses, despite the challenges the pandemic has brought. But the figures are clear, COVID-19 has not disappeared, and we continue to do our bit to tackle it from supporting the vaccine programme, supporting businesses, and encouraging people to do their best to spread kindness not infections. This will include some continued use of virtual meetings where appropriate, which not only reduces the spread of COVID but also supports our environmental goals. I know for some this is hard, but I would like to thank all of you for your forbearance on this and helping keep everyone safe while delivering the vital work, we all do.

With best wishes to you all

John

Councillor John Griffiths
Leader of West Suffolk Council