
Council



Forest Heath
District Council

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My focus over the past few weeks, not surprisingly, has very much been on dealing with the effects of RAF Mildenhall's closure and RAF Lakenheath's expansion. What has been absolutely great is the reaction of our local communities, businesses and councillors. While the announcement was initially a shock to many, the overwhelming response has been positive, with a real feeling that we can make something good come out of this.

The clock is ticking. Since the Pentagon announcement we have been swift to establish a lead role to ensure that local people have their say over the future of the Mildenhall site. I was at the first meeting of the Government's Mildenhall, Alconbury and Molesworth (MAM) Working Group, held in our council chamber and chaired by our MP, Matthew Hancock. I made it very clear to the Ministry of Defence that people here expect to have a firm indication as to whether MoD has a future military use for the site within the next three months. I know it will be years before the base finally closes, but we can't afford to drift endlessly waiting for a decision because there's a lot of fact-finding, consulting and planning to get through before then.

What is more, I want our communities and businesses to be at the heart of the regeneration of this important site. Already the ideas are coming in, and it fills me with confidence that we can all work together, with the backing of our MP and partners, especially the two Local Enterprise Partnerships and county council, to ensure that the district emerges stronger from this. I want to explore every avenue, make sure that every community, every business has a say in the future because we have a massive opportunity.

The end of February and early March will see Forest Heath host three meetings with representatives of residents' groups, parish councils and businesses, looking firstly at housing, then the impact on local communities, and finally on the economy, businesses and jobs. These meetings will enable us to come back with a stronger and better case to argue on behalf of those who live and work in the district. And if the MoD says they don't want the base then we need them to agree not to asset strip the place, but phase the release of assets so we can take advantage of the opportunities they present.

All of the above is not forgetting the importance of the work that we need to do to understand the impact of the expansion of RAF Lakenheath and the arrival of both additional personnel and the F-35 jets. With that in mind, we will be seeking discussions with the USAF and others over the coming months to allow us to get ready for any change that the growth of RAF Lakenheath may bring. So there is still much work to be done, but progress has already been made. And finally on this topic (though I'm sure we'll be revisiting it many times in the future) I would just like to thank the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee for inviting me to their meeting and especially for having the opportunity to talk about our ambitions around the RAF Mildenhall site. I was particularly pleased that these ambitions have cross-party support from councillors, regardless of their political views – a true illustration of our shared can-do attitude.

While the future of the USAF in Forest Heath has obviously been the major topic, there has been some really good news for us recently – the opening of the dualled A11, for a start. This is a really big opportunity for business in the district and, although we need to get through summer before we know the true impact, it's already relieving some of the traffic pressure in Brandon.

The Growth Deal announcements from the LEPs at the end of January was also good news for West Suffolk. Among the announcements, there's extra money for small and medium-sized businesses looking to grow, and for our young people the prospect of a £8 million Engineering and Innovation Technology Centre at West Suffolk College.

For those of us wondering what we should do with that time we spend between various meetings in our Mildenhall offices there is now of course an alternative to waiting around, with the opening of the new gym. It's another great example of how we're making best use of our assets and, at the same, time, improving facilities for people. I look forward to reports from fellow councillors on their new gym experiences.

Finally, later in this meeting we will be debating the budget for 2015/16 and the proposal to freeze council tax for the sixth year running – a tremendous achievement in these difficult economic times. We're able to propose this thanks to the huge efforts of staff and councillors to be tough on costs, challenge our spending, chase opportunities to be more commercial and get more income. My thanks go to everyone who has come up with ideas, put them into practice and squeezed every penny so we can keep money in people's pockets.