

West Suffolk District Councillor Report for Dalham Parish Meeting November 2024



Leader's Statement

I want to start this Leader's statement off with a thank you. Councillors Hopfensperger, Lukaniuk and David Smith and I were pleased to publish at the end of October the findings of the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge which looked at the authority now and over the past five to 10 years. This agenda includes the action plan going forward and I will have more to say when we discuss the item in the meeting. But I wanted to start my statement by saying publicly that this is not an appraisal of just the current administration or, indeed, of the previous administration – this is a reflection of all your hard work and dedication and that of current and previous councillors and employees going back to before the creation of West Suffolk Council. Thank you.

The report and verbal feedback we received was very positive and showed that we are a good council with sound financial foundations with strong and, importantly, the right shared priorities for the future. It is therefore a report that all of us as group leaders have been pleased to put our names to as the first report of its kind for West Suffolk Council. I also want to thank and recognise the work of Councillor John Griffiths and his Cabinet for his and their work up to 2023, which was also reflected in this positive report.

We encouraged free and open discussions with anyone the CPC team wanted to speak with and indeed the peers had 61 meetings with 110 individuals. Thank you to everyone who supported this and to those involved in the good work through the years for our businesses and communities.

In summary it found the council has:

Strong foundations and the right ambitions as well as priorities

A sound financial base

Good visible leadership

Engaged staff whose contribution is recognised and talents developed

Cabinet and councillors working well to deliver on strategic priorities

Strong relationships with partners to drive forward initiatives and common goals.

The report ends by saying: “West Suffolk Council is currently in a stable and strategically advantageous position, with a solid financial foundation that allows for proactive planning and the capacity to address future challenges. Strong internal frameworks provide a robust support system for continued growth and improvement. The council's commitment to effective asset management, strategic partnerships, and community engagement positions it well to capitalise on opportunities for regional influence and enhanced service delivery. WSC is well-equipped to define and achieve its long-term goals, ultimately benefiting residents and stakeholders.”

The council’s strategic priorities and the need to engage more with residents were agreed by the whole of council in 2023 and I am pleased to say the panel agreed that the priorities are “clear, based on local evidence, political priorities, and challenges....created through engagement with councillors and were understood by staff as well as welcomed by partners, local organisations and residents.”

The eight recommendations are helpful and answer some of the challenges we put to the corporate peer challenge group ourselves. They build on the good work that is already being delivered and help us move forward in our ambition to support West Suffolk communities and businesses in the future. I look forward to working with you all and with staff on the action plan ahead of the return of the peers in May 2025 to check on our progress.

National Government

We will have all seen the budget and I am sure we all have our own thoughts on it. As ever we await the detail and what a settlement for West Suffolk Council looks like. However, I welcome the news of investment in public services as well as an indication of long term settlements which allows authorities to better financially plan. In addition it is good to see commitment to funding new burdens such as Simpler Recycling. Plans to reduce homelessness, grow the economy, increase affordable housing and help some of the most vulnerable also support our strategic priorities. We will of course continue with our robust financial planning until the review of funding for councils is clarified, as well as looking at the white paper on reorganisation of Local Government through devolution. We will also continue to work with partners to seek to influence Government on key issues affecting our communities, as well as talking to our own local MPs to make the case directly Affordable, available and decent homes

I know my Cabinet colleague for Housing, Councillor Richard O’Driscoll will be recommending our draft Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough

Sleeping Strategy for approval later in this meeting, but I wanted to express my delight at the real life stories we have shared recently with the public and through social media which show how West Suffolk is making a difference. “Brenda”, a woman in her 70s who lives near Bury St Edmunds spoke of how, as a Council, we gave her back her independence and self-esteem. She was struggling to look after her personal hygiene after breaking her pelvis and being diagnosed with osteoporosis. Through a disabled facilities grant we were able to replace her bath with a wet room.

Bob who is in his 60s and from Red Lodge told of how his wife would go to work and worry that she’d find him collapsed at the bottom of his stairs. He has Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and Atrial Fibrillation (AF) and would get breathless going up the stairs on his hands and knees. We’ve helped make a massive difference to his life through a grant for a stairlift. We’ve also been recognised as one of three top three per cent of authorities in the country for how quickly it awarded Disabled Facilities Grants are decided and delivered.

Nationally the average in 2022/2023 was 30 days for approval of a full application and another 95 for completion of the work. West Suffolk was approving in four days and contractors were completing the work in 49 – and we’ve got even faster since.

Then there’s the work around helping people out of homelessness. We had “Sarah” who fled her long-term partner after he got violent and praised the support of our housing officers in helping her and her daughter secure a new home.

We had “Peter” who described his shock at having to have a foot amputated which meant he had to give up his building job and couldn’t stay at the beautiful historic house he was renting. He has been helped into a full accessible ground floor flat.

And we heard the praise of “James and Jane” who were served a no fault eviction by their landlady who wanted to sell up. Fair enough but during the eight years they’d lived at their home in Bury St Edmunds, private rents had increased so dramatically – they say by £600 to £700 a month - that they just couldn’t afford anywhere to live. They described how the threat of homelessness caused pressure on the family and they were “drifting apart.” Housing supported them first in a temporary home through one of the landlords that works with us as part of the West Suffolk Letting Partnership, and then helped them secure a dream home in Newmarket which they described as the “making of their family.”

Finally, we have the story of “Chris” who had been rough sleeping, driving around in a car in the cold and sleeping in out of the way village car parks.

Thankfully he was referred to our Rough Sleeping Support Service who intervened and got him back into a house before temperatures plummeted further. If you haven't seen or heard any of the case studies, I just mentioned please check out our YouTube channel.

All these things are examples of the great work we are already doing as part of our strategic priority for Affordable, Available and Decent Homes. There's obviously much more though that we, and our partners including housing associations and developers, need to be doing and I look forward to our discussion on the strategy which many in this room, our communities, and our partner organisations, have helped shape.

Sustainable growth

Provincial House

By the time this is published a new centre to boost adult learning and skills should have opened in Haverhill High Street, following a £2million capital investment by West Suffolk Council.

West Suffolk College, part of Eastern Education Group (EEG) will have completed the phased opening of its Personal and Professional Learning centre at Provincial House on 4 November.

The council's investment helps deliver its own strategic priority for sustainable growth by supporting the development of adult skills and education and bringing extra footfall to the high street. The money, which has been used to remodel the building and make improvements including to accessibility, will also help the council attract other tenants and businesses, and creates annual income to support the cost of day-to-day council services.

I know Haverhill members and Cabinet members were given a sneak preview of the premises which I believe will be an excellent asset for both encouraging new skills but for the town centre itself.

Markets

It would also be remiss not to take this opportunity to advertise the fact that our popular monthly Makers Markets will be returning, complementing the normal weekly markets.

The festive markets will take place in November and December, allowing shoppers across the district to get into the joyful spirit and find the perfect gifts for loved ones!

Of course, our normal weekly markets continue to operate and through our Markets Matter initiative we have seen many of them expand as we work much more closely with traders and partner organisations. For example, Mildenhall opening times have been amended in consultation with the traders which has made set up and pack down easier. This has resulted in several traders trying the market for the first time. A mini-Christmas market will also

take place in Mildenhall on 22 December with additional stalls and entertainment. Newmarket has attracted new traders, and the Makers Market has grown from 10 to over 15. Haverhill Makers Market has increased from 20 to over 30 with an additional date added in December due to demand. Bury St Edmunds market has over 80 stalls and a long wait list with two extra markets during December now fully booked with markets in place every Sunday too. Closer working with traders has meant we have been able to better meet their needs and use them in marketing and communication of what's on offer. The markets team, which is also expanding, have moved into our Growth service as part of us recognising the importance markets play. Plans are also afoot for additional events and markets in spring and summer working with partners such as the Business Improvement Districts to be more joined up in encouraging more visitors.

Environmental resilience

Decarbonisation projects

The Council has been working through decarbonisation projects sent in by councillors on behalf of community organisations in their wards. This initiative is a great way of not only helping the environment but helping ward members take an active role in supporting their localities with tailored projects and funding.

The Decarbonisation Initiatives Fund (DIF) supports community projects that advance decarbonisation efforts and contribute to reducing carbon emissions, improving energy efficiency and transitioning to renewable energy sources. It has already assisted town and parish councils to convert around 1,500 streetlights to light-emitting diodes (LED), saving over 200 tonnes of CO2 per year.

The latest round of the initiative received an enthusiastic response, with 29 expressions of interest (EOIs) submitted to ward members from across the community. Given the high level of response, the council has been working through the EOIs with the assistance of the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership, and will follow up with communities as needed, with a view to making funding offers as soon as possible to all of the EOIs that are viable and within the funding objectives of the scheme.

Simpler Recycling

Following on from the decision made by Council over measures to improve recycling for households Cabinet has now backed plans to support businesses meet their responsibilities. Cabinet backed plans to develop our commercial waste collection service to meet the Government's 'Simpler Recycling' requirements as set out in the Environment Act 2021. West Suffolk Council has well-established commercial waste services and these proposals seek to

protect and grow these services and its income by providing compliant waste services to our local businesses – many of whom already use the service. The deadline the Government has mandated for the introduction of the new recycling requirements are by 31 March 2025 (a year earlier than households). To help support businesses meet the deadline and while waste handling and processing infrastructure is being put in place an interim scheme has been put forward. This will protect our current business and support growth in the following years, when the infrastructure is fully available. It will also meet the key objectives of providing a separate food waste collection service to all relevant commercial and non-household customers in West Suffolk from April 2025, unless they are exempt; extend the current recycling service to all existing customers who currently have no recycling service; introduce the separate collection of glass and cartons where applicable and work with businesses to ease the transition from a predominately disposal-based service to one based on recycling.

Solar

West Suffolk Council's leading work on solar energy has meant we have been able to be an integral part of a Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) project to save 7,500 tonnes of carbon emissions and £7 million by putting panels on schools.

Together with our own highly successful solar for business scheme, Toggam Solar Farm and the agreement by Cabinet of a £1.3million scheme to seek planning permission to put solar panel canopies over one of the Mildenhall Hub car parks – West Suffolk is doing its bit to help make the county a super power in green energy.

The £3.72 million SPSL initiative will be in place for 25 years and help schools across Suffolk save on energy bills and help the environment as well as helping fund further environmental work. The scheme will be supported by West Suffolk, using our expertise in this field, over the next three years.

I am also pleased to say that, if approved, our own scheme at Mildenhall Hub could save around £150,000 and 125 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

Air pollution

I am sure you will all welcome the news that levels of harmful air pollutant linked to vehicle exhaust emissions have been consistently decreasing across West Suffolk.

There is a combination of reasons from behaviour change to measures put in place to encourage this by our council over the years.

Air pollution impacts people's health and additionally the cost to public and health services to support those suffering from the effects of these toxins.

As part of our legal duties, we monitor nitrogen dioxide at 80 locations. Our

latest annual report highlights all sites in West Suffolk are below national thresholds in 2023 and below pre-pandemic levels as well – falling also below 2022 levels.

Part of the fall is due to increased use of electric vehicles and West Suffolk Council has been investing in improving access to EV infrastructure such as charging. In doing so we have been successful in accessing national funding. This includes recent works to install EV chargers at the Guineas Shopping Centre car park in Newmarket and Parkway car park in Bury St Edmunds. This is funded by the council and the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles. This means car park users and residents who do not have access to off street charging can use them as well as the council's own vehicles when working in communities and towns.

These and chargers across the district will further help attract current and transitioning electric vehicle owners to our town centres as well as reducing carbon emissions and contribute to a cleaner air quality in West Suffolk.

Thriving communities

Memories Are Golden

The future of an important community dementia hub in Haverhill has been saved thanks to agencies, organisations, individuals and councillors coming together.

Memories Are Golden Community Hub was facing possible closure due to their previous accommodation being sold.

It was only weeks away from closure because it could not find a suitable longterm home when Abbeycroft stepped forward and secured space for them at the Haverhill Leisure Centre, which they run on our behalf.

The group, which had previously received Community Chest funding (now called Thriving Communities funding) specialises in offering day care services to individuals living with dementia and suffering from heart conditions, diabetes and other long term physical challenges. They also support people combat loneliness and isolation.

Golden Age have thanked Abbeycroft, West Suffolk Council, Suffolk County Council and Haverhill Town Council for helping make sure the hub stayed open to deliver this vital service for the local community.

I would also like to highlight and thank Councillor Andrew Martin who used locality funding to support the work of this organisation as did Suffolk County Councillors Joe Mason, David Roach and Heike Sowa.

It is a great example of where organisations and councillors can come together and make a big difference not only to those suffering with these issues but help their families and carers too. This type of funding and way of

working is vital in helping our communities thrive and find tailored solutions for local issues.

Arts and culture

Arts and culture and the part they play in thriving communities has always and continues to be at the heart of this council. Councillor Shipp recently visited the new Sci-Fi and Action exhibition at the Moyse's Hall Museum which also helps commemorate the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Landings. The exhibition which gives the opportunity for current and new visitors to learn about the events through displays and props from famous film and TV productions depicting the historic and real life stories of those who fought and gave the ultimate sacrifice.

This is part of the annual exhibition which also includes items from a range of legendary films and television franchises, and I would urge you to go along or talk to Councillor Shipp about what you will see. There is something for all the family and the exhibition runs until Sunday, 26 January.

Equally we have been able to help support outside organisations that also deliver art and culture to local communities. This includes helping the Theatre Royal find a venue for their panto rehearsals, something I am sure will be enjoyed by residents and visitors this Christmas.

Finally

I will end where I started in recognising the work that has gone on over the years and through co-operation by councillors. An example of this is the current Local Plan process with the hearing stage being held until 12 December in West Suffolk House. This is West Suffolk Council's first ever Local Plan and the fact we have reached this important stage is testimony to the hard work of previous and current councillors as well as our staff and partners. Having a Local Plan is crucial to help shape future development and support the continued success of West Suffolk as well as the delivery of our strategic priorities.

Councillor Cliff Waterman

Leader of West Suffolk Council



Mike Chester



District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward