

## Leader's statement

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<b>Documents attached:</b>	<b>None</b>	

### Leader's Statement: June 2022

1. As I write my Leader's Statement the country and our district have been celebrating Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee. It has been wonderful to see the various events and celebrations that communities and local organisations have come together to deliver and which I know many councillors will have been involved in or supported.
2. West Suffolk has a long-established connection with the Royal Family and often play host to Her Majesty The Queen, especially in Newmarket to watch her beloved horseracing. And so, it would be remiss if I did not mark in my statement our admiration and thanks for the 70 years of dedication and service she has given and continues to give to our country and send our best wishes to her majesty on this historic occasion.
3. As there was no formal Leader's Statement at our Annual Council meeting, I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect on many of our achievements as well as highlight some of the challenges and opportunities we face moving forward.
4. At the heart of the creation of West Suffolk Council has always been the welfare of all our communities, businesses and the continuation of our plans to secure a prosperous future for them. Our priorities are focused on growing West Suffolk's economy, fostering resilience in families and communities that are healthy and active and ensuring there is increased and improved provision of the right kind of housing in both towns and rural areas.

### COVID-19 Pandemic

5. Almost immediately as West Suffolk Council was created, we, like the rest of the world, had a new role in managing the impacts of the pandemic.
6. Our Council was able to quickly organise as part of the Home But Not Alone scheme. This meant we were able to deal with around 1,100 cases of need from the most vulnerable and worked with around 450 different organisations to deliver, food, medicine, and support. Equally we were one of the top performing councils in the country in helping our local businesses quickly access more than £120 million in Government grants.

7. In addition, we carried on delivering services such as emptying six million bins, during the pandemic which resulted in countless messages of thanks from residents.
8. But even while rising to that challenge we have been able to continue to deliver the vision we first started with, creating a Local Plan, bringing measures in to manage and grow the local economy, building hubs, tackling homelessness and improving leisure facilities – to name but a few.

### **Economic Growth**

9. We continue to support our existing businesses, attract millions of pounds of investment as well as help grow and establish new ones. From our smallest independent traders to multinational companies our Council is focused on providing support to them. While we can help grow our economy not all the levers are in our gift, and there is even less we can do about national economic trends. With that in mind we will continue to focus on delivering locally.
10. This includes:
  - Investing £590,000 in the MENTA centre in Hollands Road, Haverhill, to support entrepreneurs, start-ups and those considering self-employment.
  - Taking on the day-to-day running of the Harvey Adams Enterprise centre in Brandon, in partnership with MENTA, to help support the existing tenants and new businesses.
  - Committing to create 40,000 square feet of start-up and incubation space at Suffolk Business Park which was approved for new and growing companies, in the advanced manufacturing and engineering (AME) sector and its supply chain.
  - Supported a multi-million-pound vertical farm due to be launched in an unused warehouse in Newmarket. This will be capable of producing 415 tonnes of food a year. This has involved support from the County Council and the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).
  - West Suffolk markets are held in all our towns and continue their recovery from COVID-19, with successful additional initiatives such as Makers Markets, a sustainable produce market, and support for the Young Market Trader of the Year competition. They of course play an important role in supporting town centres and the wellbeing of our residents.
11. We have been bold in investing or attracting outside funding for infrastructure to bring commercial development forward. We have been able to use our finances to unlock further investment for companies while bringing in an income for West Suffolk. This includes the Epicentre in Haverhill which also gained Local Enterprise Partnership support and has now celebrated its first birthday as well as having all its laboratory space full. Our planners work closely to help encourage the growth of business here (or staying in West Suffolk), such as the growth of the Claas agricultural equipment headquarters.

12. In addition, we are working with organisations such as Menta to support businesses as well as bringing colleges and companies together to improve skills and job opportunities for current and future residents. This includes investing in a project with schools to provide more opportunities for young children to learn about STEM subjects. We have been helping arrange job fairs and talks as well as new relationships between colleges, schools and businesses. By getting businesses to work more closely with colleges or encouraging more young people to take up STEM subjects they will be better prepared for the future job markets where new skills are needed.
13. By working with partners, such as the United States Airforce, we have also connected local companies, and apprentices to the millions of pounds of investment being made in the plans for Lakenheath for the arrival of the F35 fighters. Social value generated to date by this project is more than £85 million for the area. The project won the Defence Infrastructure Organisation Sanctuary Award for Social Value. It has created more than 140 local jobs so far and the spend on local small and medium enterprises is nearly 30 percent of the budget.
14. We have directly invested in properties across West Suffolk to support place shaping and drive economic growth as well as improving the centre of our towns. This includes property in Newmarket for retail and residential use as well as Provincial House on Haverhill High Street and the former post office at Cornhill, Bury St Edmunds.
15. The income generated from the assets we own from car parks to businesses and properties total around £15.4 million per year. This income generated helps to support the delivery of services to residents and businesses in West Suffolk and strongly supports our strategic priority of growth in West Suffolk's economy for the benefit of all our residents and, indeed, UK plc. Our commercial asset portfolio provides various types of industrial, retail and office accommodation across the district for businesses and supports their growth (and our investment in growth strategy firmly focusses on West Suffolk).

### **Working differently and across boundaries**

16. We have been at the forefront nationally of new ways of working with partners, such as our Hub projects and the delivery of health and leisure services. Some of which I highlight below.
  - In June 2021, the Mildenhall Hub officially opened (and has already been winning awards). It has brought together a range of services for the benefit of local people with the latest modern equipment and facilities. In the first six months, the leisure facilities at Mildenhall Hub, managed by Abbeycroft Leisure, saw a positive increase in use compared to pre-COVID levels, with centre membership increasing by 38 per cent, swimming lesson participation up by 45 per cent and casual swimming use up by 127 per cent. There was also a 54 per cent increase in library use, with 700 new members.
  - A new splashpad in Haverhill opened in summer 2021, providing play opportunities for local children and families. The council invested £50,000,

alongside £180,000 from Haverhill Town Council who are the lead organisation running the facility. It a great example of us working with other authorities but not taking the traditional role of leading when the better outcome is a more local solution.

- The successful Moments exhibition at Moyse’s Hall Museum in Bury St Edwards saw 200,000 visitors, including 900 school students, and a boost of up to £350,000 to the local economy. The exhibition included original works by international artists such as Banksy and attracted visitors from as far and wide as Cardiff, Edinburgh, Cornwall, Cumbria, and the Isle of Wight. By investing in our heritage and cultural facilities we lever other benefits for all (and in the above case we are looking at how we can encourage even more by having the exhibition tour West Suffolk).
  - In the first year West Suffolk Council helped open the Clare Community Hub. This has brought community groups together with external organisations to support local residents. Examples of this include the delivery of a dementia project supporting local organisations to help those living with dementia within Clare and surrounding villages.
17. This way of working with others has seen partners, such as the NHS, and other public services and councils working better together for one common goal. It has also seen pooled funding and shared approaches to estates.
- As well as the new Mildenhall Hub we have also seen other improvements to Brandon, Newmarket and Haverhill leisure and health facilities totalling £45 million.
18. Next will be the improvements in Bury St Edmunds and much needed modern leisure facilities to be hosted in the Western Way development which is supported by the NHS. We are also planning with partners for Hub facilities in Haverhill. This collaborative way of working is about putting the right solutions in place to meet the local needs of our communities.

### **Families and Communities**

19. In this year’s budget we have earmarked more than £1 million to be invested over the next three years in Leisure Asset Management - including nearly £100,000 in Mildenhall for the replacement of the pump track and renewal of the St Johns Close Multi Use Games Area this financial year. The budget includes £758,000 of investments in renewing play areas and equipment across the whole of West Suffolk. This builds on initiatives such as the Haverhill Splash Pad, developing the new skatepark in Newmarket as well as Yellow Brick Road improvements.
20. Our families and community work has seen hundreds of thousands of pounds invested in Community Chest and Locality Budgets which directly support local projects. You have played your part as local councillors in being champions for your communities to promote these organisations and access funding from the grants we have been able to make available.
21. Over the last three years:

- Organisations and charities across West Suffolk have been awarded a total of £1.39 million in Community Chest funding helping them deliver vital local work and benefits. Just last year the council supported 122 community groups and sports club projects through the Community Restart fund and the Sports Club Restart programme, allocating over £207,305.63 of the £246,609 funding for COVID specific projects. This included £1,700 for Wickhambrook Parish Council to purchase outdoor equipment to support social distancing at community engagement events and £1,989 for Worlington Cricket Club to purchase additional equipment for junior players and for qualified coaches to adhere to COVID guidance.
  - When West Suffolk was first formed some 1,450 children took part in the Crucial Crew initiative which gives year six pupils the opportunity to learn valuable and potentially life-saving skills. Last year, despite COVID restrictions we were able to invite more than 50 West Suffolk primary schools to participate in the first virtual Crucial Crew,
  - In collaboration with West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, 816 referrals were made to Abbeycroft Leisure which has helped improve the health and wellbeing of those local residents. Within the first 12 weeks, 61 per cent of those referred experienced an increase in their wellbeing. In addition, from week one to week 24, referrals on average saw an overall increase in the number of minutes spent exercising, and a decrease in time spent sitting.
  - We have managed the Holiday Food and Activity Programme (HAF) in West Suffolk, funded by the Department for Education. The council has enabled 995 HAF spaces to be filled on activities, sports, and community Christmas events. 202 food parcels were supplied to eligible families across West Suffolk and 40 additional families attended Family Park Cooking days and also received a food parcel. More activities are planned for school holidays in 2022.
22. We have also worked hard with partners in an holistic way to reduce rough sleeping. This has included successfully encouraging people to give to charities where the funds will help most and carry out preventative work to help people stop becoming homeless in the first place. This is directly helping the most vulnerable as well as working with landlords.
23. Over the last three years:
- 4,208 households who were at risk of homelessness were provided with advice and support and rough sleeper numbers reduced from 21 to nine. 181 empty homes were brought back into use last year alone.
  - An innovative personalised healthcare service has been in place for one year in partnership with the West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group, health outreach and Sanctuary Housing for rough sleepers in supported accommodation. There has been a marked improvement in health outcomes for clients, opportunities for holistic support and reduced demand for emergency services.

## **Housing and Development**

24. We have been managing growth and consistently meeting Government targets for housing development in West Suffolk. Those authorities who do not meet these targets are put under closer scrutiny by Government and must show plans to make up any deficit. While it is important to meet these targets, we also continue to strive for the right balance, meeting the differing needs of our communities and having the right kind of properties in the right places.
25. In addition, our own developer Barley Homes has been hugely successful in building homes and selling them in two developments in Haverhill – bringing an initial dividend to the Council of £200,000 thus providing much needed affordable homes and an income for the Council.
26. Over the last three years:
  - Westmill Place, off Manor Road in Haverhill, was the first development for Barley Homes with the second, Stonemill Park, close to the former Castle Hill School. Together the sites have brought forward 63 homes, including 30 percent affordable ones.
  - Two new bungalows were completed in Brandon as temporary accommodation for people with special needs as well as four properties for social rent, all with financial support from the council.
  - Since the new Independent Living Service was introduced in December 2020, the number of Disabled Facilities Grants approved has increased by 101 per cent from 93 to 187 and the average time taken to complete a Mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant from enquiry to works has reduced by 37 per cent.
  - Last year approximately £1.3 million was spent making disability adaptations to almost 200 homes through the Disabled Facilities Grant.
  - In the last four years, the council has granted 5,444 major, minor and other planning applications including for one of the country's largest greenhouses using waste heat from water station.
27. But our focus is of course not just on the here and now but also delivering a robust Local Plan for the future with strong engagement with our communities and stakeholders. Having a strong Local Plan means we, with communities, can manage growth and shape where residential, employment, leisure and public services can go as well as helping to protect or enhance our environment. Not having a Local Plan means unwanted or speculative development can be built. We have a good start with a five-year housing land supply and a record engagement on the new developing Local Plan which will last until 2040 and help guide planning.
28. Following the Issues and Options consultation on the new West Suffolk Local Plan in 2020, preparations were made during 2021 to 2022 for the Preferred Options consultation stage, which is now running from May to July 2022. The

last engagement, which was at the height of the pandemic and carried out mostly online, saw a record level of replies which have now helped shaped these latest stages. Now we have been able to add face to face meetings as well.

## **The Environment**

29. The environment and the climate emergency has remained high on our agenda since the creation of West Suffolk Council when one of our first acts was to create the taskforce to help tackle this issue. Many of you took part in the taskforce and helped shape the comprehensive programme agreed by Cabinet with the aim of reaching carbon neutral by 2030. The budget we agreed earlier in the year was also designed to help deliver on that vision.
30. We have already made great strides in the way our buildings work and many now use batteries for storage as well as solar and our Solar for Business has been busy with orders and interest where we help local companies install panels, reduce their bills, help the environment, and bring an income to the council. We, of course, also have our own successful solar farm at Toggam which in 2019 (the third year of operation) exceeded targets generating 11,947MWh and £560,000 towards council services.
31. The £9 million investment the council agreed earlier this year in our budget is anticipated to deliver a further 31 per cent carbon saving on council operations by 2026, together with a financial return to the council of 2 per cent, after allowing for borrowing costs.
32. This fund is to be utilised across the following proposed projects:
  - Council buildings: improve the energy efficiency and incorporate renewable energy (electricity and/or heat) into buildings
  - Electric vehicle fleet (EV) investment: replace small vehicles on fleet with EVs when replacement falls due
  - Expansion of the successful West Suffolk Solar for Business scheme which provides carbon and financial savings for companies and an income for the council.
33. In addition, it includes a £100,000 per year provision to support the proposed switch to use Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) derived fuel in the larger diesel-powered fleet – such as freighters used to collect rubbish. No vehicle modifications would be required, and this would achieve carbon savings of nearly 400 tonnes Co2e per annum as well as improving air quality.

## **Championing our communities**

34. The creation of West Suffolk Council has strengthened our ability to champion our communities and businesses nationally while being close enough to continue to focus with them on their needs and creating and delivering local solutions.
35. This has already been recognised - in the Government's Levelling Up White Paper, published on 2 February 2022, it was announced that Suffolk would be

one of nine areas with whom Government would be working to develop a County Deal. The way West Suffolk has been working across the whole Suffolk system and with partners means that we are at the table in the negotiations. This reflects many years of partnership working across the public sector in Suffolk, in which West Suffolk Council has played a major role. Work began in 2021 on how the council could ensure maximum benefit for West Suffolk residents from a county deal and the Shared Prosperity Fund.

36. Our voice has also been heard in Government during the pandemic as we lobbied for greater funding for businesses, market traders and business groups such as the BIDs that had been left out other grant streams.
37. Importantly the creation of West Suffolk Council has meant we have been able to better weather financial challenges that we have seen, securing greater savings and efficiencies. This continuation of prudent financial management and harmonisation of Council Tax has held us in good stead since the Council's inception. This has meant not only have we been able to continue to deliver high quality services, even in the most challenging of times, but deliver on our vision for better health, economic and environmental outcomes.

### **High Quality Services**

38. Our services continue to be high quality and award winning.
  - Our parks have achieved national green flag status and played a crucial role in the health and wellbeing of our communities. That is why we are investing £1.3 million in our parks and heritage assets such as Moyse's Hall and West Stow – including maintaining areas such as now award-winning Brandon County Park which we had taken ownership of from Suffolk County Council and a year later won its first nationally recognised Green Flag in 2019.
  - We introduced civil parking enforcement with public support to help improve safety, reduce pollution and traffic jams, grow the economy and make sure emergency services get through.
  - In this year's budget we have agreed to invest more than £1 million on car park improvements across West Suffolk including new EV points, improvements to an existing multi-story car park in Bury St Edmunds and car parking in Newmarket.
  - Bins have been emptied more than six million times from local households since West Suffolk was created and their contents sent for processing at the Energy from Waste facility in Great Blakenham. With new changes nationally to recycling and waste collection due by the Government, known as Resources and Waste Strategy, we have been taking part in the national consultation and continue to lobby to make sure authorities get the best deal (and most appropriate for our area) and the funding to go with it.



## **The Future**

39. Our first term has given us the building blocks and confidence to show we can achieve our vision for a healthier, greener and more prosperous West Suffolk. To continue to help our local economy grow; to carry on breaking down barriers on how we work with partners and our communities, to use our already excellent families and communities work to support local solutions and our louder voice to further champion our aims and vision. All while we are continuing to deliver high quality services.
40. We continue to face challenges such as the cost of living, climate change, the financing of Local Government. But also we have opportunities presented by County Deal and funding such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to name but a few.
41. We are continuing to strengthen and forge new partnerships from local groups to regional bodies, for example joining the UK100 national group to support economic growth and tackle climate change. Of course, we are working with individual towns, local communities and areas to shape locally what the future looks like for them. Indeed, this is a continued evolution of the way we have been working differently to get the right local solution and putting communities at the heart of all we do.
42. I know we are all very mindful of the cost of living rises that our residents, businesses, and indeed public services are facing and how we can play an even greater part in helping tackle this while dealing with the increased direct costs to us and the impact on services due to increased demand.
43. West Suffolk has always been full of communities whose compassion and care for others shines through. And we have seen this, not only through the pandemic, but with the tragic and monstrous events unfolding in Ukraine as well as the wider refugee crisis. West Suffolk has and will continue to be at the heart of the response to this in the County including helping, with partners, to make sure they have suitable homes to go to and the support in place to deal with very complex needs.
44. In closing you and our staff have been the engine that has made the delivery of so much possible. This has rightly involved debate which has no doubt led to better initiatives and outcomes and I would like to thank each and every one of you.
45. We have faced challenges that we have never faced before and continue to do so. But the creation of West Suffolk Council has meant that not only have we been able to meet these challenges, but also carry on delivering the vital initiatives and services which make, and will in the future, a real difference to the lives of our residents whom we serve.

With best wishes,

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