

West Suffolk District Councillor
Report
for
Hargrave Parish Council
March 2025



Ward Member comment.

The two key items under recent discussion at West Suffolk Council are, Devolution and Council budget. The Leaders statement Contains references to both. The Budget proposals contained much that was worthy of support, however, the Conservative group (of which I am one) proposed an amendment, the details of which are quoted below the Leaders statement in an article from www.suffolknews.co.uk/

Leader's statement to Council 25th February 2025

At tonight's meeting and over the coming weeks there will be major decisions made by West Suffolk Council on its budget and the future of local government in Suffolk.

I know that making sure we focus on ensuring West Suffolk continues to have a prosperous future will be at the forefront of every councillor's thoughts when debating these. And I look forward to that conversation.

Due to the importance of what we will be discussing, I will be focusing my Leader's Statement on just a few items. However, I would highlight, as ever, that councillors and staff continue to deliver a range of initiatives and everyday services vital to local communities. It is clear we remain laser focused on our shared priorities of thriving communities, sustainable growth, the delivery of affordable, available and decent homes and environmental resilience.

Budget

The proposals before us at this meeting make common sense choices that protect services, help the most vulnerable and meet the many different pressures on our finances.

However, while it is an achievement to deliver a balanced budget and meet so many pressures, making this decision tonight is much more than putting numbers in columns. West Suffolk Council is investing in services and initiatives that make a real difference to the lives, health and prosperity of local communities and the economy. We are prioritising delivering services that matter to people, such as housing, reducing homelessness, emptying bins, better recycling facilities, protecting the environment and improving health through parks, playgrounds, cultural

facilities and leisure centres. Encouraging civic pride but also helping those struggling financially. At the same time, we are investing in creating jobs, helping businesses, developing and supporting our town centres, markets and rural areas.

The core Council Tax bill is split 77 per cent to Suffolk County Council, 13 per cent Police and Crime Commissioner and 10 per cent West Suffolk Council. Parish and town councils also collect additional funds of their own. In terms of our share of this, we continue to stretch the West Suffolk pound to deliver and

protect West Suffolk's value for money and high-quality services. For example, the Council's investment in property and green energy secures an annual income of over £10 million. The Council is also on track to deliver its pledge of £1 million in savings by March 2026, the majority having already been achieved. In their funding calculations, Government expects councils to increase Council Tax to help meet rising costs. That means in West Suffolk there will be a rise of 11p a week (£5.85 a year) to £203.67 for the average Band D property per year. 70 per cent of properties are Band A to C so will pay less. West Suffolk will give up to 100 per cent discount to those most in need. In addition, we will make Council Tax go further, by ensuring more than 80 per cent of the true cost of collecting bins and providing other services is found elsewhere rather than being a burden on Council Taxpayers.

This budget builds on our long-term robust financial management as a council but makes a real difference to the health and wellbeing of West Suffolk's communities, businesses and environment.

English Devolution White Paper

You have read much from me and others in various other places about Suffolk being part of the Devolution Priority Programme and the Government's invite to take part in Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). I am conscious I do not want to go over old ground. But I am also aware this statement is for the public and they may not be as up to date as councillors. While we are not debating these topics tonight, I want to reassure you that the three Group Leaders have met and agreed with me arrangements to make sure all West Suffolk councillors will have their say on any proposals from the recent White Paper which affect our area. As the Secretary of State said in her statement, devolution is about moving powers and funding from Whitehall to the town hall. Which means in reality local people being given control of funding and decisions that Government normally has.

There are two aspects to this. Norfolk and Suffolk have been accepted on the Government's Devolution Priority Programme to create a mayor for the two counties supported by a mayoral combined authority. The Mayor will be elected in May 2026 and have powers and funding for a range of areas such as growth and transport. A Mayoral Combined Authority will also be set up to support this work and I will be keen to see how this works. Please watch out over the next few weeks for the Government's consultation on this. I look forward to debating with you all how we should respond to that. The second element is Local Government Reorganisation which would see all six of Suffolk's district, borough and county councils disbanded and replaced with one or more unitary authorities. They would still provide the same council services in an area but, as a single organisation, drive efficiencies. At this stage no decision has been made on whether Suffolk would be covered by a single or multiple unitary councils. In the coming weeks you will no doubt hear many suggestions and arguments around what this should look like, including in this chamber. Government has asked councils to provide interim plans by 21 March 2025. So, we will need to debate this at our next meeting on 18 March when we have all the detail. In the meantime, all Suffolk councils are agreed that our main priority is to consider what will be best for our local communities and this will continue to be the case, no matter what direction ongoing discussions take. But whatever the solution agreed, I have been clear it should make sure the 'local' stays in Local Government. It should put communities and businesses close to the decision making and have elected decision makers who are close enough to know their communities and businesses. Most of all it should benefit local communities, businesses and the future of West Suffolk.

Brandon Commission

I am pleased to say we have appointed Mark Pragnell as the independent Chair of the Brandon Commission. This is an important step towards delivering the ambition we set out in our Strategic Priorities and the draft Local Plan to set up an independent commission. The Commission will explore the options for the future growth of Brandon, examining the economic, housing, environmental and infrastructure challenges which have been a challenge for its future prosperity to date. Mark's depth of expertise and commitment to rural and local development makes him the perfect fit for the Commission's work, and I am confident that his leadership will help shape a strong vision for the future of Brandon. He was amongst a number of very strong candidates interviewed by Brandon Ward Members, Councillor Wijenayaka and Councillor O'Driscoll for the role, and demonstrated a deep understanding of the issues faced in Brandon. The result of the Commission will form an important tool with which to engage government and any new Mayor, enabling the removal of more barriers to equitable growth across our district. Work is now underway to secure the remaining Commission members and to deliver on the project plan, which has engagement at the heart of it.

Once established, we expect the Commission to last for approximately nine months. We will be in touch again when we have a confirmed public launch date.

Finally

There is much going on at the district, county and national level that West Suffolk is part of, with important large-scale decisions to come. But I wanted to finish on the human level about an individual. Mark Saunders had been for a swim at Bury St Edmunds leisure centre as he regularly did when he suddenly collapsed in the changing room from a cardiac arrest. Abbeycroft's Duty Officer, Carl Deeks, and lifeguard, Jack Eatly, together with centre manager Julie Hughes acted quickly and began administering CPR on rotation, as well as shocking Mark's heart with a defibrillator. The team followed their training professionally and effectively, carrying out all the necessary steps to keep Mark alive until paramedics arrived. He was then taken to Papworth Hospital by helicopter where he underwent surgery to insert a stent. I am pleased to say Mark recently returned to the leisure centre after requesting to meet the staff that had saved his life, to thank them personally. Learning CPR and using defibrillators is a skill many of our staff and Abbeycroft have learned and put into practice. I am glad Mr Saunders had a happy ending to his story, and I am sure you would like to thank staff who, as part of their day-to-day job, keep that extra eye out for local communities and make a real and even lifesaving difference. I will leave the last word to Mark: "I'm just so incredibly grateful that the Abbeycroft staff were so well trained and did what they did so efficiently. The surgeon at Papworth even told me that

he didn't think I would have survived the cardiac arrest if I hadn't been where I was and treated by staff who knew exactly what to do."

Councillor Cliff Waterman

Leader of West Suffolk Council

[Article from www.suffolknews.co.uk/](http://www.suffolknews.co.uk/)

West Suffolk Council approves parking charges in Bury St Edmunds and maximum Council Tax hikes during fiery debate

Parking charges and Council Tax were among the hikes approved by an authority.

Last night, West Suffolk councillors met to discuss budget proposals for the upcoming financial year, including car parking charge increases across Bury St Edmunds of at least 20p. Cllr Diane Hind, the authority's lead for resources, said: "This budget and this council make the West Suffolk pound stretch to achieve the best outcomes and value for money."

Cllr Diane Hind, the West Suffolk Council's lead for resources presented the council's budget proposals last night. The debate began, however, with councillors discussing a Conservative amendment, brought up by Cllr Sarah Broughton, which primarily sought to reverse the car parking charges.

The Conservative amendment

The amendment would have seen several changes to the administration's budget proposals, including offering the first hour of several car parks across Newmarket and Haverhill for free.

West Suffolk's Cllr Sarah Broughton, presented the Conservative budget amendment. Picture: West Suffolk Council

It would keep prices for the long-stay Ram Meadow car park, in Cotton Lane, Bury, frozen at the current rate, reverting the administration's proposals to increase them to £3, up from £2.50 for three hours, and £3.50 for an all-day stay.

Changes to weekly and annual tickets in Ram Meadow, which would increase by £12 and £78 respectively, would be reverted.

Similarly, Conservative councillors wanted to continue absorbing the 20p charge for the RinGo mobile app, which the administration sought to reinstate.

West Suffolk Council budget proposals included hiking prices at Ram Meadow car park, in Cotton Lane, Bury St Edmunds. Pict

The blanket 20p increase across all short-stay car parking tariffs in Bury town centre would be kept.

On pavement licenses, the amendment asked to freeze rates at £100 — this, however, was based on incorrect information within the budget report as charges were changed last summer.

All of the changes, as proposed, would have come at a total cost of £835,250 to be taken from reserves.

West Suffolk councillors had a fiery debate on the authority's budget for the next financial year. Picture: Submitted

A fiery debate

Kicking off the debate on the amendment, Cllr Broughton said although budget proposals were good and balanced, the increased charges were 'disappointing and anti-growth'

She said: "The attack on parking charges in this budget needs addressing — the high street and shopkeepers are suffering, the face of the high street is changing as shopping habits move to buying online.

"These huge [pavement license] increases could be the tipping point for some small businesses and we should be supporting businesses to grow and not increase the burden on them."

Cllr Beccy Hopfensperger said: "We live in challenging times and the pressure is just being piled on our residents and businesses which may well push them to the edge."

Their speeches were not enough to convince councillors on the other side who criticised bringing in an amendment at late notice — this, however, is common during councils' budget discussions.

Councillors within the administration were concerned about the proposed use of reserves.

Cllr Cliff Waterman, the authority's leader, said: "This puts us in a position where we're using up our reserves, we do know looking forward that we could well face some large deficits and that's why we keep reserves."

Although some independent councillors decided to support the amendment, it was still defeated with 26 votes for and 29 against.

Discussions resumed on the administration's proposals, giving councillors another chance to speak.

For the most part, Conservative members said although they were in support of the majority of the proposals, they could not agree to the proposed parking charges.

Cllr Waterman said some Conservative members did not share the passion to work with residents and said 'they're sore, they're bitter, they're twisted' after losing the vote — he was made to withdraw the statement.

Speaking on the budget, Cllr Hind added: "These budget proposals support the most vulnerable, are financially sound and importantly invest in the prosperity of our communities, businesses and West Suffolk as a whole."

The council also sought to increase Council Tax by the maximum amount of 2.99 per cent, equivalent to £5.85 extra for a Band D property.

Despite the increase, the authority's tax relief scheme was given the go-ahead in December for another year.

The budget was approved with 32 votes for and 21 against.

Reacting to the decision, Mark Cordell, chief executive of the Bury Business Improvement District (BID), said he was disappointed and warned it could be the tipping point causing the town centre's success to diminish.

He said: "Our members will just have to deal with yet another blow to their businesses and fingers crossed the public will continue to visit our lovely town centre despite all the increasing costs to them in doing so."

Mike Chester



West Suffolk
Council

District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward