

## Leader's statement

<b>Report number:</b>	<b>COU/WS/22/001</b>	
<b>Report to and date:</b>	<b>Council</b>	22 February 2022
<b>Documents attached:</b>	<b>None</b>	

### Leader's Statement: February 2022

1. This is the first full Council meeting of 2022 and while we are now well into February, I do wish all of you a somewhat belated, but none the less, Happy New Year.
2. As I write this Her Majesty The Queen and indeed the nation are beginning to celebrate and mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee. Her Royal Highness is and hopefully will continue to be, a regular and very welcome visitor to West Suffolk. I am sure all of you will join with me in reflecting on the dedication and unparalleled public service she has shown over the last 70 years. We, like other councils, will be doing our bit as part of the national programme to help mark this momentous occasion, including the Queen's Green Canopy initiative.
3. With the New Year we are developing a new way to help keep everyone informed about what we have been doing; and have initiated a new monthly newsletter sent to you all which you can share with your Parish and Town Councils, as well as on social media. You will have had one of these in the last week and so I don't propose to go back over what is on there in this Leader's Statement – which probably thankfully for you should make it shorter. Please feel free to use the contents included in the newsletter to help keep the communities you represent informed and send any suggestions on how we can improve it to our communications team.
4. That said, there are a few things I would like to address in slightly more detail in my update.

### The Future

5. Before Christmas I highlighted much of the great work and many initiatives we have delivered for our communities and businesses. Tonight's meeting will look at how we can continue this excellent work and, in particular, setting a fair and balanced budget to carry this forward.
6. A budget is of course not just a set of numbers on a balance sheet. It contains within it the thousands of ways we deliver services and improvements to the lives of our residents every day. It is also the means we can deliver our vision

and the ambition West Suffolk has to, put simply, help to continue to deliver a healthier, more prosperous, and greener West Suffolk.

7. One of the first things I did as Leader was to create a task force to assist us to more than do our bit to help tackle climate change. I am pleased to see that this year we are proposing to invest £9 million in a range of green initiatives that will help us reach our ambition of carbon neutral by 2030. But importantly this investment will also pay for itself, not only in the environmental benefits it will bring but also financially. It is another great example of how we in West Suffolk are a forward-thinking authority while at the same time delivering financial security and certainty for our taxpayers.
8. This budget also supports our continuing economic growth work to encourage and support new and existing businesses in West Suffolk – and connecting to our colleges and other business support organisations to make sure people have the right skills and training. We are investing ourselves as well as creating the right environment for business and the growth of the local economy to help provide people the opportunities for better and more employment and skills. In addition, we continue to invest very significantly in other areas - from car parks to our parks - helping our towns and villages and bringing more people to our area.
9. The health of our communities is also vital. If the pandemic has taught us anything it is not only the importance of the wellbeing of our residents but also the ways the public, private and volunteer sectors can work together to improve outcomes for people. We are already at the forefront of this work with LifeLink and the creation of our hubs, bringing health and leisure services together with education and better access to services. We have already invested millions of pounds into this work and this budget illustrates how we will continue this, while continuing to provide the many day-to-day services we do. We continue to invest in our award-winning parks and open spaces, which people turned to through the pandemic for their physical and mental wellbeing. Equally we are making sure we support and protect the most vulnerable, building on the successes we have already had in reducing rough sleeping and homelessness. We are thus proposing a budget that will strengthen our work and make sure the health wellbeing, and future prosperity of our communities is at the heart of what we do.
10. We will also continue this strengthened partnership working by engaging with our Parish and Town Councils in tailoring our services, so they are delivered to have the best effect locally. One of the reasons West Suffolk Council was created was not only to be large enough to champion our communities but small enough to find local solutions to issues. We recognise one size does not fit all and I look forward to moving this work on and extending our already successful families and communities work.
11. This is of course not an easy balancing act. The pandemic has had a financial impact both on our income and the need to continue to support our residents and businesses through this challenging time. In addition, like all local authorities, we have to deal with the historic reduction in national funding. Government policy requires that councils meet any funding gap through income and other means such as Council Tax; and I am sure I have no need

to remind you that Council Tax only pays for 20 percent of our cost of delivering services and that we get just 11 percent of people's overall Council Tax bill. It is also perhaps worth noting that we have been harmonising Council Tax for the two former areas of Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury since West Suffolk Council was created, and this is the final year of that process. We will continue to invest in our area to bring financial and other benefits but also lobby Government with partners for better funding.

12. In short, this budget invests in the future of the whole of West Suffolk and all our communities and businesses. Not only does it deliver the services people deserve and need every day, but it builds on our work to help people to have better opportunities and live in an area that helps them be more prosperous, healthier, and kinder to the planet.

### **County Deal**

13. It is good to see that our efforts around fairer funding and our arguments for decision making and powers to be held more locally has been listened to by the Government. I welcome the newly announced County Deal offer for Suffolk which hopefully gives us the opportunity across the County and in particularly in West Suffolk to gain more funding and drive decision making more locally rather than from central Government. This is a recognition of the 'Suffolk System' which is already in place and can for example be seen working in practice in our hubs across West Suffolk.....and there is no suggestion of the need for a mayor or to change the existing governance arrangements. I look forward to our being part of these negotiations and helping to secure the maximum benefits we can for our communities.

### **Business Grants Update**

14. You have had an update on the various national Omicron business grants we are helping local traders to access, and I urge you to join with the Council and help make sure companies are aware of what is on offer. I am pleased to see that once again we have been quick off the mark to help businesses access this money. West Suffolk Council has already paid out over £760,000 so far to more than 200 eligible local businesses under the Government's Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant (OHLG) scheme, and the amount is increasing daily.
15. We were given an allocation of £1.74 million to pay out OHLG grants (including fixed amounts of up to £6,000 based on rateable value).
16. The Government grant scheme is open to hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses that are in the business rates system and meet the Government criteria; and thanks to changes in Government guidance, we have been able to extend the deadline for applications for this grant by 10 days to 28 February 2022.
17. The application deadline for the separate Omicron Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) is 18 February 2022. In this case the Council has been given £310,000 to help support other businesses including those not in the business

rates system, but who have been severely impacted by the Omicron variant and do not qualify for OHLG.

18. We continue to advise, that with all previous allocations of ARG already paid out to businesses, and with limited funding for the scheme, grants may be somewhat smaller than those received under previous ARG schemes.
19. Unlike with previous grant schemes, we are unable to say how much the Omicron ARG grants will be at this stage. With limited funding, the Council will review and decide on grant amounts for different categories of business once applications have closed on 18 February 2022. Those decisions will be based on evidence of the scale of impact on trade and other criteria such as the type of business. Based on previous numbers of applicants received, the levels of payment may therefore be somewhat smaller compared to those paid previously, because of the smaller allocation from Government.

## **Environment**

20. We know we can do more to build on the good work we are doing to tackle climate change and indeed that is why we are proposing to invest £9 million in measures to help us reach carbon neutral by 2030. However, it is pleasing to see we are already making positive inroads as highlighted by Climate Emergency UK which scored 325 local authority plans according to 28 questions grouped into nine categories. This includes how well councils' plans would mitigate the impact of climate change locally, whether climate and ecological emergency was integrated into existing policies, community engagement, climate education, scale of emissions targets and commitments to tackle the ecological emergency. With 64 percent we had the top score of all Suffolk Councils, were in the top 15 of all district councils (average score was 43 percent for district councils) and top 50 of all councils nationally. While I am unsure of the scientific way this may have been assessed it shows we are moving once again front runners, regionally and nationally. Not only can we do more but we have plans and funding to improve upon this great foundation.
21. I regret that I will be unable to join you in person at this full Council meeting but thank you all for what you are doing and hope that we can all work together (irrespective of any party political or personal interests) to not only approve the proposed budget but continue to move forward together in the best interests of the people and this lovely area which we all serve.

With best wishes,

**Councillor John Griffiths**  
**Leader of West Suffolk Council**