

Leader's statement

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Leader's Statement – December 2022

1. I wanted to start my statement off with a massive thank you to all councillors and staff for what you have done so well during what has again been another very challenging year.
2. Despite these challenges West Suffolk Council has continued to deliver, to attract millions of pounds of Government funding, to drive economic prosperity and tackle climate change. This is while delivering high quality services and protecting the most vulnerable.
3. As these papers go out, I will be joining Councillor Bull at our staff awards to not only pass on our thanks on behalf of all councillors but to hear more of the amazing work they do every day – often well beyond the call of duty.
4. It is this passion for our area, communities, residents and businesses that I see in the chamber and in our staff that makes us one of the best councils in the country.
5. With global challenges, such as from the heat wave to the cost of living, it would be easy to focus just on today's next email or challenge.
6. That is why I have taken the liberty of including a brief summary of what West Suffolk Council has achieved since it came into being in 2019. I will follow this up with a more in-depth brief of our achievements following this Council.
7. But I hope you will agree that what has been delivered in these four years by everyone in this chamber and our staff, has continued to drive the economic prosperity, wellbeing and environmental health of our communities and businesses.

Summary

8. As I have said, I will send you all a more in-depth review of what we have achieved together but below is just a short summary of some of the highlights.

Working across the Suffolk system

9. Part of the success of West Suffolk and embedded in its DNA is the ability to work across the Suffolk system and beyond our geographical and organisational boundaries. This has allowed us to draw down additional millions of pounds of extra or match funding to the benefit of our local residents and businesses.
10. For example, Suffolk Public Sector Leaders which includes West Suffolk, work together to bring funding to tackle national and countywide issues in local ways. This has levered millions of pounds of investment, including the recently announced £913,458 in funding for the next phase of the Suffolk Climate Emergency Plan.
11. This funding is designed to bolster the Suffolk wide ambition to be net-zero by 2030 by helping to fund initiatives to reduce carbon emissions and tackle the effects of climate change.
12. From January 2020 to December 2022 some £11.2 million has been agreed by Suffolk Public Sector Leaders for a range of initiatives including encouraging economic growth and helping the most vulnerable. I will send further details of this in the more in-depth brief.
13. This way of working has also meant we have been able to work in a partnership to negotiate a County Deal with the Government. This should not only bring further investment and local powers to Suffolk and to us, here in the West, but also a louder and stronger voice to lobby Government.
14. The system wide approach we have taken means we are embedded in the health network to support delivery of improvements for our communities. This includes strengthening the bond between good wellbeing outcomes and the services and activities we provide, such as through our leisure centres or the new hub.

Environment

15. Tackling Climate Change has been at the forefront of our agenda since West Suffolk Council's first meeting. A taskforce was set up and challenging targets set to reach net zero by 2030. The taskforce produced a road map of around 50 initiatives, agreed by the Cabinet, to build on the already successful work we had initiated and continue to lead on.
16. Since then, we have been putting our money where our mouth is and in last year's budget allocated a £9 million investment to further help us achieve our goals.
17. There has been a 41 per cent reduction in the carbon emissions we control compared to our 2010 baseline. More recently we have seen emissions cut by 15 per cent compared to 2019-20 levels. Last year's full report can be found here [WSC-Environmental-Statement-2021-2022.pdf \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/media/1000/WSC-Environmental-Statement-2021-2022.pdf)
18. There has also been a range of initiatives that have helped the public reduce their impact on climate change and save money. This includes initiatives such

as our Solar for Business scheme; our decarbonisation programme (after we secured £1.43 million from the Government) and our work to help people insulate their homes, supporting them in staying warmer for longer while using their heating less.

Economic Growth

19. The growth of the local economy and continued prosperity of all our communities and businesses has been at the heart of West Suffolk Council. This takes many forms including our Growth Investment Fund – allowing us to invest in new and existing premises to bring not only financial returns but also social and wider economic benefits to our local communities.
20. The income generated from the assets we own, from car parks to businesses and properties, total around £15.4m per year. This 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. We have also helped deliver infrastructure at Suffolk Business Park to help unlock the growth of this vital facility, as well as making a loan available for the EpiCentre in Haverhill.
21. We have supported businesses through COVID in championing their cause, encouraging people back to the high streets and helping traders access millions of pounds in Government grants. We have introduced new markets such as our makers markets and have worked with young traders to help them bring new ideas and grow their own successful businesses here in West Suffolk.
22. In addition, we support mentoring and initiatives to help people, no matter their age, gain new skills, including working with places of education.
23. West Suffolk is the location for business, and we can see this in the recently announced opening of a Primark store in Bury St Edmunds. This represents a major investment and vote of confidence by a popular national chain in the town and West Suffolk as a whole, as an attractive and business friendly area.
24. Economic Growth is not just the responsibility of one team or service but the whole of the Council from making sure our parks and leisure centres are attractive to bring visitors or regenerating a building or delivering on our Local Plan.

Families and Communities

25. Prevention by partnering with others and finding tailored local solutions is what our families and community work is based on. From preventing homelessness, improving health and wellbeing outcomes to councillors working with community groups the remit is broad.
26. In this year's budget (2021/2022) 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. Work on the skatepark, which was designed with the users has now finished. 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.

27. Our families and community work has seen hundreds of thousands of pounds invested in Community Chest and Locality Budgets which directly support local projects to achieve the greatest benefit. You have played your part as local councillors in being champions for your communities, promoting these organisations and supporting them with funding from the grants that we have been able to make available.
28. We have a holistic approach to preventing homelessness. Since 2019 we helped 5,044 households who were at risk of homelessness get advice and support. Rough sleeper numbers have reduced from 36 in 2018 to nine as of 1 November this year. Some 370 empty homes were also brought back into use – 181 of those we achieved last year.

Leisure

29. Just before West Suffolk came into being in 2019, the newly refurbished leisure centre at Haverhill was reopened. This was a £1.5 million scheme that brought tailored and upgraded modern facilities. The completely overhauled first floor saw new facilities including new changing rooms, an extended gym, super-sized studio and spaces for an increased range of high demand classes. The ground floor included the addition of a Self-Centre, brand new to Haverhill. Also included was a new café, Energy, the children's soft play area, with dedicated children's party space, the X-Height indoor climbing experience, parkours and two courts.
30. The £1.8 million transformation at Newmarket Leisure Centre was completed during challenging lockdown conditions in July 2020. The project was delivered via the UK Leisure Framework and remodelled the existing space to create new facilities. The new soft play facility has a sensory room for a more inclusive offering, party rooms, new café, gym and exercise facilities, NHS groups room on the first floor, a meeting room on the ground floor as well as new reception.
31. The new Brandon Leisure and Health Hub opened in November 2021, following a £2 million investment by the Council. As well as a reshaping of the existing town leisure centre, it now includes upgraded fitness facilities and community health facilities. The improvements, informed by public engagement, include a new gym and free weights area, Shapemaster suite, new changing rooms, Changing Places toilet, café, reception and the health treatment rooms. It also includes space that is being used by community healthcare professionals such as district nurses and physiotherapists and other community and hospital services. Bringing leisure and health together under one roof is having benefits for patient care.
32. Mildenhall Hub, is a £39 million nationally important and award winning development designed to bring together a number of different services under

one roof and was officially opened to the public in September 2021. The Hub has been named project of the year in the Government Property Awards beating a shortlist that included other major national initiatives. It is an exemplar of the Government's One Public Estate programme, demonstrating how the public estate can be a catalyst for place-shaping and better health, wellbeing and education. In addition, it has seen increased use of leisure and library facilities and an improvement to exam results.

33. In addition, a new £40 million leisure centre is being looked at as part of the first phase of Western Way.

Services

34. Our communities, rightly, depend on our services which continue to be high quality and award winning.
35. For example, our parks have continued to achieve 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 Country Park which we had taken ownership of from Suffolk County Council and a year later won its first nationally recognised Green Flag in 2019.
36. We introduced civil parking enforcement after public support to help improve safety, reduce pollution and traffic jams, grow the economy and make sure emergency services get through.
37. In this year's budget we have agreed we will be investing more than £1 million on car park improvements across West Suffolk including new electric vehicle (EV) charging points, improvements to an existing multi-storey car park in Bury St Edmunds and car parking in Newmarket as well as Clare.
38. 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. Of course, all helped by our award-winning West Suffolk Operational Hub which was opened in 2019.
39. Our services and statutory duties remain at the centre of what we do and are delivered often despite very challenging conditions.

Keeping people healthy and improving wellbeing

40. As I pointed out previously, in my report about Mildenhall Hub, our work to bring health and leisure together is bearing fruit and better health outcomes. I wanted to share with you the positive news from Abbeycroft Leisure that a series of further programmes are either being introduced or expanded because of their success or to meet local demand. The details on these will be forthcoming as they are finalised.
41. But I can already say that the NHS Pathways has been such a success for the people it has helped that Abbeycroft Leisure are now exceeding the original number of referrals first planned and funded. The scheme links NHS patients

to our leisure facilities to help them on their journey to recovery, reablement and health improvement. This means close working between the two organisations and tailored programmes for each referral. This work is being funded by West Suffolk Foundation Trust through the relationship built with West Suffolk Council.

42. Abbeycroft have also secured funding to put another Sporting Memories session in Mildenhall. Sporting Memories sessions are open to everyone over the age of 50. It uses sports-based reminiscence resources and develops collections from local groups that rekindle those very special sporting memories and events. Sessions also incorporate appropriate promotion of gentle exercise and physical activity within a fun and relaxed environment. It is part of Suffolk's Most Active County partnership.
43. In addition, Abbeycroft has secured £355,000 from the West Suffolk Alliance through West Suffolk Council to deliver place-based activities in Haverhill, Mildenhall and Sudbury.
44. There is more to come which I will ensure you are kept updated on, but it is very clear that this pioneering work of joining leisure and health as well as other public services is paying dividends. Not only improving the wellbeing of our communities but giving better access to services and preventing health issues becoming much worse - which not only adds increased costs but is of course worse for the individuals affected.

Funding and budget

45. West Suffolk Council's Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee received an update on the challenges faced by the Council in delivering a Sustainable Medium-Term Budget.
46. The forecast pressures for the 2023/2024 budget have grown from £1.16 million to £2.5 million during this year.
47. All authorities across the UK are facing the same difficulties caused by UK and global issues. This includes the ongoing and increasing nationally high increase in fuel, utility and other prices caused by the cost-of-living crisis, inflation, rise in Council service delivery costs, and the war in Ukraine as well as people's spending habits following COVID-19. I must emphasise though that these costs are forecasts and as we have seen already are likely to change.
48. These challenges are not only faced by households and businesses but also all public authorities as demand and the cost of delivering services soar. This includes an addition £1.2 million burden caused by rising fuel costs, inflation and energy prices as well more than £1 million reduced income to the Council which has been an ongoing trend started in COVID-19 and seen nationally.
49. However, the report also highlighted how the Council's robust and prudent financial planning, management and investments has reduced this pressure from more than a £4 million gap. The Council has been able to reduce the challenge due to its sensible investments bringing financial and community benefits as well as owning a solar farm, which has brought in an extra £1.7 million and is helping West Suffolk reach carbon neutral by 2030. The solar

farm is not only powering council buildings, it is also providing additional million income for West Suffolk to help fund council services.

50. The additional demand on services as well as the high cost of delivering them means nationally local authorities are having to stretch their budgets much further than planned. This is also partly due to local communities themselves needing more support and increased demand for our services as well as residents changing their spending behaviours.
51. To sum up, the Council, like all authorities, are facing significant challenges but we are in a stronger position than most to not only face these, but to continue to deliver on our strategic vision.

Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme

52. As I write this Cabinet will be looking at the results of our annual review of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) ahead of it coming to Council for discussion; so I do not yet know the result of Cabinet's debate. But I can say the review is part of West Suffolk Council's work to ease the cost of living for communities by looking at possible options to increase for one year the discount for Council Tax given to people on low incomes.
53. We engaged with the public and stakeholders on options with a consultation. The results of which showed that those members of the public who replied were strongly in favour of helping those who qualify by increasing the discount they get on Council Tax. This included increasing the discount from the current capped 91.5 per cent (where those eligible pay 8.5 per cent of their Council Tax) to look at discount options between 95 and 100 per cent (those eligible would pay five per cent to none of their bill).
54. The proposal is highly targeted to reach those who are already on means-tested benefits and has low administrative costs.
55. If agreed by Cabinet and Council, it would see the average working age recipient of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) receive up to an additional £103 discount on their Council Tax for the single year. This would benefit around 4,700 people - representing a one year only £500,000 investment by organisations that set Council Tax precepts, in supporting those in need that meet the criteria (our share being around 10 per cent).
56. I am pleased to say that although this means additional cost implications, the options for this additional help did receive support from major preceptors such as Suffolk County Council and town and parish councils.

Tackling homelessness

57. Often when people think of homelessness, they picture those sleeping rough on the street. But homelessness or those with the threat of it over their head is something that is not so obviously seen by the public and is very complex.
58. We, with partners, have a holistic approach, to not only help where we can with the immediate issue but also long-term challenges. As I'm sure you can

imagine this is challenging work helping people at their most vulnerable or with issues that are not quickly resolved.

59. More than 800 households who were homeless or facing homelessness, have been helped by West Suffolk Council in the past year.
60. In the year running up to the end of October, the Council has helped prevent 212 households from becoming homeless, while it has helped another 626 through temporary accommodation and back into a more settled and permanent home.
61. Alongside this, the Council is continuing to help people who are homeless and sleeping outdoors – also known as rough sleepers.
62. On 1 November 2022 West Suffolk had nine rough sleepers - compared to 36 when the Council first set up its rough sleeper support service in 2018. And I also want to thank staff who last month were out again in the early hours across West Suffolk carrying out our regular count.
63. The figure fluctuates regularly as people become homeless or are accommodated, as well as when people lose or leave their place of accommodation. Of the nine who were rough sleeping on 1 November, all but one has previously been accommodated and/or refused help. The one that has not been offered accommodation has sufficient income for private rent and we have provided information to him so that he can secure his own accommodation.
64. The rough sleeper support service, which includes specialists in mental health and addiction support, is continuing to engage with all of our rough sleepers to try to assist them. By investing in and providing advice and support as well as accommodation, we have, over recent years, reduced the number of people who are rough sleeping in West Suffolk. This is however, an ongoing issue that we know rises in these winter months but I want to reassure you the Council, which uses a variety of emergency, temporary and specialist support rough sleeper accommodation, has enough bed spaces in place to meet expected demand this winter.
65. Sensibly we are also preparing for a possible increase in demand next year and continue to look to secure more access to accommodation.

Women's Tour

66. In June 2022 West Suffolk welcomed back the Women's Tour with Bury St Edmunds hosting the finish to the first stage of Britain's biggest professional women's cycling race.
67. Bury St Edmunds was involved in the inaugural race back in 2014 and Haverhill hosted the start of the sixth stage in 2021, making the race a key event in the local calendar.
68. Data has now been released on the impact of the race in Suffolk. This year an estimated 3,000 people attended to cheer on the cyclists as they raced

through Bury St Edmunds. Supporters also tuned in across the world - Eurosport viewing figures for stage one was the highest out of all the stages with 349,500 views, additionally the stage one highlights were featured on ITV4 to an audience of 111, 000.

69. Not only did the spectators support the race, but they also supported the local economy too, with the estimated net economic benefit for Suffolk being over £600,000.

West Suffolk's COP27 update

70. Having committed to working towards being carbon net zero by 2030, we used the recent COP27 as a chance to highlight the steps and results we are having as a Council in reaching our goal.
71. As reported to Cabinet in July, these actions have helped reduce our own emissions last year by 41 per cent of our 2010 baseline, putting us on track against our carbon budget. The work is detailed in our Environment and Climate Action Plan and supported by our £9 million decarbonisation fund.
72. I am also pleased to report strong demand for the fully funded solar panel installations we offer local businesses with suitable premises. We have been working on our largest installation to date at Caps Cases in Newmarket and are looking at another large scale project.
73. The Council has completed energy efficiency work worth more than £1.5 million to 150 homes in West Suffolk; are is now aiming to do the same for another 150 homes under the Warm Homes Suffolk scheme before the current funding runs out at the end of March. This helped us win the Energy Efficiency East of England awards 2022 in the council / local authority category for a second year. To ensure that work continues, Suffolk Public Sector Leaders have agreed to fund a Fuel Poverty Retrofit Team to help those most affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The team will identify properties with low energy performance rating and incomes, including those in West Suffolk, so advice on best measures can be given.

Just some of the many things going on at our Council but finally...

74. While there are particularly significant challenges currently, and ahead for the council, and the people and businesses we serve in West Suffolk - and for the nation as a whole - we are in as strong as possible a position to face these issues. This is not just down to the long term thinking, processes and policies we have in place but also the dedication, pride and tireless work everyone here at West Suffolk Council delivers for our communities and businesses.
75. As this is the last Council before Christmas and the New Year, I want to take this opportunity to once again thank everyone for their continued hard work and service..... And importantly, wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

With best wishes,

Councillor John Griffiths, Leader of West Suffolk Council