

West Suffolk District
Councillor
Report for
Hargrave Parish Council
January
2026



The following statement formed part of the agenda at the meeting of West Suffolk Council on Tuesday October 16th.
The views expressed are of the Council Leader and do not necessarily reflect mine.

Leader's statement

This year has been a year of delivery, challenges and opportunities with each and every one of you championing your communities to help them become the thriving places we all want to see. Last week I took the opportunity to thank staff on behalf of all councillors for their hard work over the last year. Over this winter they will be out in every weather continuing to deliver for our communities the high-quality services we saw praised by the Corporate Peer Review. I also know that you will all be working, dealing with issues raised by local residents. This Leader's Statement is just one of the many ways we engage with communities. The peer review praised us for this, and for our plans to strengthen this further to help communities understand what we do, using 'the residents' voice'. In other words, talking to people in the language they understand, and not 'officialese'. To help achieve this, a new newsletter will be posted through people's doors after Christmas to give information about some of the many things we are doing to deliver our shared priorities, with pointers on how to get involved or find more information. This approach helps us reach those who are not online, without having our information distorted in the ways we all know social media can cause. We have also set up a new way for people to sign up to get information straight to their email inbox in future.

Local Government Reorganisation

It was welcome news that Government has included our proposals for three unitaries – Suffolk to the Power of Three – in its final consultation. Government have also asked people to have their say on Suffolk County Council's proposals for a one unitary solution – One Suffolk. Government has asked councils to encourage people to take part in the consultation, and I would urge you – whatever the side of the debate you are on – to make your voice and views heard. You have until 11 January 2026 to have your say and you can find a link to the consultation on our website, the County Council's or the Government's. We have also been with local town and parish councils as well as organisations and partners. To be read alongside the County Council's information, we have distributed materials, including leaflets and postcards, to encourage people to have their say. Councillors can of course also use them to share the message in their communities. You'll be aware that the district and borough councils in Suffolk wrote to the minister for Local Government, Alison McGovern MP, to share our concerns about possible breaches of the Local Government Code of Conduct for Publicity. There were two replies, one to all councils in the Devolution Priority Programme to remind that publicity must be even-handed and objective, and that public money must not be spent on one sided propaganda. There was a second letter specifically addressing our concerns in Suffolk, and we are taking the advice given in this letter to ask Suffolk County Council's monitoring officer to investigate our concerns under their complaints process. Government confirms delay to mayoral elections but Local Government Reorganisation remains on track. You may have heard that Government has issued a written ministerial statement confirming its intention to delay the inaugural Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral election until May 2028. You can view the statement here: [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#) The elections were due to be held for the new mayor in 2026 but this will now be postponed until May 2028. In a letter to council Leaders the Government has said the postponement has happened "...to align mayoral devolution in the Devolution Priority Programme areas with the establishment of new unitary authorities following local government reorganisation. "... we are minded to hold the inaugural Mayoral election in Norfolk and Suffolk in May 2028, in order to complete the reorganisation process before Mayors take office."

In the announcement the Government confirmed that it will proceed with steps to establish the Norfolk and Suffolk Combined County Authority (CCA), enabling core capacity to be built ahead of the first Mayoral election in 2028. We will keep members updated as further details about this process emerge. This announcement is only for the mayoral elections and not the creation of new unitary authorities under local government reorganisation (LGR). That timetable remains the same for LGR with the consultation ending on 11 January and a Government decision expected by March 2026. This is a welcome change, as it enables the new mayoral authority to be set up in a timely manner and allows the newly elected mayor to lead a well formed authority, at the same time giving some of the investment funding to the fledgling authority from next year.

Homeless prevention

With the weather getting colder and wetter this winter it's worth reminding ourselves of the work our teams are doing to help reduce homelessness. Officers have been out in the early hours checking on those sleeping rough and offering support. Early intervention work by West Suffolk Council has helped prevent more than 200 households from becoming homeless in the past year. The figure for the 12 months to 31 October represents a 40 per cent increase in successful homelessness preventions compared to the same period last year. During the past 12 months the council has helped 153 households who were in temporary accommodation out of homelessness and into a place they can call home. Our teams have been working hard to help those sleeping rough and prevent people from becoming homeless. Where an individual, couple or family does become homeless, the council will look to work with them and support them to find alternate accommodation. We encourage anyone facing this situation to make contact with our housing team at the earliest opportunity. They can do this by phoning 01284 757178 Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm or our out of hours number 01284 763252 – more information can be found on our Homelessness webpage. The council will look to work with households to address any rent debts, affordability or other issues that could otherwise be a barrier to them getting a more permanent and settled home of their own.

Action Days and In Bloom

I want to also highlight the Action Days being carried out with local town and parish councils, BIDs, and other local organisations to tidy up areas that have been identified locally as in need of help. This is about listening to local needs and being able to act upon them, in addition to the regular work we are doing to look after the district. It is also recognising the great work carried on every day by local groups, organisations and public services. It is important we continue to help support and encourage civic pride in our areas. A special mention goes to all the community groups who also took part in the regional and national In Bloom competitions which is also supported by our council. (Britain in Bloom saw Brandon in Bloom CIC (community interest company) win the gold award in the town category and Bury St Edmunds in Bloom earn the gold award in the large town category) While it was good to see national awards for some of the groups I think the real winners are the communities and places they have been brightening up and I would like to thank all the volunteers.

Improving bus services

I am very pleased that Cabinet was able to agree the finding of the Rural Bus Service Review. This was a great cross-party piece of work which has its origins in our communities and their campaign for improvements, as well as work by local councillors and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Although West Suffolk Council is not responsible for public transport, we have been looking at what can be done to encourage more use of buses and ensure residents who don't have access to a car – just under 15 per cent of households in West Suffolk – aren't left isolated and excluded as a result. Cabinet agreed to the recommendations of a Steering Group made up of councillors from across council. Some of the recommendations included the lobbying role of the council and the suggestion that all councillors act as Change Champions pushing for better local transport for their communities. Cabinet also agreed to use £30,000 allocated to it under the Rural England Prosperity Fund to support improvements to bus infrastructure. This extra local funding from West Suffolk is to complement £2.8million awarded to Suffolk County Council from central government in the summer for delivering new or enhanced bus services and bus infrastructure as part of their plan to improve public transport nationally. Community transport schemes are already able to apply to the council's Thriving Communities Fund annual grant scheme. Helping people get around using public transport, especially in rural areas, is vital for residents to get to services such as health, leisure and education as well as shopping. I am very pleased this council has been able to find local solutions which only we have to scale to achieve.

Mildenhall Bus Station

A planning application to redevelop the former bus station building in Mildenhall has been submitted. We aim to visually improve a centrally located site in the town, support job creation and contribute positively to the local economy.

The planning application includes change of use from former bus station ticket office and public toilets to a mixed-use building comprising a commercial, business and service space (Class E). The council has also worked to retain the public toilets at the site, which will see them redesigned and modernised for continued community use. The proposed development will not impact the bus service, and the covered outdoor seating will be kept. The property has been marketed by commercial agents and has received interest.

Delivering in partnership

I was pleased to see the educational centre in Haverhill celebrated its first anniversary of being at Provincial House. Since opening in November 2024, the learning centre run by Eastern Education Group has taught almost 450 people. The council, which owns the building, invested £2million into it for the local community. The idea behind the venture is to help local residents get the skills they need for their personal or professional development while also helping the town centre. The oldest student is in their eighties but I know the centre is keen to get the message out that no matter what age, background or educational level that you are at, the centre is there to support you. We are also working with Haverhill Town Council to promote and deliver two key initiatives, public realm lighting and town centre wayfinding, as part of a wider regeneration project. West Suffolk Council have appointed Studio Dekka, an independent lighting consultancy, to produce a lighting strategy to improve public realm lighting and make Haverhill town centre safer and help enhance the evening economy by encouraging people to visit businesses and arts offers in the town. The company use night walks to understand user perceptions and identify barriers and help to create better public realm lighting designs. Residents were invited on one last week to help provide insight to shape future plans. Residents were also invited to a session at Haverhill Arts Centre to share their memories and stories about the town, its characters and the local landscape with artist Steve Pardue. This session will help shape the town centre wayfinding in a way that celebrates Haverhill's unique identity, history and culture.

Bury Leisure Centre work

Work is now underway at the Olding Road site in Bury St Edmunds for new recreational leisure facilities. You will have seen the contractor is now on site carrying out enabling works as part of the redevelopment of the former depot and warehouse on Olding Road. In September the Cabinet agreed the plans for refurbishing the former depot and part of the warehouse to make them suitable for a trampoline park, padel courts and a further recreational leisure use. Part of the former warehouse will be demolished and alternative uses for the site are being explored such as outdoor sports pitches. Xtreme360, an established trampoline park provider, has signed an agreement for lease with the council for the refurbished depot. More significant changes to the site will begin in the new year as work starts on the removal of the old roof and outdated exterior cladding.

Councillor Cliff Waterman
Leader of West Suffolk Council

Mike Chester



West Suffolk
Council

District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward

