

Leader's statement

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Leader's Statement

1. It's December and our thoughts are turning to Christmas and the New Year. This is a magical time for many but for others it is very challenging. I know each and every one of you have been working hard this year to champion your communities to help meet those challenges and represent our area. Indeed, recently our staff were out in the early hours checking on those sleeping rough in freezing temperatures and helping them find support. I will touch later on in this statement of how we are working as a council to tackle these issues, especially poignant at a time when people are sleeping out in freezing temperatures.

Strategic Priorities and Vision

2. A New Year often brings changes and tonight we will be looking at agreeing ambitious aims for the Council through the new draft Strategic Priorities.

The draft vision:

Working across West Suffolk, we will support the district to flourish by focusing on the delivery of:

- affordable, available and decent homes
- environmental resilience
- sustainable growth
- thriving communities

3. The strategic priorities and vision we are setting for the Council, if agreed, will bring clear focus and direction on what we are delivering. The vision and priorities, outlined in the document, are designed to make sure West Suffolk Council continues to address the needs of local communities and of future generations.
4. Importantly, the document also highlights how, through strengthened engagement, there will be a step change in how the voices of local people will be at the heart of shaping what the Council does. This puts councillors

squarely in the centre of talking to residents, businesses and partners bringing everyone closer to understanding issues and informing the solutions.

5. Central to the new priorities is also a commitment to make sure essential services that communities and businesses rely on continue to be delivered well. Local communities rely on us delivering high quality and value for money services consistently.
6. Using this living document as our guide we will now, together, engage with our communities and partners as well as lobby decision makers to achieve our priorities.

Budget – Medium Term Financial Strategy

7. We will soon be setting our budgets next year and as part of that at our meeting we will be agreeing the principles that underpin what we are trying to achieve. We end this year with a broadly break even position through good budgeting and prudent financial management.
8. West Suffolk Council's response to the financial challenges and opportunities are based on six key themes. These themes have been further developed for this council and they represent an appropriate response to the ongoing financial situation.
 1. Aligning resources to the West Suffolk strategic priorities and the delivery of essential services.
 2. Sharing services and innovation in service delivery.
 3. Behave commercially, delivering a return to our communities.
 4. Considering new funding models.
 5. Supporting online access to council services.
 6. Taking advantage of new forms of local government finance.
9. There are challenges ahead for all local authorities and public services around funding and we must continue to make robust financial decisions to make sure we continue to deliver for our communities. This budget and its themes will drive our strategic priorities and will be the financial engine to deliver our vision.

Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme

10. We also will be talking at Council about continuing the 100 per cent Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024 to 2025.
11. If agreed families in West Suffolk on low incomes, including those in work, suffering from the cost-of-living crisis would benefit for another year from a 100 per cent discount in Council Tax.
12. It is part of a range of ways the Council is supporting communities including those with the highest risk of financial hardship as a result of the current cost of living crisis.

13. Last year saw public and stakeholder support West Suffolk Council temporarily changing the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for one year. This year the consultation also shows support.
14. The average working age recipient of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) receive up to an additional £174 discount on their Council Tax for the single year.
15. The proposal is highly targeted to reach those who are already on means-tested benefits, many of whom are working, and has a low administrative cost. This could benefit around 4,700 residents and represents a one year only £500,000 investment by organisations that set Council Tax precepts in supporting those most in need that meet the criteria.
16. The cost to the Council would be worked through the 2024 to 2025 budget setting process.
17. By providing additional support to residents the aim is to help avoid crisis situations, for example, homelessness, which I have already shown is on the rise, and fewer applications for Exceptional Hardship Payments from those in receipt of Council Tax support.
18. This is a short-term measure and if agreed the West Suffolk Council's LCTRS would revert to the current minimum 8.5 per cent contribution rate from April 2025.

Local Plan

19. Our meeting includes some of the fundamental building blocks crucial for the continued prosperity and ambitions of our communities and businesses. One of these is the West Suffolk Local Plan which has seen some of the highest engagement of any such plan that the council has developed. As such the proposals are based on evidence and hundreds of views expressed by residents, companies, partners, organisations and councillors. Now we need to go out once more and engage with our communities on the submissions stage draft. I will not debate it here in my statement, but I want to highlight how vital the plan is and put the spotlight on some of the proposals as well as thanking all of you who have been part of this long but vital work.
20. The West Suffolk Local Plan will guide how and where new homes and employment will be built to the year 2040. Policies to deliver more affordable homes and sustainable housing through measures including solar panels on roofs wherever practically possible, feature in the latest draft plan. If adopted, the local plan will also require new homes to be more accessible, so that they can be adapted to people's changing health needs. That in turn will mean people can stay longer in their own homes which is better for them and their families, as well as reducing the impact on health and social care.
21. Once adopted, the local plan will ensure funding from developers is secured to pay for infrastructure such as money toward education provision, highways, footpaths and cycleways.

22. The West Suffolk Local Plan will allocate new sites for 5,211 new homes alongside 9,075 that already have planning permission. While the total number it needs to deliver over the plan period is 13,702, the local plan deliberately and sensibly over allocates to allow for flexibility over the plan period.
23. The local plan also makes provision of 86 hectares for employment growth including 47.9 hectares which are new allocations.
24. By allocating land for much needed housing and employment for West Suffolk's growing communities, the local plan also protects other areas such as the countryside from harmful, speculative development, and it ensures that residents and elected councillors, continue to have a public voice and a say on planning applications submitted to the Council.
25. This is so much more than lines on a map or statistics about housing numbers and employment. This is about the success of our district and the future lives of generations to come.

Rough Sleeping

26. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis has seen an increase in the number of people and families needing help in West Suffolk after finding themselves at risk of homelessness. Later in my statement you will see some of the actions and investments we are making in this area to help the most vulnerable and lead to many having a better New Year.
27. Helping those rough sleeping and at danger of becoming homeless is one of our key responsibilities and I have no doubt it is one of the most complex tasks we face.
28. I want to thank our staff who do a brilliant job in a challenging area and were out in the early hours across West Suffolk doing the regular count and checking on those rough sleeping.
29. The Council has geared up for the winter to help those in need and keep people off the streets. We have also been running campaigns to explain what we are doing to reduce the number of people sleeping rough and crucially prevent people becoming homeless.
30. As part of this campaign we have encouraged those who have faced these issues to tell their stories. These are powerful and give an insight into the challenges and issues people face that bring them into contact with our services. We will be sharing them on our website and social media.
31. I would urge you to follow the link and to hear Dave's story (not his real name). He tells how he has turned his life around with the help of our teams and partners. See Dave's story on [YouTube](#).
32. Dave is one of many rough sleepers who have been helped by West Suffolk Council. The Council has invested in accommodation and support over the years and established a Rough Sleeper Service. While the number of people rough sleeping can fluctuate daily as people are accommodated or become

homeless, the number of people rough sleeping in West Suffolk on 1 November 2023 was four. It's still four too many and we are doing all we can to encourage those who are rough sleeping to take up the support and accommodation available to them.

33. Over the past 12 months, West Suffolk Council has invested more than £1.2 million to improve existing temporary accommodation and increase the overall amount it can access. In the six months from 1 April to 30 September this year, the housing team at West Suffolk Council has intervened to prevent 77 households from becoming homeless. Another 90 households who became homeless have since been re-housed.
34. The Council is continuing to work with and help another 148 households including some who are currently living in temporary or emergency accommodation.
35. Numbers have increased compared to the same six months last year when the council helped prevent 47 households from becoming homeless, "relieved" 90 households out of homelessness and were continuing to work with and help another 141 households.
36. Anyone can end up facing homelessness, and none of us can assume we will never need help. In a fair and just society, surely we should expect that when the worst happens there will be support which will help set us back on course.

Provincial House

37. I am pleased Cabinet has backed a plan to invest up to £2 million into Haverhill town centre to attract more businesses, support current traders and boost adult skills and education.
38. This will help relocate the town's Personal and Professional Learning Centre run by the Eastern Education Group back into the heart of the town centre at Provincial House. The proposals include remodelling the building to attract more businesses while bringing an income to the council to help invest in services.
39. It will very much help us meet the new priorities of sustainable growth and thriving communities.
40. Many of you will know the Council bought Provincial House in 2019, to help retain a major employer, AXA in the town, as well as identify an opportunity to use the building's prominent location on the High Street to encourage footfall and support local businesses.
41. Since then, phased works have been going on to bring the building up to the required standards, such as being accessible. Investigations have also been carried out to find what is the best use of the property to re-purpose the vacant space creatively, create jobs, deliver wider public benefits, and drive people to use the town centre.
42. Following those investigations, the Council is partnering with the Eastern Education Group (West Suffolk College) as part of the One Public Estate

initiative to explore the potential to re-locate the Learning Centre back into the heart of the town and centre of the community.

43. The £2 million is coming from the Investing in our Growth Agenda fund (supported by external borrowing) and will help fund the investment needed in the remaining vacant floors including the work required to relocate the college.
44. Works would also include new landlord circulation space - essential to maintain safety and comply with current building regulations. It would also help create smaller, modern and flexible business spaces tailored to suit the needs of new start-up/business incubation spaces and also attract existing businesses that might be tempted to relocate elsewhere.

Flooding

45. This has been the first time we have come together since the storms last month and the flooding that effected the UK and East Anglia.
46. I want to thank our staff and councillors who were helping their communities as well as working alongside partners during the storms themselves and the recovery period.
47. Following the Government announcement of grants and council tax reductions through the Flood Recovery Framework, councils in Suffolk received more than 750 reports of internal flooding to homes or businesses.
48. Suffolk councils have been working together, with Suffolk County Council collecting information and assessing the reports, and the district and borough councils distributing the funding to eligible property owners.

And finally...

49. I had the pleasure of thanking our staff for all their hard work this year and I want to do the same to each and every one of you. Representing your communities is rewarding but hard work. I think it shows dedication and a care for your communities which deserves recognition. Thank you for championing West Suffolk and I hope you have a good Christmas and New Year.

Councillor Cliff Waterman
Leader of West Suffolk Council