
Council



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Report by Cllr John Griffiths Leader of the Council	
Report No:	COU/SE/14/003 [to be completed by Democratic Services]	
Report to and date/s:	Council	16 December 2014
Portfolio includes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership of the Council• Corporate Planning• External Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shared Services• Strategic Economic Development (LEPs)• Communications

1. Leadership of Council

1.1 The future (financial and otherwise)

While matters of a financial nature are covered in more detail in the Portfolio Holder for Resource's report, I would like to take this opportunity to thank councillors, and staff, for all their commitment and continuing efforts to deliver excellent services with diminishing resources. How to do things differently, behave in a more commercial manner, increase income, generate growth, and cut costs is a challenge that every council faces – but I think we are facing this particularly well here in West Suffolk.

As expected the Chancellor of Exchequer George Osborne confirmed in his Autumn Statement on 3 December 2014 that local services will not face additional cuts next year (2015/16), on top of those already announced. However further reductions are inevitable as the Government still needs to make substantial savings in public spending. By not announcing yet further cuts next year the Chancellor has at least acknowledged that councils are more than doing their bit to help balance the country's books.

I also welcome the Government's commitment to give local authorities multi-year budgets so that we can at least plan for future reductions in our central Government funding. And as always St Edmundsbury is ahead of the game having already put into operation work not only on the next financial year's budget, but on how we are going to tackle future financial challenges as well.

2. Strategic Economic Development

2.1 Business rates level playing field

St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath councils have been lobbying the Government not only for a review of business rates generally but for a change to the laws governing licensing of premises so we can have the power to refuse licences to business people who have not paid their business rates.

I was therefore pleased that the Local Government Association saw the sense of what we were saying here in West Suffolk and incorporated the idea in their submission to Chancellor of Exchequer for inclusion in his Autumn Statement. As a result, it was good to hear in the Chancellor's speech that the structure of business rates will be reviewed and that he will be issuing a discussion paper on the nature and scale of business rates avoidance. We should now have a real opportunity to demonstrate that the current situation is simply unfair to hardworking business men and women, especially those in smaller businesses, who reliably and honestly pay their share of the tax.

Business rates are a major challenge for our businesses (and High Streets) and there will always be businesses who unfortunately, and sometimes through no fault of their own, go out of business and, as a result, we cannot collect an outstanding debt. However, our case has always been that there are some business people who seem to use non-payment of business rates as standard working practice, placing a greater tax burden on every one else. I await with interest some improvement and reforms as a result of this discussion paper, and how quickly we can implement any changes to the law.

2.2 Our Bury St Edmunds

I am pleased to hear that local town centre businesses have voted to support Our Bury St Edmunds for another five-year term. This is a glowing endorsement of the successes that the BID has built during its first term. The success of Bury St Edmunds is frequently reported both locally and nationally and the way that town centre businesses have worked alongside the borough council to develop the car parking offer, stage hugely attractive events such as the recent Christmas Fayre and Christmas lights switch-on, and simply come together for the common good shows just what can be achieved through excellent partnership working.

2.3 Business Festival 2014

I am delighted to report on another successful West Suffolk Business Festival. I once again had the pleasure of opening the festival at the Menta Trade Fair and Food & Drink Expo, and also to close the event at the Business Awards. Both events took place at The Apex.

The Business Festival continues to go from strength to strength and this year was titled 'Going for growth'. The festival ran over a 10-day period with events organised by more than 20 different partner organisations. The highlights of this year's programme included the Menta Trade Fair; a Business Breakfast with the Bank of England, who shared their views on the economy; InDigital

Connect, which is seeking to establish a regional digital hub; as well as business funding workshops that were held across West Suffolk. Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council jointly sponsored the West Suffolk Award for International Trade and we were very pleased to present the award to Andrew Denny of Denny Bros/Fix-a-Form International.

2.4 Visit by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council

On Monday 17 November we (Cllrs, Chung, Pugh, Everitt and I) welcomed representatives from the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) to Bury St Edmunds. David Marsden, Director, UK, Benelux & Ireland, and two members of his team were shown the unique selling points of West Suffolk, followed by a lunch at West Suffolk College. Andrew Denny, Managing Director of Fix-a-Form International opened his doors for a tour of one of West Suffolk's leading businesses, and the day concluded with a tour of Bury St Edmunds town centre.

Following the visit the HKTDC have offered to host a business event in Bury St Edmunds in 2015, around the time of the Chinese New Year, and we look forward to developing further a mutually beneficial relationship for both Hong Kong and West Suffolk.

2.5 Transport investment

Alongside our very lukewarm response (to put it mildly!) to the suggestion that West Suffolk councils consider taking over parking enforcement, I am currently in a dialogue with Suffolk County Council about income it receives from on-street car parking here. I have asked for a meeting to discuss the investment Suffolk County Council makes, and intends to make, in the borough and indeed across West Suffolk, as a result of this income and have asked them to identify which transport initiatives they intend to fund.

3. Communications

- 3.1** Shared services continues apace and November saw us take that extra step launching the new shared West Suffolk website. This has been designed with the customer in mind, rather than structured for the councils' convenience so we have tried to avoid local government language and focused on clear and easy-to-find information. We've managed to halve the number of pages that were on the old St Edmundsbury website and make the information clearer. More than half of the people accessing our website do so from tablets and smartphones (and that percentage is increasing) so the website has also been designed to work well on those devices.

The feedback we have had since the website was launched has been positive and reflects the huge amount of work put in by those who managed the project, designed the website and wrote the content – a terrific team effort. I would also like to thank those councillors who helped us to test the website before it was launched, especially those who identified any gaps or usability issues so we could quickly make the necessary changes. We continue to monitor the website very closely because encouraging people to access information and carry out transactions online is central to our service delivery, especially in a world where people expect to be able to do this any time of day and any day of the week.

We still have lots of work to do on the site and will add more improvements, such as online forms and mapping functions over the next few months, but I can confidently say we have made a good start.

4. External Relations

- 4.1** New Anglia LEP held its first Innovation Expo at BT's Headquarters, Martlesham on 20 November. There were 45 exhibitors and 500 people registered to attend. This occasion was used to launch New Anglia's new Digital Growth Advisors who will work alongside the team of the current seven growth advisors. Ten thousand Broadband Basics for Business leaflets have been printed and our Economic Development team will be distributing these among our local businesses.

Also in November New Anglia sent a small delegation, including local MPs, to meet the Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin at Westminster. New Anglia made the case for £476m of investment into the rail infrastructure in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. This plea also included improvement in rolling stock to be included in the new franchise tender in 2015.

Meanwhile, negotiations to deliver the projects here which the LEP is supporting – such as the Eastern Relief Road in Bury and the Business Park in Haverhill – continue apace.

5. Shared Services

- 5.1** In West Suffolk we have again been leading the way when it comes to fully sharing services and co-locating with other public and voluntary services. We have a strong focus on 'no boundaries' and this applies not just to working across (and indeed beyond) the whole of St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath, but with other organisations. Both councils share our buildings with a range of other organisations such as the county council, Citizens Advice Bureaux, Department of Work and Pensions, West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group – and more. The advantage this gives is not only closer working relationships but much better, joined up and cost-effective services.

So the announcement in November that a bid for by the Suffolk Public Sector Leaders' group (SPLS) for £3.35 million Government funding to invest in new ways of collaborative working, reduce costs and generate benefits for residents across the whole of Suffolk was well deserved and excellent news. The SPLS brings together leaders from borough, district and county councils as well as members from NHS England and Suffolk Police, among others. We all face the same financial challenges and need to further transform the way we work. This Government Transformation Challenge Award funding means we will be in an even better position to meet current and future challenges, and to achieve more for our communities with fewer resources.

At the time of the announcement, my counterpart in Forest Heath, Cllr James Waters, and I stated: "We are delighted that DCLG shares our ambition to improve the way the public sector works in Suffolk for the benefit of residents and businesses and, as West Suffolk councils, we look forward to playing our part in that. Existing initiatives like the innovative Mildenhall Hub, the integration of council and health teams at West Suffolk House and our joint

Families and Communities Strategy show we are already thinking along these lines, but we know there is lots more to do, and can't wait to get started."

Not all partnerships are easy, whether it's due to different forms of governance, funding methods, priorities or other reasons. But what we all have in common is the need to service our public in the best, most effective and efficient, way we can. We have already shown, through our work together as West Suffolk councils, just what can be achieved by working together. This TCA award now takes us on to a bigger stage, with the opportunity for greater influence, innovative investments and better services for those people we serve and represent.

In conclusion, may I take this opportunity to thank members and staff for all their efforts over the past year. It has been challenging, but I think 'challenge' is now a constant in our lives. Your commitment to excellent service, as well as your support and professionalism in the delivery of the services our residents need and deserve, is what makes St Edmundsbury, and West Suffolk, so special. Thank you to everyone, and I wish you all a very happy, peaceful and healthy Christmas and New Year.