

West Suffolk District Councillor Report for Ousden Parish Council December 2024



The statement below is from the meeting of West Suffolk Council on December 17th, 2024, agenda item 6.

Leader of West Suffolk Council

Statement

1. I wanted to start off wishing everyone a merry Christmas and happy New Year. I was honoured to be invited to say a few words to staff recently and thank you on behalf of us all for their hard work and dedication. It was truly humbling to hear what they have delivered this year from preventing people from becoming homeless to performing CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) on a gentleman who had become unwell.
2. I also want to say thank you to you all as councillors, on behalf of our communities. We may not see eye to eye on all issues as is to be expected in a democracy but, at the heart of all our debates, is the ambition we all share to do the best for the residents and employers we represent. We are delivering on our strategic priorities and making a real difference but also, on a local level, having an impact through locality funding and championing of organisations that are vital for communities to thrive. If your inbox as a councillor is like mine, I know that ours is not a nine to five role and while I hope you get some time over the festive period to see your family and loved ones, I suspect you will be answering questions and continuing to support your communities as usual. Thank you.

National policies

3. As I write this, we are still waiting for details from Government on policies that will have an effect on West Suffolk and Local Government as a whole. For example, we await the details of the financial settlement that follows the financial policy statement. This will have a direct bearing on our budgets. Importantly, we also await the English Devolution White Paper and what that

means for Local Government and Mayoral Combined Authorities. Depending on when these are published, I will hopefully be able to update you in my speech at Council. But I would say whatever these and other announcements have to say we know from our Corporate Peer Review and the ongoing work both now and in the past, that West Suffolk Council is in a strong position to face these opportunities and challenges.

Affordable, Available and Decent Homes

Calling our partners

4. I welcome Councillor O'Driscoll's call to partner organisations to work with the council to help deliver our new housing strategy that will benefit communities.

5. Earlier this year, West Suffolk Council asked residents, town and parish councils, housing associations, local NHS trusts, care providers and developers to give their views on the various challenges faced around housing as well as some of the possible actions that the council could take to try to address them.

6. As you know this led to the creation of a new Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy which was approved and adopted by Council at our last meeting.

7. The new strategy aims to:

- help more people to better be able to afford a decent and secure home
- support residents by improving living conditions which will benefit their health and wellbeing and reduce the impact on health and social care
- reduce homelessness and rough sleeping.

8. However, while we have certain levers to effect this, we do not alone have the power to meet all the challenges. This is a complex issue and requires a holistic approach.

9. Which is why Councillor O'Driscoll will be meeting with representatives of housing associations, developers, local health and care providers in the new year to discuss how we work collaboratively to best address these many challenges for current and future generations.

Environmental Resilience

Suffolk Retrofit Assessment Voucher Scheme

10. I welcome the Suffolk Retrofit Assessment Voucher Scheme, a pioneering initiative aimed at promoting energy efficiency and sustainability in homes across the county, has now been launched.

11. Homeowners across Suffolk will be able to apply for a voucher that covers the

cost of a professional retrofit assessment on their home property. These assessments are the first step towards making their home more energy efficient, lowering their energy bills and reducing their carbon footprints.

12. Funded by Suffolk's public sector organisations and delivered by public services provider Reed in Partnership in support of Suffolk's Climate Emergency Plan, the scheme will play a significant role in providing support, direction, and incentives for private homeowners to decarbonise their homes.

13. The retrofitting of all homes to energy performance certificate (EPC) band C (or above) by 2035 is a stepping stone on the journey to achieving net zero targets. Retrofit refers to any improvement work on an existing building to improve its energy efficiency.

14. Residents who own a home with an EPC band of below C can take up the offer of a voucher to claim an assessment from a PAS [publicly available specification] 2035 Retrofit Assessor who will identify the best measures that could be deployed in their home to improve energy efficiency.

15. Homeowners can check to see if their property has an existing Energy Certificate with an EPC band and record of their property size at GOV.UK - Find an energy certificate.

16. There is no obligation to take up the recommendations of the retrofit assessment report, but a new council loan will provide up to £15,000 at nought percent interest to those interested in making efficiency upgrades.

17. To find out more go to Home | Suffolk Energy Efficiency Assessment and please feel free to share the link.

Play areas

18. Our open spaces and country parks are putting on a tremendous show this autumn of reds and golds and I would like to thank all our staff who are working outside in this cold weather to keep services going from park rangers, sweeping streets and checking on people rough sleeping. Keeping our facilities in the best condition is a constant battle and I note in the last few months we have seen refurbishments of play areas at Heasman Close and Green Road, Newmarket; Woodcock Rise, Brandon and Lowry Close, Haverhill.

Tree Planting Week

19. I was delighted, with Councillor Kelly, to help celebrate National Tree Planting Week 2024, by joining local community groups to plant a black poplar tree at No Man's Meadow in Bury St Edmunds.

20. The black poplar tree is one of Britain's most endangered native trees and is vital to the health of wetland ecosystems. It is just one of hundreds of trees

and other plants West Suffolk Council has grown or planted across the district.

21. The tree was grown as part of a species stock at Nowton Park, which is the established Suffolk clone bank for the Black Poplar Project that increases the tree's genetic diversity.

Bulb planting grows community spirit

22. I would also urge all of you to look at the pictures on our social media of over 60 school children from Guildhall Feoffment taking part in planting bulbs at the Abbey Gardens in collaboration with volunteers and West Suffolk Council.

23. In a delightful display of community spirit and environmental awareness, two classes of children from Guildhall Feoffment and the school gardening club came together with Friends of Abbey Gardens volunteers and our staff to plant around 8,000 bulbs. These were all planted in a mulched area under the tree canopy near the Abbey Gate entrance to the award winning and nationally recognised gardens.

24. Hopefully this will also help set the seed for many of the youngsters of an interest in the natural world and the environment.

Reverse Vending machines

25. Two additional reverse vending machines have been installed in West Suffolk following an initial six month trial.

26. Earlier this year we became the first council in the country to get behind an initiative to increase recycling and support local businesses. The council teamed up with Love Newmarket Business Improvement District (BID), Our Bury St Edmunds BID, The Guineas Shopping Centre, Abbeycroft, Eastern Education Group, and Trovr to deliver four reverse vending machines.

27. I want to thank the members of the Environment and Sustainability Reference Group and especially Councillor Jarvis who I know has particularly been a champion of this initiative.

28. With the goal to increase recycling rates of single use drinks containers and reduce litter, it is positive that a total of 12,640 items have been recycled via the machines so far.

29. Thanks to an enthusiastic response from the local community two more machines have been added: one in Haverhill Leisure Centre and another in local insurance broker Howden Bury St Edmunds.

30. These join the machines already installed in The Guineas, Newmarket Leisure Centre, West Suffolk College and Parkway Multi-storey.

31. Trovr, the company supplying the machines, uses a smartphone app to

incentivise recycling through points-based rewards. Residents can earn points by recycling at the designated machines, redeemable at local and national businesses.

Thriving Communities

Upgrades for Bury St Edmunds Leisure Centre

31. As I write this, proposals to deliver key improvements to the Bury St Edmunds Leisure Centre are due to be brought before Cabinet.

32. If approved Council should also be debating it at this meeting, following a strong public engagement campaign which broadly supports the scheme and has helped shape the proposals.

33. In July, West Suffolk Councillors approved a business case for refurbishment works at the Beetons Way leisure centre, contingent upon public consultation. From 22 August to 10 October 2024, West Suffolk Council and Abbeycroft, who manage the centre, joined forces to conduct an extensive consultation, including an online survey, in-person sessions, focus groups, and a digital campaign.

34. This effort resulted in feedback from over 1,000 residents, centre users, and stakeholders, providing valuable insights into what enhancements matter most. This is a great example of our strategic priority for engagement.

35. The top priorities identified included modernising the wet-side changing rooms, upgrading the pool halls, as well as adding water play features in the children's leisure pool while retaining the popular flumes.

36. While the proposed upgrades were broadly welcomed, respondents voiced preferences for minimising disruption by phasing the work appropriately during the refurbishment. The council and Abbeycroft are looking at a phased approach to help mitigate these concerns.

37. I am sure I will say more when we debate the issue, if it comes to Council.

Local Council Tax Reduction

38. As I write this Cabinet has not met but I am pleased to see that the Portfolio Holder is recommending for a third year a 100 per cent Local Council Tax Reduction for those most in need, including people that are working.

39. Hopefully this will be supported by Cabinet and we will also be looking at this at Council tonight.

40. If agreed, the average working age recipient of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) would receive up to an additional £103 discount on their Council Tax for the single year.

41. The proposal is highly targeted to reach those who are already on means tested benefits, many of whom are working, and has low administrative cost.

This could benefit around 4,700 residents and represents a one year only £500,000 investment by organisations that set Council Tax precepts in supporting those most in need that meet the criteria.

Holiday Activities and Food programme

42. Children and young people in West Suffolk who receive benefits related free school meals can now book for free activities throughout the school winter holidays.

43. We are also helping families who are in financial hardship but who wouldn't otherwise qualify so they apply for activity places.

44. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme includes film making, multisports, football, outdoor cooking, swimming, roller skating, arts and crafts, nature walks, environmental projects, forest schools and more. In addition, Abbeycroft will be giving 225 food and activity hampers to participating children and young people.

45. HAF is Government funded and coordinated locally by West Suffolk Council on behalf of Suffolk County Council. The HAF winter programme in West Suffolk includes 1,089 places across 31 sessions which are being delivered by 12 partner organisations.

46. While the Government programme is primarily aimed at children and young people in West Suffolk who receive benefits related free school meals, we have been allowed to use some of the funding we are allocated to make places available to other families who are in financial hardship.

47. Families with children on benefits related free school meals should have already received information through their school about HAF in their area. Those in financial hardship can find out how to apply for a place or places at our holiday events webpage.

Warm spaces

48. Nearly 40 warm spaces including libraries, community centres and village halls are putting on activities to support residents of all ages across West Suffolk this winter.

49. And residents can find warm spaces in their area, the activities taking place, and other support through West Suffolk Council's dedicated webpages.

50. The council learned in early October that it would receive winter related support from the county funds. West Suffolk is using that money to support warm spaces and contacted all that it has supported in previous years to see if

they were operating this winter and needed funding support.

51. Across West Suffolk 39 warm spaces are operating this winter including 26 which are being supported by West Suffolk Council with a grant of £1400 each. All 39 are now listed at on the Council's Warm Spaces webpage. And the list will be updated as other warm spaces contact families.communities@westsuffolk.gov.uk to be added to the list.

Drop-in

52. Residents were invited to a local community energy drop-in event at Ixworth where experts gave free impartial advice to help save money and tips for staying warm this winter.

53. Council attended the Keep the Heat event at the Village Hall on Saturday 16 November. Green Ixworth teamed up with the Suffolk Climate Change Partnership (SCCP) to run the event alongside stallholders from organisations such as Warm Homes Healthy People, Centres for Warmth and Safe Suffolk Renters, Suffolk County Council and many more in attendance.

Sustainable Growth

Stourview Medical Centre

54. As you are aware, this July we acquired the freehold of Stourview Medical Centre in Haverhill to help facilitate future development on the Jubilee Place area, meet the ambitions of the town masterplan and provide the opportunity to deliver some of the place-shaping proposals. As we undertook to do at the time of purchase, we have sought to let out the property and I am pleased to report that the centre has been and continues to be used as a Covid and Flu Vaccination Clinic. Operated by Clare Pharmacy this has helped to provide a well-located vaccination service, close to the high street, for the residents of the town and the surrounding area. With the vaccination centre ending its term this Christmas, we are working with partners in the Health System to bring forward uses for property to the benefit of Haverhill and the town centre.

Calling all budding young chefs aged 11-15 years

55. Aspiring young chefs in West Suffolk have been invited to apply for a six week Junior Chef Programme at West Suffolk College.

56. West Suffolk Council and West Suffolk College are working together to deliver this exciting opportunity after securing £10,000 funding from the Visitor Economy Network Initiative (VENI), to continue the Choose Hospitality partnership project.

57. Helping young people gain the skills and experience is vital in supporting them

in getting a career and reaching their dreams.

58. VENI is a collaboration between educators and industry to deliver skills, support, and career opportunities for the visitor economy of the region, while simultaneously raising awareness and challenging perceptions. VENI was formed in 2021 and is overseen by the Eastern Education Group and Visit East of England.

59. This scheme will enable 10 students to access the Junior Chef Programme beginning in January for half price. The course offers a fantastic opportunity to cook up a storm each week, learning new skills, techniques and recipes in a professional commercial kitchen.

60. There will be an Intermediate Junior Chef course running in March that will also be available for half price (£175), and Choose Hospitality will also be delivering opportunities for unemployed adults to gain skills in the hospitality industry in spring 2025, more information will be announced in the new year.

61. To find out more and to sign up for the Future Chefs Programme, visit West Suffolk College - Junior Chef Programme - Introduction Level.

Festive Markets

62. Depending on when you are reading this hopefully you have been or will visit one of the additional festive markets running alongside the regular markets throughout West Suffolk in the lead-up to Christmas.

63. Residents and visitors have been given the opportunity to discover a wide range of stalls selling homeware, clothing, jewellery, tasty treats, gifts and much more!

64. If you are reading this as the Council Summons is published you can visit Mildenhall Mini Christmas Market on Sunday 15 December which will showcase regular traders alongside some new faces, with music and activities for children to enjoy.

65. There will be extra Sunday markets in Bury St Edmunds on Sunday 15 December and Sunday 22 December. Shoppers will find a mixture of regular market traders and those who attend the monthly makers markets throughout the year.

66. There is also still time to visit Newmarket Makers Market on Saturday, 14 December, if you missed the ones that have already been held this month in the district.

Essential Services

Christmas bin-fluencers

67. West Suffolk Council is calling for Christmas bin-fluencers to share information on bin day changes to make sure family, friends and neighbours don't miss a collection over the holidays.

68. We're also encouraging residents to continue their excellent efforts in recycling, as we all strive to reduce waste and increase reuse. For those who are not sure if particular items can be recycled, please visit:

Suffolk Recycling - What to do with? (A-Z).

69. Over the festive period, there will be changes to bin collection dates between Wednesday 25 December 2024 to Saturday 11 January 2025. Normal collections will resume from Monday 13 January 2025. Residents can check collections online.

Finally...

I wish you and yours, our staff and West Suffolk a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Councillor Cliff Waterman

Leader of West Suffolk Council



With best wishes for a happy Christmas and prosperous new year.

Mike Chester



District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward