

Leader's statement

1. We are of course now in December and hopefully, a joyful Christmas Season for you all, but we remain in challenging and uncertain times.
2. COVID-19 is still with us, and we continue, with partners to do all we can to support local and national efforts to help reduce the spread. At the same time, we have continued to deliver services and various projects and nationally important initiatives. I thank all of you again for your help and support in this.
3. But the reality this Christmas is that some of us will have lost friends, family members and acquaintances or indeed battled COVID ourselves. Sadly, the pandemic is still with us and I cannot endorse strongly enough the message from our Local Outbreak Engagement Board to please follow their advice, as well as encourage everyone eligible to get vaccinated or have the booster.
4. As this is the last meeting before we all meet again in 2022, I thought it worth looking back over the last year or so at just some of the things we have achieved and the foundations we have built together to help the quality of life and prosperity of our communities and businesses whom we serve.
5. We have also seen a step change with our continuing progress in our environment agenda and our aim for net zero carbon emissions by 2030 – reducing our impact while attracting millions of pounds of investment to West Suffolk and the wider county.
6. We have:
 - Delivered a strong response to COVID-19 meaning quality services were still delivered, the most vulnerable helped and many of our businesses given access to funding and support. We were one of the top councils in the country in this respect helping West Suffolk businesses access around £120 million in grants and business rate relief.
 - Invested millions of pounds in new leisure facilities across West Suffolk, including the recently opened Brandon centre.
 - Opened Mildenhall Hub bringing into reality new ways of working between public services, health, leisure, education, and the private sector. This is being brought forward with other hubs in West Suffolk in the pipeline including Western Way.
 - Continued to deliver the roll out of Social Prescribing across the whole of West Suffolk (which has become a model of good practice) and helped hundreds access help, new confidence, and employment.....often a real lifesaver, and particularly in these times of pandemic.
 - Made progress towards delivering a new Local Plan while consistently meeting Government targets on development.

- Continued to support our markets and deliver many high-quality services (such as bin collections) in exceptionally challenging circumstances.
- Reduced homelessness and the risk of homelessness thanks to a holistic approach that helps people move on, and forward (as well as engendering public support for our approach).
- Continued to lead a countywide project to help children and their families access various events where youngsters could have fun while gaining skills (for example, around cooking and access to food).
- Seen Barley Homes successfully building out its first two developments with one now already all sold out and housing new residents.
- Maintained our wonderful and important parks which have again received the nationally prestigious green flag awards.
- Continued to run a financially robust single council which has been able to withstand unprecedented local and national challenges, leaving us in a relatively good position to deliver further for the people of West Suffolk.
- Continued our successful growth agenda including tonight considering an incubator centre in Bury St Edmunds – only made possible by our forethought, investing in infrastructure and forging partnerships to develop business parks linked to the skills agenda. As just another example, the EpiCentre in Haverhill celebrated its first birthday this month with more than 20 companies and all its laboratory space taken.

7. I would also invite you to look at some more things we have been doing in our annual report and environment statement for 2020/2021.

https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/Council/Policies_Strategies_and_Plans/upload/West-Suffolk-Annual-Report-2020-21.pdf

[Environmental Statement 2020-2021 \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](#)

8. As already mentioned, we have built a strong foundation to face future challenges, and both help further support our local economy and our West Suffolk communities to be healthier, prosperous and greener. In the coming months we will further strengthen this to both deliver our vision and, importantly make sure that nationally Government and others of influence see what a beacon of good practice, forward thinking and delivery West Suffolk remains. We will also not only continue to make sure Government and others know what we can deliver but the part they need to play in better funding and supporting us to forge ahead with initiatives that are ground-breaking and beneficial to our own residents, but for the country.

Hubs

9. I was delighted to attend another hub opening which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of residents in and around Brandon.

10. The Brandon Leisure and Health Hub follows a £2 million investment by West Suffolk Council, reshaping the existing town leisure centre not only to upgrade fitness facilities but also to enable NHS services to be introduced at the site.
11. The improvements were informed by public engagement, and include a new gym and free weights area, Shapemaster suite, new changing rooms, Changing Places toilet, cafe, reception and the health treatment room. It also includes space that can be used by community healthcare professionals such as district nurses and physiotherapists and other community and hospital services.
12. Our forward-thinking partnership approach of bringing leisure and health together under one roof is already providing real benefits for patient care. Previously the nurses and therapists shared a small office and one clinic room, used by a number of community health services. They now have plenty of space and five newly built clinic rooms where patients can be treated. Crucially local residents can now access services locally rather than having to travel to West Suffolk Hospital or Addenbrooke's Hospital.
13. Having these impressive leisure facilities also means that preventative work can be carried out to help keep people fit, recover or increase their physical activity.
14. We are seeing similar benefits of this in Mildenhall since the hub opened there six months ago; and this has been confirmed by Health West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust adult and the paediatric community health teams who are reporting significant benefits for patient care.
15. Incidentally, the leisure facilities at Mildenhall Hub, managed by Abbeycroft Leisure, have seen a positive increase in use compared to pre-COVID statistics, with centre membership up by 38 per cent, swimming lesson participation up by 45 per cent and casual swimming use up by 127 per cent.
16. Abbeycroft has also been able to offer specialist classes at the hub as a direct result of working alongside the pulmonary rehab and Hub based physio teams.
17. The Hub has similarly enabled families to attend community paediatric speech and language therapy there rather than having to travel to Bury St Edmunds, while having a library on-site has also supported this work.
18. The library, whose staff welcome visitors to the building, was the first service to open at the Hub. Since its 1 June opening it has seen a 54 per cent increase in people borrowing books compared to the same period in 2019, while the number of library members has also soared with around 700 new members. Mildenhall College Academy which moved into the hub in mid-June has also seen the number of students it can cater for increase from 210 to 240 for this academic year, and it may well increase that again by another 30 for September 2022. As well as offering a better learning environment, the school is continuing to strengthen its community links and is currently collecting items for the Kings Project Food Bank to donate ahead of Christmas.

Growth

19. It is also good to see that our decisions around growth and economic development continue to bear fruit. A good example of this is The EpiCentre in Haverhill which I have already mentioned celebrated its first birthday this month. It is a facility that was made possible by our council providing a loan facility and working with the LEP to secure grant funding.
20. EpiCentre has now over 20 companies using its facilities and all its laboratories are taken with just some office space left. That is no mean achievement during the last two challenging years.
21. In addition, the building was also used as a vaccination centre for the local community. As part of its birthday celebrations businesses at the EpiCentre described how useful this facility is, providing both space for them to start and grow as well as to get vital business advice and connections.
22. Tonight, we will be discussing a similar opportunity and proposing a £12.1 million investment in a much-needed initiative to help create new and grow small companies in the advanced Manufacturing and Engineering sector.
23. This scheme aims to be cost neutral but also comes with the wider benefits of supporting new start-ups and providing facilities that are in high demand but are rarely built by the commercial sector. At the same time, it will link into colleges to improve that essential liaison between education and business, crucial to increasing skills and creating jobs.
24. This investment is another example of the Council's priority to grow the local economy, providing more and better jobs, helping people gain additional skills and making the area even more attractive to business.

Housing

25. I think we can all agree, preventing homelessness and helping those who do not have a roof over their head is a vital but very complicated and challenging issue. Thanks to taking a bold and holistic approach our latest count has seen us reduce rough sleepers from 36 to nine – although this figure fluctuates. We have also worked hard to engender public understanding of what we are doing and importantly, how they can help.
26. Our wrap around service with partners and the charity sector not only looks at the cause but also how we can help people move forward with their lives and seek better options for them.
27. As just one example, look at the case study just publicised about Kane (not his real name). At 15 he started taking drugs and had a life of addiction, prison and homelessness. But now in his 40s, Kane is clean, housed and has thanked the Council for our support and service to achieve this.
28. Part of that reduction in rough sleeping has been achieved by investing in a host of different types of accommodation including supported accommodation,

across West Suffolk; and the council now has enough accommodation in place to house all of those who are currently rough sleeping this winter.

29. But accommodation is only part of the picture and some people who are still rough sleeping may not be ready or willing to be helped; and this is why our dedicated rough sleeper service, which includes expertise in addiction support and mental health, never give up.
30. As always, if you know or suspect someone is sleeping rough, the quickest way to report it to the council's rough sleeper service is using Streetlink www.streetlink.org.uk

Building houses for our communities

31. I would like to thank everyone who has been engaged with the developing Local Plan and process, which is essential for the best possible future development and prosperity of West Suffolk and will also help protect us from speculative and unplanned development.
32. I am also pleased to report that we have surpassed Government development figures for West Suffolk again. Last year our target was 800 and 842 was achieved.
33. In addition, I also want to highlight the success of Barley Homes Group Limited (the housing company owned by West Suffolk Council).
34. It is good to see that the Westmill Place, Haverhill has new homeowners for all the 37 properties. The site, which was our first development, includes 30 per cent affordable homes as well as environmentally friendly measures such as charging points for electric cars, open space and provided funding to upgrade the local Railway Walk.
35. It has not only brought much needed housing but has improved the once vacant and disused Westfield Primary School site (and will also bring some income to West Suffolk Council to help support services).
36. Barley Homes second development, Stonemill Park, close to the former Castle Hill School is also progressing well and will deliver 63 homes. The show home is now open there and I understand there is already a lot of interest and some reservations.

And finally...

37. Just a few examples above of the many ways we have, and continue, to deliver on our vision for a healthier, greener and economically prosperous West Suffolk for the communities and businesses we serve.
38. 2022 will no doubt continue to be challenging but I am confident that - with your support - West Suffolk Council will continue to lead the way and, as always, more than rise to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

39. I just want to end by wishing you and yours - and our officers and staff of course - a Merry Christmas and a happy, safe and prosperous New Year; and indeed all our partners, communities and businesses as well. I'm sure you will also join me in thanking the many organisations and individuals across West Suffolk who have put on Christmas events that have both been COVID-19 safe and brought festive cheer to our district.

With best wishes and Happy Christmas again,
John

Councillor John Griffiths
Leader of West Suffolk Council