
May 2021 District Councillor report

for

Ousden Annual Parish Meeting

With the previous year dominated by Covid-19, lockdown, and the effects of both on the health and prosperity of the Nation, West Suffolk is well placed for the recovery. From an initial slow rollout of Vaccine to the massive implementation of infrastructure to deal with mass vaccination, the results are self-evident.

West Suffolk District Council's (WSDC) role in dealing with the crisis led to new ways of working, with staff working in multi-roles in which they excelled, I can't praise them enough.

On a theme of praise, I'm in awe of the community spirit I witnessed within the villages I serve as District Councillor, from individuals, help groups and Parish Councils. Thank you.

Despite Covid-19, WSDC has maintained its statutory role in running services with little or no impact to the public, despite increased demand. The full costs of the pandemic are yet to be realised, however WSDC has agreed a balanced budget for the next financial year, Government support has been vital, however there is a deficit which, at the time of writing, is managed in line with Budget expectations

Moving on

West Suffolk continues to be a desirable area to live, work and retire. We have an adequate supply of building land and have reached the quota of new homes (both statutory requirements). The current land supply expires in five years, hence the process titled SHELAA – The Strategic Housing Land and Economic Availability Assessment and the Local Plan which facilitate local input into developing or preserving their locality.

Retail units in Bury St Edmunds are in high demand despite Covid-19 and a corresponding increase in online purchasing, planning applications in West Suffolk are at an all-time high, all indicators towards a prosperous future.

Financial help to business expires end of May 2021 (Covid-19 related). £95 million through grants and rate relief for this financial year has been made to thousands of West Suffolk businesses since the pandemic began.

The Council has secured £205,000 from the Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund (SIGIF) to work with town centre partners on an initiative to help manage empty shops. SIGIF is a £1.65m fund allocated by Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) and New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (NALEP) to support local, place-based economic recovery from COVID-19 across Suffolk. The fund supports projects that respond to the significant impact of COVID-19 on Suffolk's businesses, employees, and our local economy.

The SIGIF funding will be used to do a number of things. This will include working with partners to look at better utilising vacant units in towns as well as explore initiatives to help start-up businesses begin trading and support them to get more permanent premises. It will also look at measures to help cafés and restaurants accommodate and attract more customers, such as outside facilities, while keeping COVID-19 safe.

We continue to have confidence in the future of our high streets as a place of economic, social, and cultural activity. It is a place where people will continue to come to shop, relax in a café or restaurant, to live, work or enjoy other leisure or cultural attractions such as museums, arts venues or more. Which is why I, with my fellow Public Sector Leaders, argued for this funding to be set aside to encourage this growth and recovery.

In progress

Sunnica Solar Farm. A cross boundary proposal affecting West Suffolk and East Cambs. Affecting an area the size of 500 football pitches and being a major infrastructure project, any decision will be made by the Secretary of State, WSDC is only a Consultee in the process.

West Suffolk Hospital expansion. Proposal to develop and increase facilities on the site of the former Hardwicke Hall.

Barley Homes, a development company wholly owned by WSDC. Enabling the Council to act more commercially and be less dependent on Government funding. Two sites up and running in Haverhill with more sites in the pipeline.

Work continues apace at the former Post Office building in Bury St Edmunds. The difficult process of retaining the Victorian façade, whilst demolishing the rest of the structure has been achieved. The Skyline is temporarily dominated by the installation of an 18 metre Crane.

This project delivers what people asked for when they helped shape the vision for the town centre in the masterplan in 2017.

“Once completed this will deliver a much better and wider walkway between the arc and the historic town centre, as well as a new commercial frontage onto St Andrews St South and improved access to the historic Cornhill front.

“The new homes and commercial units, will hopefully also be creating a small level of income which will help toward the day-to-day services we provide.”

Putting service at the heart of Mildenhall

A project group, involving the potential partners, has obtained planning consent for plans to create a 'Mildenhall Hub' with a view to opening the first facilities by 2020/21. Building of the hub started in 2019.



those involved in exploring the Mildenhall Hub include:

- Citizen's Advice service
- DWP (Job Centre)
- Mildenhall College Academy
- Mildenhall swimming pool and the Dome (Abbeycroft Leisure)
- Suffolk County Council
- Suffolk Libraries Service
- Suffolk Police and Crime Commissioner/Suffolk Constabulary
- West Suffolk Clinical Commissioning Group (for the NHS)
- West Suffolk Council

The project is also part of the Government's One Public Estate Programme

Work is on programme for project completion in May/June 2021.

Mike Chester

District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward

Temporary point of contact for the Wickhambrook and Whepstead Ward