

West Suffolk District Councillor Report for Ousden Parish Council March 2024



Dear Councillors

Following on from the February 19th meeting of West Suffolk District Council, below is the Leaders Statement from the agenda papers. The main item for discussion was the annual budget setting, a statutory requirement. The administration has forecast a two-year balanced budget which may be difficult to honour given the financial uncertainties that lay ahead. The proposed budget, however, was passed by majority vote with Conservatives abstaining on the grounds of a worst-case scenario budget gap of £9.62 million by 2028. There is much in the statement that remains topical and contentious, I'm happy to answer any questions where possible or make a written reply where appropriate. The full Agenda is available at.

<https://democracy.westsuffolk.gov.uk/documents/g5588/Public%20reports%20pack%20Tuesday%2020-Feb-2024%2019.00%20Council.pdf?T=10>

Leader's Statement

1. As we are now well into February it seems very belated to say Happy New Year for our first Council of 2024. But what is still relevant is that New Year is a time to look forward and 2024 is an important year for shaping the future of West Suffolk with new strategic priorities to guide us as well as opportunities to seize, but also many challenges to face. Indeed, this Council meeting will be a time where we will, through the budget, be helping deliver on those new priorities and through the coming months see the fruition of the Local Plan which will shape the future of West Suffolk to come.
2. At the heart of this will be our communities and businesses helping shape our projects, policies and initiatives through improved engagement.

West Suffolk Council's Budget

3. I will not dwell in this statement on the budget as I am sure we will all have much to say on it at our meeting.
4. However, I do want to thank everyone who has helped put this together, including the vital contribution the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee (PASC) has made in getting to this two-year balanced position as well as Cabinet colleagues and staff.
5. You only have to look at the national headlines and our own report to see the struggle Local Government and public services are having to balance the books. West Suffolk Council is no different in having a £5 million gap as well as facing historically low Government financial settlements, soaring inflation, increased costs and more demands for our services.

6. These proposals meet those financial challenges ahead and provides prudent steps towards long term sustainability. But the most significant factor is the uncertainty in Government funding levels, and we will continue to lobby, with others, for this to be resolved and to gain certainty over longer term funding for West Suffolk. In the meantime, we have plans in place to make savings as well as generate and maximise our incomes while protecting and delivering efficient essential services for our communities. We continue to review the longer-term funding scenarios and plan for the various options that could happen in the future in line with our medium-term financial strategy themes. At the same time, we are ensuring our reserve levels are maintained to draw on should the worst-case scenario materialise.
7. Importantly, the proposals include investment in improving essential services that people rely on while helping drive West Suffolk's strategic priorities that were agreed by Council in December. This includes supporting thriving communities, sustainable growth, the delivery of affordable, available and decent homes while also focusing on environmental resilience.
8. You will be aware that Government has given some last-minute additional funding to Local Government (primarily for counties and unitary councils).
This announcement was only recently shared as they were finalising the actual settlements by local authority. Although this additional one per cent (one-off £194,000 in 2024 to 2025, included in these reports) is welcomed it is not continuous, it's also still not enough to cover the inflationary and demand pressures facing West Suffolk. This announcement also included more red tape. Local authorities now have to produce productivity plans setting out how they will improve service performance and ensure every area is making best use of taxpayers' money. The Government will monitor these plans, and funding settlements in future years will be informed by performance against these. We, like other authorities, are working through what this means in practice but for West Suffolk delivering efficient services isn't something new. We have had efficiency plans every year (that I can certainly remember) but now councils have to prepare and to report on it to central government. It's just going to create extra work and take capacity away from delivering local services.
9. In short, our budget invests in a fair, thriving and sustainable future for West Suffolk that is ready to meet the national challenges faced by Local Government while keeping charges low.

Suffolk County Council Budget

10. You will have seen the headlines, and the massive cuts Suffolk County Council is making and how that not only effects our communities but our budgets too. The County Council has proposed £11 million in staffing costs cuts which will no doubt impact on local services. In addition, they will be cutting £500,000 - the funding to arts and museum organisations. This has a wider impact on the health and social life of our communities. The Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds is quoted as saying the £100,000 funding it received was used to run a number of weekly classes for "vulnerable people in our society", including a sensory youth theatre for disabled and neurodivergent children. This is at a time when the County Council's own reports show more investment is needed in helping SEND children not less.
11. As I am finalising my Leader's Statement for Council, I am also agreeing a letter from all District and Borough Council Leaders to Suffolk County Council about their decision to cut Housing Related Support.
12. These cuts, if they go ahead, will be catastrophic to the lives of some of the most vulnerable in our communities including care leavers, teenage parents and adults with mental health conditions or disabilities. It will mean the loss of more than 170 bed spaces in West Suffolk alone and 700 across the whole of the County. In addition to the devastating impact to people's lives, it won't actually save taxpayers money. The impact will be felt by district councils in terms of increased demand for temporary and emergency accommodation. Some of it will come back to the County Council in terms of their statutory duties to Children and Young People and Adult Care Services, increasing its costs. And it will also lead to increased housing and benefit costs not to mention extra pressure on the NHS.

13. Finally, I will touch on the decision to move the archives from Bury St Edmunds and indeed West Suffolk. When the County Council looked at relocating the archive in early 2023, they considered the option of moving to Western Way costing around £5 million or staying at Raingate Street at around £3 million. At no point was it said by the Council that if they did not move to Western Way they would move out of West Suffolk and indeed moving the archive out of Bury St Edmunds altogether was discounted by the County at this time for operational reasons. This is all explained in their own Cabinet report. After the Western Way project was cancelled West Suffolk Council offered to explore alternative options for the archive within the original capital budget for the Western Way scheme. And this offer still remains. Which is why I am pleased to see the below motion.

Archives Motion

14. Again, I will keep my powder dry for the debate that will be had on this motion to keep our historic archives local. But I would hope that this is something as West Suffolk Councillors we can all support. As I have already outlined, we understand the financial difficulties Suffolk County Council is under and that is recognised in the motion which seeks to find a practical solution to this problem. West Suffolk Council has continued and will continue to offer support to help find workable solutions and options to keep the archives local.

Supporting communities - Flooding Recovery Grant

15.

Like other authorities in Suffolk, and with the assistance of ARP and Suffolk County Council, we have paid 32 of the Government's flood recovery grants to households badly affected by Storm Babet before the end of January deadline. The grant provides a cash payment of £500 each and an exemption from Council Tax for three months. Affected households and businesses may be eligible for further grants for flood prevention measures (see [Storm Babet - Suffolk County Council](#)).

Improving the way we engage

16. Creating a step change in how we engage is an important addition to our strategic priorities. The recent Cabinet tours of our West Suffolk towns are just the start of that wider process. It has been incredibly useful for I and colleagues to see and hear firsthand from local councillors about the assets West Suffolk has and the plans for these. However, this is just the beginning of the process and we will be back out again to talk to local groups and parish and town councils to understand even more about the issues and ambitions that are held locally. We will also be arranging to meet our rural colleagues as well. Engagement is an ongoing process and this first round of visits means we have been able to get an improved understanding of the opportunities available. This will also enable us to work in a better and more effective way with partners when we visit again.
17. Below and later in my report you will see we have launched several consultations and engagement campaigns and I would ask you not only to have your say but encourage others to do so also.

Local Plan

18. The final consultation has started on the West Suffolk Local Plan, which will guide how and where new homes are built and allocate land for employment growth to the year 2040.

19. Hundreds of comments, evidence and feedback have already shaped the draft plan following the Issues and Options consultation in 2020 and a Preferred Options consultation in 2022.
20. This has also included much hard work from councillors across the district and I would like to pay tribute to their dedication. I also want to recognise the hard work of Councillor Thorndyke on this as well as the previous administration and staff in delivering to this stage an incredibly complex project that will set the future of development for decades to come.
21. This third consultation will test and check the plan with the public ahead of it being submitted to the Secretary of State. The Government will then appoint a planning inspector to hold an examination in public.
22. I would still urge you and our communities to engage in the process which has now reached a final, more technical stage.

Street Trading Policy

23. West Suffolk residents are being asked for their insight and input to help shape a new street trading policy for the district.
24. Street Trading covers a wide range of outdoor retail and catering activities undertaken in public streets. It includes flower sellers, ice-cream vendors, fancy goods, souvenir stalls and a variety of hot and cold catering activities such as burger vans.
25. West Suffolk Council is due to review its street trading licensing policy later this year. But before it does, it wants to hear from street traders, businesses, events organisers, town and parish councils, residents and other stakeholders on some of the issues which could potentially be covered and addressed in the new policy.
26. The policy will be formed with the new strategic priority of sustainable growth in mind.

Delivery of affordable, available and decent homes

New housing, homelessness reduction and rough sleeping strategy

27. Communities and councillors are being urged to have their say and help shape our new Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy.
28. The consultation will inform the new West Suffolk strategy which in turn will help more people better afford a place to live, improve living conditions and reduce homelessness.
29. Residents are being asked for feedback on proposed actions to include in the new strategy which will direct our approach to housing over the next few years.
30. Part of that could see it lobby Government to tackle some of the factors that inflate prices and rents in the housing market in West Suffolk. Some of the planning constraints that prevent housing development and supply, extra demand for housing including from West Suffolk's proximity to Cambridge, and rental allowances given to USAF personnel at RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall, all mean higher private rents across West Suffolk.

31. The consultation runs from 6 February to 18 March. Take part at Smart Survey - Housing, Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Thriving Communities

Community Chest

32. I am pleased to report a Community Chest investment of over £450,000 to help people through the cost-of-living crisis and support residents' health and wellbeing, was agreed by Cabinet.
33. Thank you to the Cabinet's Grant Working Party, who I know debated long and hard before making the recommendations to Cabinet to give funding to 32 community groups, charities and voluntary organisations across West Suffolk.
34. The grants are in line with the council's new strategic priorities including helping support thriving communities.
35. It includes funds to support people struggling for food, to help them manage their money, tackle debts and get the benefits to which they are entitled. In addition, it provides funding to help people with the cost-of-living as well as supporting families and individuals including people who are vulnerable.
36. Cabinet agreed grants to a variety of projects to reduce loneliness and social isolation, and others which aim to empower people, teaching them life skills and building confidence and self-esteem. Specialist support for people that have suffered domestic abuse, sexual violence and for people who are struggling following bereavement is also being backed with Community Chest funds.
37. In total £466,733 of Community Chest grants will be paid to the organisations to support work taking place over the 12 months from April this year.
38. I know the grants were oversubscribed and the council, wherever possible, does offer information about funding to those groups who were not successful this time around.

Capital Sports Fund

39. Community sports clubs from across West Suffolk have been applying for a council grant to help increase participation and further enhance activity.
40. Organisations across West Suffolk took up the offer and applied for grants of between £200 and £1,000 under the council's Capital Sports Fund.
41. West Suffolk Council is using £14,700 from its UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) allocation from Central Government to provide the grants. Applications are now being looked at and successful bids will be contacted shortly. All grants are subject to criteria in line with UKSPF.
42. In total, West Suffolk Council has been allocated £1,943,467 over three years through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).
43. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund is a central pillar of the UK Government's Levelling Up agenda and provides £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025. The Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK investing in communities and place, supporting local business, and people and skills. For more information, see the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund prospectus.

Sustainable Growth

Suffolk Chamber of Commerce

44. West Suffolk Council is partnering with Suffolk Chamber of Commerce with the aim of supporting sustainable growth across the district. This collaboration reflects the Council's Strategic Priorities.
45. At the heart of this partnership are several initiatives set to enhance local business growth and engagement, ranging from forums to campaigns. All with the aim of unlocking local business opportunities and solutions to challenges, fostering a collaborative environment for sustainable growth.
46. One of the key areas to be explored will see Suffolk Chamber of Commerce collaborating with Cambridgeshire Chamber of Commerce on a joint networking event. This will be aimed at forging robust business relationships spanning across West Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Other areas of focus include business exhibitions and forums to discuss how West Suffolk businesses can not only reduce their own carbon footprints but take advantage of the opportunities that these actions will bring, as well as looking at prospects that the local supply chains and future tech may offer.
47. The Suffolk Chamber of Commerce will also champion West Suffolk in its lobbying role. This includes areas such as improving transport links including rail, (Ely and Haughley junction improvements to facilitate improved freight and passenger services, as well as improvements to the A14 and A11). It also includes making sure residents and businesses have access to the right skills and training opportunities.

Happy Birthday West Suffolk Manufacturing Group

48. I am pleased to say the West Suffolk Manufacturing Group (WSMG) has celebrated its fifth anniversary.
49. The group, established in 2019, comprises of representatives from both the private and public sectors to champion and support the thriving Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering sector within the district.
50. Manufacturing leaders from across West Suffolk met at SEALEY HQ in Bury St Edmunds for a presentation and a tour of the site, led by Logistics Director, Rob Sealey. This was followed by presentations from: the Department of Work and Pensions on engaging with employers; Icanbea on the local labour market, information, and work opportunities for young people; and from The Institute for Manufacturing at the University of Cambridge on Shoestring, lowcost digitisation for manufacturers.
51. West Suffolk Council remains a strong supporter of the group which gives a voice for local businesses. By helping these companies network and forge new relationships the group has seen successes such as one business being able to access over £800,000 of support and others based in West Suffolk now working with Cambridge University.

Environmental Resilience

52. I am pleased to say West Suffolk has become the first council in the country to get behind an initiative to increase recycling and support local businesses.
53. The council has teamed up with Love Newmarket Business Improvement District (BID), The Guineas Shopping Centre, Abbeycroft Leisure, Eastern Education Group, Our Bury St Edmunds BID and Trovr to deliver four reverse vending machines.
54. Two of these in Newmarket and two in Bury St Edmunds. Trovr uses a smartphone app to incentivise recycling through points-based rewards which can then be spent in local businesses. The goal is to increase recycling rates and reduce litter.
55. The new reverse recycling machines can be found outside The Guineas Shopping Centre, Newmarket Leisure Centre, and West Suffolk College, Bury St Edmunds. A fourth machine will be installed in Bury St Edmunds town centre once a site has been secured.

56. This is part of our Strategic Priority for environmental resilience and if successful then more sites will be looked at across West Suffolk.

Councillor Cliff Waterman Leader of West Suffolk Council

Mike Chester



District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward