

# Leader’s statement

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## Leader’s Statement

1. As I write this the country is about to hold a General Election but as you read it we will know the results. Whatever the outcome I recognise that every councillor, no matter their allegiance, will remain rightly focused on delivering the best services and getting the right outcomes for our West Suffolk communities and businesses.
2. Whoever sits in Number 10 or parliament we will strengthening our relationship with the local MPs and continue to champion the needs, opportunities and successes that we have here in West Suffolk with Government.
3. I also want to thank our staff and volunteers who had delivered a successful Police and Crime Commissioner election for the whole of Suffolk. Also, by the time you read this, they would have also delivered the General Election for our two local constituencies. This involves weeks of hard work, long hours and attention to detail and understanding the latest laws and guidance – while maintaining a swan like ability of appearing calm while working hard behind the scenes.
4. I also know many of you will have been on the campaign trail and I would applaud your efforts and that of all the candidates in being at the sharp end of local democracy. No matter who you are or what you represent it takes courage to have that debate in public and put yourself forward.
5. It is worth noting that in May was the first year anniversary of the last election for West Suffolk Council. This month we will see the annual report published and I would urge everyone when this is published to see and feel proud of the investment and successes being delivered across the whole of West Suffolk that you all have had a hand in. Equally we are moving forward on our initiatives such as the Brandon Commission, improving our markets and delivering a new housing strategy while looking at how we fund community groups to benefit the whole of the district. At the same time, we have launched our strategic priorities, agreed by the Council, and set a robust budget which has enabled us to invest heavily in services, such as grass cutting, waste collecting and our parks and open spaces. We have led a UK trial by installing a reverse vending machine and set up a £1million

decarbonisation fund as part of our wider work on a sustainable environment. Engagement continues to be the key and Cabinet continues to visit the whole of West Suffolk as well as partners to gain a wider and more in-depth perspective. For example, the Cabinet Member has been able to draw upon the expertise of the local ward members for Clare in relation to car parking in the town.

### **Peer Review**

6. This month, as I have spoken about previously, the authority will be undergoing its first Local Government Association Peer Review as West Suffolk Council. This is a useful process to look at what we do, what we have achieved and crucially what we can improve upon. This is something that many councils, who are members of LGA, go through.
7. We have a great story to tell about the achievements of this authority since its formation in 2019 and I want to thank the Leaders from across the authority coming together to back this process.

### **Meeting outside pressures**

8. Cabinet and councillors continue to be asked their views and make decisions on a range of important initiatives that have been impacted on by UK and global events, Some of those decisions we will be looking at tonight have been affected by factors such as the invasion of Ukraine, cost of living crisis, inflation and increased costs of utilities as well as underfunding for public services. The effects of these are beyond the control of our council but have a massive impact on what we do.
9. These challenges will continue but I am pleased to see us continue to invest in initiatives that will have a positive impact on helping create jobs, opportunities and sustainable growth as well as thriving communities, affordable, available and decent homes and environmental resilience.

### **Affordable, available and decent homes**

10. As this Leader's Statement is published, I expect the Council to be asked to look at options for investment up to £200,000 to help meet the need following Suffolk County Council's decision to reduce Housing Related Support. I am pleased to say we have continued to work with Suffolk County Council, which has significant budget pressures, and our colleagues in District and Borough Councils as well as partners in the housing sector, who of course also have significant budget pressures.

**Supported housing currently helps more than half a million people in England to live independently in their communities. It provides a vital service to the people in our society who need the most support, from survivors of domestic abuse to young people leaving care.**

11. This is to include sourcing additional temporary accommodation and undertake a system review of the current Supported Housing Options available to homeless people in West Suffolk.

12. This is part of our work on making sure people have affordable, available and decent homes. I am pleased to say the work on our Housing Strategy work is going well and strengthening partnerships as well as the way we will help people get that most basic need of a home. Thank you to those who have attended the three workshops for members and I know your feedback has been vital and, with the other engagement we have had, is shaping the strategy we will publish later this year. Overview and Scrutiny will be looking at progress on the engagement in a few days' time.

### **Local Plan**

13. The final draft of the West Suffolk Local Plan has now been submitted to the Secretary of State and I want to thank everyone who has been involved in this complex and vital process.
14. Once adopted, the local plan will guide where new homes may and may not be built up to the year 2040. It includes policy designed to increase the delivery of affordable housing, improve the energy efficiency of homes and make them more adaptable to people's changing health needs, particularly as people get older.
15. It also allocates land for employment growth to help meet future need.
16. Having been shaped by thousands of public comments, it has now been sent to the Secretary for State who has appointed a planning inspector to hold an independent examination in public.
17. Following that examination, the revised local plan will come back to West Suffolk Council to formally adopt.

### **Thriving Communities**

18. To meet those challenges I outlined earlier we took the financially prudent decision not to carry on with the Western Way plans. However, we were also clear in our support for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work, on our desire to deliver leisure improvements in Bury St Edmunds, as had been done in the rest of West Suffolk, while meeting the financial challenges we face.
19. The investment being outlined for the Leisure Centre in Bury St Edmunds at Council will achieve that. We have worked closely with our partners at Abbeycroft Leisure on this additional package of improvements alongside the much needed maintenance.
20. It will help shape the future of sport and physical activity in Bury St Edmunds so that it can continue to ensure access to sport and leisure services to support people's health and wellbeing in line with our strategic priority for Thriving Communities.
21. In addition, it will enhance and modernise Bury Leisure Centre to improve the customer offer, listening to what Overview and Scrutiny and our residents said was needed. Importantly it will continue to encourage people of all ages and abilities from the surrounding area to get and stay active including programmes tailored to individual health needs.

22. This project delivers exactly what we said we would do for maintenance but over that it delivers the enhancement that our Overview and Scrutiny Committee (and our residents) said was needed.

### **Olding Road**

23. Hand in hand with the Leisure Centre investment are proposals for the Council owned Olding Road site.
24. A range of options have been considered for the site to meet the council's strategic priorities while balanced against a range of factors, including:
- Retaining ownership of the site for longer term opportunities in the delivery of the council's strategic priorities.
  - Providing short term flexibility to meet a challenging and changing economic market.
  - Need for financial certainty, lower capital investment options, income certainty and reduce ongoing costs.
  - Remediation of the site due to the age of the structure and materials and addressing any contamination caused by previous historic uses.
  - Planning regulations and guidance.
25. The option being put forward achieves this by creating, subject to market demand, a recreational and community area in the former depot that, together with the skatepark and surrounding college and neighbouring leisure centre, supports thriving communities – especially targeted for young people. While the warehouse section (former NHS supplies building), will be marketed in line with the site's emerging local plan allocation meaning it can be operated under current planning regulations, in support of the local economy and sustainable growth.
26. This project brings the site back into use, it delivers in the medium term a net return to the council following an initial breakeven position when assessed over 10 years. but it also addresses the £300,000 a year holding costs for the site. Additionally, it provides continued flexibility in the site for uses while supporting our communities, especially the young people that live across West Suffolk. This and the investment in the Leisure Centre are prudent and practical steps that deliver benefits for the wellbeing of residents but also means the Council does not risk funding that can be used to support all communities in the district.

### **Sustainable Growth**

27. You have seen that as part of the Olding Road site proposals is a mixed blend of benefits including sustainable growth and employment.
28. I wanted to also highlight an initiative you may have missed with the start of the election. I am pleased that we with other Suffolk councils have launched Thrive: Suffolk Skills and Employment Service. This is a new initiative designed to provide targeted support and opportunities for NEET (not in education, employment, or training) young people and adults across Suffolk who would benefit from support.

29. This innovative programme is funded by the district councils who have combined their grant allocations from the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to deliver this bespoke service. The fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills.
30. The Thrive programme is a partnership led by Suffolk New College, with our own West Suffolk College, East Coast College, Inspire Suffolk, Lofty Heights, Anglia Care Trust and Access Community Trust.
31. The programme aims to deliver a high-quality support service that addresses the complex needs of Suffolk's residents. By offering a highly localised and responsive approach, Thrive is dedicated to helping individuals navigate their unique challenges and access the full spectrum of education, training, and employment opportunities available within the county.
32. I also want to take a moment to say well done to all those who took part in the local heats of the National Market Traders Federation (NMTF) Young Trader Competition.
33. The NMTF Young Trader competition is a terrific opportunity for entrepreneurs to showcase their creativity, skills and talents whilst growing their businesses and networking with likeminded individuals. It is also part of the wider work we are carrying out to support and grow our local markets. By the time we meet the Newmarket heat will just have been held.

### **Provincial House – Haverhill**

34. By the time you read this, adult learners should have been given a first glimpse of a new skills and education centre that will open in Haverhill High Street later this month.
35. West Suffolk College, part of the Eastern Education Group, is to open its Personal and Professional Learning Centre at Provincial House under a phased opening.
36. It follows major investment by West Suffolk Council in a scheme designed to boost adult education and skills, bring extra footfall to Haverhill town centre to support existing and new businesses, and further generate income to help toward the cost of council services across the district.

### **Newmarket Cinema**

37. The official opening of the new Newmarket Cinema was held in June and the Chair was able to attend The Kings Theatre for the Council.
38. Newmarket Charitable Foundation, working with partners such as West Suffolk Council, Abbeygate Cinema and local theatre group NOMADS made having a cinema a reality.
39. This community led initiative is an excellent example of what can be achieved when working together. Our £35,000 grant, part of the Council's allocation from the Rural England Prosperity Fund, is to help run the latest releases and

create a fund supporting reduced price entry for those who would normally be prevented from going due to cost of living pressures.

### **Environmental Resilience**

40. The £1 million decarbonisation initiatives fund approved by Council last September is being well spent, turning ambition around improving the environment into reality. The bulk of this fund will be spent on upgrading parish and town council-owned streetlights to LED technology, reducing carbon emissions and the cost to tax payers. However, a significant residual sum will be available for decarbonising further community assets. As I write this Cabinet is set to receive a proposal on 9 July on how we can engage with all West Suffolk councillors in the coming months to identify the best potential uses of this money.

### **Finally**

41. Being a councillor is an incredibly hard but rewarding job. We have two motions to help people step forward and take up that challenge which I hope you will also support. Debate Not Hate aims to support councillors in saying no and appropriately dealing with the abuse that members can get which, unfortunately, can lead to tragic consequences. The second motion looks to introduce family friendly schemes to support elected members – recognising the barriers of childcare and leave for parents can be for people to become councillors. The more people we can encourage to come forward the better represented our communities will be.

**Councillor Cliff Waterman**  
**Leader of West Suffolk Council**