
Council



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Title of Report:	Leader's Statement	
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1. It is a fascinating time to be in local government – hugely challenging – but the opportunities for fundamentally changing the way we work with communities (and other public, private and voluntary sector organisations) throughout West Suffolk are also huge.
2. As I write this, Suffolk's councils are getting to grips with the devolution agenda. What powers do we want the Government to give us so we can help families to thrive and improve the lives of those who live and work in the county? What would we need to offer the Government in return for a greater ability to make decisions locally? How do we make sure that the special nature of West Suffolk, with its strong links to the Cambridge economic powerhouse, doesn't get lost in this countywide debate?
3. By the time we come together for the council meeting, the parameters of the devolution debate will have moved on, such has been its pace, but we cannot afford to let that discussion – important though it is – to distract us from the realities we face immediately and which are reflected in this council agenda. Work never stops on budget issues. Even before we approved this year's budget we were working on what we need to do to balance the books in the next financial year. The 'Delivering a sustainable budget' report to our Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee clearly sets out the scale of our financial challenge – we have a budget gap which we are addressing of £1.9 million.
4. I think it is safe to say that St Edmundsbury Borough Council, in partnership with Forest Heath District Council, has done exceptionally well over the past few years to continue delivering excellent services in extremely, and increasingly, tough economic times. We can, however, never stand still, never rest on our laurels – the decisions we took and changes we made to deliver £4 million in savings between the two councils through sharing staff and services may seem simple compared to some of the decisions we will be asked to take in the coming months. That said, we are in a better position financially because of the often

difficult decisions we have already made. But, and now we've "done" shared services, we have to move on to maintain that financial balance while providing the best possible and most cost effective services.

5. Nobody should, therefore, be surprised, looking at the agenda, to see that some of our decisions (whatever they are!) will be unpopular with some, perhaps even many, of our residents. We are, however, elected to serve people both in our individual wards and throughout St Edmundsbury and to take the often difficult financial decisions needed to maintain our services and to deliver on our priorities – the right kind of jobs and homes, even better quality of life and the future prosperity of our families and communities. If we choose not to take a tough decision to make a saving (and improve things in the long term) in one place then we will have to make possibly even tougher savings elsewhere.
6. Also on the agenda is the investment strategy. I do not believe we can continue simply to reduce our budgets - we have already "been there and done that". An alternative is to raise more income through investing in projects which will bring in the revenue needed to provide excellent services while delivering against our agreed priorities. Acting more commercially in this way should, I believe, be a more common feature of our future decision-making so we will be seeing more proposals about funding feasibility studies. In the same way that people pay for survey and legal services before they buy a house, we must make sure we have the very best advice before investing taxpayers' money in projects.
7. I continue to work with, and for, the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (NALEP) to support economic growth. I serve on the board of NALEP (representing West Suffolk and the other rural Suffolk districts and boroughs) and am keen to continue to explore opportunities for local investment – building on the success we have already had, for example in securing funding for the Eastern Relief Road. A further possible example of this is the Enterprise Zones work. The Government has announced another round of bidding for LEPs to apply for Enterprise Zones in their localities. There will be more detail about this process and what it could mean for West Suffolk in the coming months; however, if we were able to establish an Enterprise Zone in our area, businesses would be able to benefit from things like a discount on their business rates, superfast broadband and simplified planning regulation.
8. Finally, may I end with a thank you to the more than 1,000 people who engaged in the recent Haverhill town centre masterplan consultation. That is an excellent reflection on the hard work put in by the ONE Haverhill Partnership and our own staff to encourage people to become involved. And I am especially pleased that the council has successfully negotiated with the Co-op to end the lease which has seen the shop empty for far too long. By bringing the lease back into our control we have now secured the ability to help deliver in that part of Haverhill town centre an iconic development at some point in the future, and as part of the masterplan.

Councillor John Griffiths
Leader of the Council