

Leader's statement

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Documents attached:	None	

Leader's Statement

1. As we've all heard the decision over the Sunnica solar farm has been delayed until April. I know this is something this council and local members have lobbied hard against. I hope there is no further delay in any announcement as although we want the Secretary of State to look at the arguments carefully our communities need to know the decision and have been waiting long enough.

Cost of living

2. Once again West Suffolk is co-ordinating the Government funded free activities, primarily aimed at children and young people who receive benefits related free school meals in our area.
3. This is for families in financial hardship under the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme and will take place over the school spring (Easter) holidays.
4. Our council coordinates the HAF programme on behalf of Suffolk County Council and is working with 18 partner organisations to deliver the activities.
5. The cost-of-living crisis is continuing to impact families pushing them into poverty. The latest available data shows that 21 per cent of pupils in Suffolk were eligible for free school meals. The figures show the number of children needing this support is continuing to rise both nationally and here in Suffolk. The Government's HAF programme exists to support families with children living in poverty through the school holidays when they may well not be able to get a hot meal.

Newmarket A14 flooding

6. Recent issues on our local roads such as potholes and even the flooding of the A14 at Newmarket has shown the importance of the need for good, well maintained, infrastructure.

7. As I write this, a bit earlier than I normally would for Council, another lane on the A14 has been opened to help ease the traffic pressure. I hope by the time this is published that all lanes will be open.
8. This has caused tremendous pressure on local roads in and around Newmarket and I know many outside organisations and councillors have been working with National Highways and Environment Agency to find a solution.
9. Moving people, goods and data around is vital for the economic success and prosperity of our area. I hope to see a permanent solution to this issue and others we have had in the area coming forward.
10. Along with other leaders in the Eastern region, I met the leader of the Local Government Association (LGA), Shaun Davies to discuss issues we wanted to see included in the White Paper which is being prepared for the incoming government. I raised a number of issues, including the need for better infrastructure to support economic growth and the need to have a soundly based policy on all aspects of water – supply and drainage in particular.

Local Plan

11. The third and final consultation to test and check the Local Plan ahead of it being submitted to the Secretary of State, closed on 12 March with more than 1,000 respondents on it and associated documents.
12. Hundreds of comments, evidence and feedback have already shaped the draft plan following the Issues and Options consultation in 2020 and a Preferred Options consultation in 2022.
13. I want to thank everyone over these years of work for their dedication and input into this plan. Once it is adopted, the local plan will guide how and where new homes are built and allocate land for employment growth to the year 2040. It will also include the provision of 40 per cent affordable homes on some developments – making West Suffolk a UK leader in supporting the delivery of affordable homes.

West Suffolk a place to invest

14. There has been good news in companies investing heavily in West Suffolk, bringing employment and sustainable growth.
15. More than 5,500 shoppers, included some councillors, visited Primark in Bury St Edmunds on its opening day, Councillor Diane Hind, as mayor of Bury St Edmunds, cutting the ribbon.
16. The store employs 150 people and represents a £6 million investment by the company in the store.
17. Meanwhile in Little Wratting near Haverhill, Sofina Foods have announced it is looking to expand its workforce by 64 per cent as part of a multi-million pound investment in the site.

18. The company, which produces cooked sliced meats from the former Karro Foods site, is increasing its workforce by almost two-thirds as it looks to continue to grow the business.

Mildenhall in Primary School careers first

19. Around two hundred youngsters from three schools based in and around Mildenhall took part in one of the only careers events for younger primary school children in the country.
20. The 'Skills Escalator Day' saw a variety of industries create short interactive sessions for children aged between six and seven giving them a window into the world of work. The event took place at the Jubilee Centre on 29 February and the schools involved were: The Pines, St Mary's and Great Heath. This occasion was organised by the Eastern Education Group (that incorporates Abbeygate Sixth Form College, One Sixth Form College, University Studies & Professional Development and West Suffolk College.
21. Organisations who offered sessions included West Suffolk Council, G's Fresh, the Royal Air Force, Newmarket Racehorse Museum, Morgan Sindall and the Police.
22. Aside from bringing their economic development department along, West Suffolk Council also provided the venue for the day.
23. Since being set up, these Skills Escalator events have helped over 2,500 youngsters and 67 schools get a glimpse into the world of work.

West Suffolk spearheads innovative recycling initiative

24. West Suffolk Council has partnered with Eastern Education Group to deliver a reverse vending machine at the West Suffolk College site.
25. The council is the first in the country to get behind such an initiative and are working with the college to encourage and educate young people to increase recycling.
26. Trovr, the company behind the machines, uses a smartphone app to incentivise recycling through points-based rewards which can then be spent in local and national businesses. The goal is to increase recycling rates and reduce litter.
27. A partnership comprising of West Suffolk Council, Eastern Education Group, Love Newmarket Business Improvement District (BID), The Guineas Shopping Centre, Abbeycroft Leisure, Our Bury St Edmunds BID and Trovr have worked to deliver four reverse vending machines; two in Bury St Edmunds and two Newmarket.
28. This is part of the Council's work on improving environmental resilience and encouraging more people to think how they can do more themselves.

West Suffolk leading the way again in arts

29. Hot on the heels of the highly successful Mutiny in Colour the largest exhibition in terms of number pieces that Moyse's Hall Museum as ever had is underway, featuring the work of internationally acclaimed illustrator David Hughes.
30. In a profound and broad career, David Hughes has produced illustrations and caricatures commissioned by The Washington Post, The Times, Rolling Stone, Playboy, Faber & Faber, Esquire USA, BBC, Channel 4, GQ, Punch, the New Scientist and many more.
31. Now he has worked with West Suffolk Council to co-curate his exhibition 'Why Can't You Draw Something Nice...?' which explores his book, newspaper, and magazine illustrations, as well as design for television, film, and operatic productions.
32. The exhibition in Bury St Edmunds also shares his pandemic journals and sculptures – works created as a reaction to the once in a generational event that brought life to a standstill.
33. He pokes fun at all parties so I would hope there is something in the exhibition for all councillors.

And finally...

34. I was very pleased that we were able to award £35,000, as part of the Council's allocation from the Rural England Prosperity Fund to the Newmarket Cinema project, which will see a silver screen opening in the town later this year. It's a brilliant example of us working with local bodies to enable culture and arts to flourish.

Councillor Cliff Waterman
Leader of West Suffolk Council