
Council



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Report by Cllr John Griffiths Leader of the Council	
Report No:	COU/SE/15/013 [to be completed by Democratic Services]	
Report to and date/s:	Council	24 February 2015
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** I must apologise for submitting this report late but, as you may be aware I have been out of the country recently. While I have continued to be involved in the work of the council (through regular email and telephone contact) I would like to thank the Deputy Leader, Cllr Sara Mildmay-White, for her admirable leadership while I have been away.

I would also like to congratulate Forest Heath's leader Cllr James Waters following the announcement of the proposed closure of RAF Mildenhall and expansion of RAF Lakenheath. His immediate reassurance to the local community about our pulling together to make the most of opportunities that may arise from the closure has had a calming effect as we all take time to look forward constructively.

St Edmundsbury has a strong relationship with RAF Mildenhall and the changes will inevitably have an impact on many who live, and have businesses, in the borough. We are working together with Forest Heath and others to build a better understanding of the potential implications and opportunities for the West Suffolk economy, gathering information from the communities affected (more of this below), and – equally importantly – lobbying Government to make an early decision about whether the Ministry of Defence wants to make use of the whole, or part, of the site. While the base is not closing overnight we need as much time as possible to investigate the possibilities and viability of alternative uses and to ensure the best outcomes for Mildenhall and the people and businesses in West Suffolk whom we serve.

2. Corporate Planning

- 2.1** The news that Suffolk is to get £3.345 million Government money, from the Transformation Challenge Award (TCA), to change the way the public sector delivers services across the county was, of course, extremely welcome but we now need to decide how to make every penny of that award count. This isn't money for quick fixes but an opportunity to think laterally, plan and come up with the innovation that will make real differences to people's lives. Here in West Suffolk, we are well positioned to deliver the TCA objectives of greater locality-based working, more resilient communities and properly integrated services. These are things we have been building for many years, not just for example through the co-location of public services in Bury St Edmunds and Haverhill and our closer working with Forest Heath and others in the public, private and voluntary sectors, but through our new Families and Communities Strategy.

The project is already bringing together people from a wide range of organisations and authorities and the first step is to agree the outcomes we want to achieve; then we can work on the actions we need to take together to get there. There will undoubtedly be some tough challenges ahead, especially getting so many different processes, governance systems, and so on working together, but there is a will so there should be a way. I will of course update councillors when there is news to report.

3. Shared Services

- 3.1** Both St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath councils will be deciding this month whether to freeze our council taxes again. St Edmundsbury's Cabinet is making that recommendation to full Council not least because it is the most direct way we can financially assist our Council Tax payers and I am delighted that we are in a position to achieve this for the fifth year in succession.

This is because we remain committed to a strong financial discipline which keeps us in control of costs while delivering quality service; and because councillors agreed to form a shared services partnership with our neighbour, Forest Heath, and work together as West Suffolk. We have already saved significant sums through this partnership, and continue to do so with for example shared procurement and different ways of working. As a result, and despite the very significant reduction in our grant from government, these savings should continue into the future and help ensure we remain an ambitious, forward-thinking authority with a vision to further improve our borough as a wonderful place in which to live, work and do business.

A prime example of shared services in action is the West Suffolk Operational Hub development, where St Edmundsbury, Forest Heath and the county council are looking to create a new single site to deal with waste collections, maintain vehicles, and provide better household recycling facilities for the public. This proposal is currently working its way through the democratic process, but bringing together three councils is only the start. Alongside the Government's own One Public Estate initiative, we will be looking to bring more partners on board to use the workshops and other facilities so that much more of the public

sector – and our taxpayers – benefit from the potential efficiencies and reduced costs offered by sharing the site.

4. Strategic Economic Development

4.1 Think Asia, Think Hong Kong: Finding your Partners in Hong Kong Event

Following their visit to Bury St Edmunds in November last year I am pleased we are welcoming back the Hong Kong Trade Development Council with their 'Think Asia; Think Hong Kong: Finding Your Partners in Hong Kong' event here in West Suffolk. Developing relationships and increased trading with China has long been a Suffolk-wide objective and both Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury are passionate about helping our businesses thrive and grow.

4.2 United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) Study

To build upon my earlier comments, along with partners we are shortly to commission a study looking into the economic and wider impacts of the USAFE bases at Mildenhall and Lakenheath. This will help West Suffolk to develop a response to the announcement by USAFE that RAF Mildenhall will be closing and of changes to the personnel numbers at RAF Lakenheath.

The study will assess the impacts, both direct such as the employment of local civilians by the bases, numbers of employees and wages etc., and indirect such as the spending US and civilian personnel on local goods and services.

It will also examine the wider impacts relating to visitor spend; labour market effects; the demand on local services and facilities, such as schooling, healthcare, community facilities and waste collection; the impact on local authority finances, through business rates, council tax and exemptions; the potential effect on revenue support grants received; housing and the potential effects on the local housing market; land and regeneration; transport and infrastructure; landlord spend and companies and their dependency on the bases.

4.3 Eastern Relief Road

We remain very keen to bring forward the development of the Suffolk Business Park within a clear and defined timetable and work continues to with our partners to bring this to fruition (preferably without the need for legal intervention). Part of this involves ensuring the land is assembled to enable the Eastern Relief Road to be completed and we may have to use the powers at our discretion to ensure deliverability of the strategic transport, education, employment and housing benefits to and around Bury St Edmunds. Similarly we may need to facilitate the necessary electricity infrastructure works to ensure speedy progress.

4.4 Funding for Engineering and Technology centre

Confirmation that the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership secured £48.5m in its recent Growth Deal with Government is great news for Norfolk and Suffolk. It is, however, particularly excellent news for West Suffolk that £7m of

that money was awarded to West Suffolk College to help create a new engineering and technology centre in Bury St Edmunds.

The new facility should equip hundreds of new students for careers in advanced engineering, giving them with the right skills and training for our employers. The centre will include an innovation hub offering real-life industry experience opportunities and bring students, regional employers and businesses together to seek practical solutions to actual, not classroom, commercial problems. It will also encourage learning in all STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects and provide routes into further and higher education for information, technology and computing.

St Edmundsbury Borough Council has a strong track record of working in partnership with the New Anglia LEP, of which I am a board member, and in attracting Government funding such as the £10 million towards the £15 million Eastern Relief road – part of the project that should help attract 5,000 new jobs in the long term amongst many other benefits. This additional funding will further contribute to ensuring the continuing success of West Suffolk College and the economy of West Suffolk for decades to come.

5. Communications

- 5.1** Improvements to the new West Suffolk website continue as we receive feedback from users. Now the team is working on a new shared West Suffolk intranet for staff and councillors, designed in a similar way to the website and I look forward to it being launched next month.

We also continue to inform people of council policies, activities and events through the local newspapers and, increasingly, through social media. This gives us more opportunities to respond directly to individuals and community groups and extend our reach to those who may not read the traditional news media.

The communications team is also working closely with the elections team to increase awareness of the role that democracy plays in our everyday lives - including the need to register to vote and encouragement to consider standing as a candidate in the borough, town and parish elections.