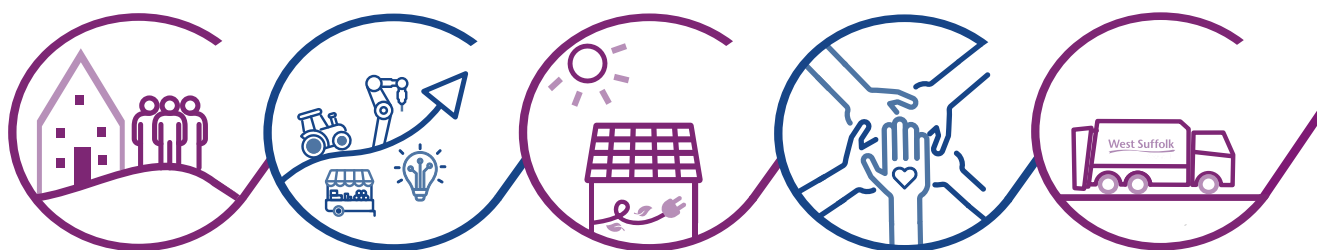


# Corporate peer challenge

## Position statement



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# 1 Foreword



We would like to welcome the Corporate Peer Challenge team to West Suffolk and thank them for taking the time to support us in our commitment to continuously improving our organisation and outcomes in the local area.

This will be West Suffolk Council's first corporate peer challenge since its creation in 2019, and it provides an excellent opportunity to take stock following a period of significant change.

As an ambitious and learning organisation, we want to do everything we can to further improve, including by building on feedback and insights from elsewhere in local government. We are also keen to share the journey we have been on and the solutions we have found, to support other councils as they face similar issues. This review is particularly relevant to us at a time when the pace of change and scale of challenge facing local government feels unprecedented, not least as we look ahead to the further potential development of Suffolk's County Deal and devolution more generally, health integration and future arrangements following the LEP transition. We are keen to use the Corporate Peer Challenge process to enable all Members and the officer team to increase their knowledge and understanding and to be empowered to try new approaches.

In December last year, we published our Strategic Priorities for the next four years, which encapsulate the shared passion and drive of all our elected members to see real change taking place on the ground in our district.

These priorities build on the earlier achievements of both West Suffolk Council

and its predecessors in bringing about significant improvements both within the organisation and in the wider public sector system, as well as in local communities. The priorities also reflect the major challenges and opportunities facing local government, communities and businesses throughout the UK, which place continuing pressure on organisations, given the levels of demand and ambition.

But even in the face of these challenges, we are confident that our track record, our ability to embrace and absorb change, our commitment to our local area and our quiet resilience will enable us to continue to succeed as an agent of change in the local area.

As this document sets out, developments such as Mildenhall Hub, West Suffolk Operational Hub, Barley Homes, the creation of a new council, our Families and Communities and Behaving Commercially approaches and our Investing in Growth strategy, all achieved while delivering excellent essential services, could not have taken place without sound governance, visionary leadership, robust and prudent financial management and ongoing transformation. The detail of these is introduced briefly in the remainder of this document, but we are looking forward to working with the Peer Challenge team in July to dig deeper into all of these areas.

**Cllr Cliff Waterman**, Leader of the Council

**Cllr Victor Lukaniuk**, Deputy Leader and leader of the Independents

**Cllr David Smith**, Leader of the West Suffolk Progressive Alliance Grouping

**Cllr Beccy Hopfensberger**, Leader of the Conservative Group

**Ian Gallin**, Chief Executive



# 2 Introduction

The focus of our corporate peer challenge



## **From our scope statement:**

We would like the Corporate Peer Challenge initially to take stock, following the significant change of creating a new single council, and to review the delivery of the anticipated outcomes and any outstanding developmental areas for consideration.

The areas the Council would like the focus of its Corporate Peer Challenge to address, in addition to the core areas of a Peer Review are:

- the robustness of the council's strategic priorities and the alignment of the budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy
- renewing the approach to engagement both internally and externally, with Councillors, staff, partners, stakeholders and communities, in order to enhance decision making and collaborative working
- the council's track record and future capacity and ability to deliver against its ambitions, including through the continuation of more efficient working and a drive for greater productivity
- further integration and system-working within the public sector system, including through the proposed Suffolk devolution deal and LEP transition

The council would like the Corporate Peer Challenge process to bring value and impact through supporting the council to critically reflect on the components that will drive organisational improvement and how best to prepare and respond to future challenges ensuring the council's ambitious outcomes can be impactful and have a sharp focus on delivering for our communities, businesses, and the broader Suffolk system.

We have also highlighted some more detailed areas where we would value the Peer Team's insights at the relevant places in this position statement document.



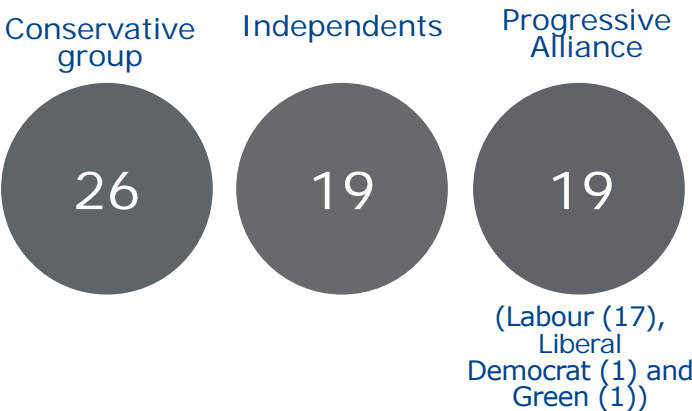
# West Suffolk Council

## Our story

### Our Council

West Suffolk Council is a rural district council in Suffolk, where there is a two-tier system of local government across the county. The council was formed in 2019, as the successor to St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council, following a full-shared service arrangement from 2013. Being one of only a handful of new district councils to be formed at this time, and following a rapid and successful shared service journey, this was a significant achievement. The council is now the eighth largest district in England by population.

The [council](#) has 64 elected members, with elections every four years, and operates a [Leader and Cabinet model](#). The West Suffolk Working Partnership (made up of the Independent and Progressive Alliance groups) formed an administration following the most recent elections in 2023, led by Councillor Cliff Waterman (Labour). The current political balance is as follows:



The Cabinet consists of 10 members, with five being Labour and five being Independent. As well as the Leader and Deputy Leader, there are eight Portfolio Holders covering the following areas:

- Families and Communities
- Resources
- Governance, Regulatory and Environment
- Housing
- Leisure and Culture
- Operations
- Planning
- Growth

West Suffolk also has two scrutiny committees (Overview and Scrutiny and Performance and Audit Scrutiny) plus regulatory and other sub-committees and panels - [West Suffolk Council - scrutiny, regulatory and other committees](#)

The 2023 elections saw a significant change in the political balance of all Suffolk district councils. For West Suffolk, the previous administration had been Conservative.

There is a strong track record of system-wide working across the public sector in Suffolk, with cross-system groups such as Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (overseeing a Suffolk business rates pool), the Suffolk Waste Partnership, the Safer Stronger Communities Board, Collaborative Communities Board and others focused on collaborative working across Suffolk.

West Suffolk also works beyond its boundaries through partnerships with Cambridgeshire (West Suffolk is in the Cambridge Sub-region Housing Market Area); Essex (through Suffolk and North East Essex Integrated Care Board); and Norfolk (as part of the transition from New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership and through the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme); and through the East of England Local Government Association.

There are 85 parish and town councils in West Suffolk and two business improvement districts (BIDs) in Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket.

The councils' predecessors transferred their housing stock in the 2000s. Our leisure services are delivered through a partnership with [Abbeycroft](#) (a Community Interest Company), and Council Tax and benefits are administered on behalf of West Suffolk by a partnership of five councils known as [Anglia Revenues Partnership](#) originally established by Forest Heath District Council. (A Community Interest Company)

West Suffolk is part of a [shared legal and information governance service](#) with Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, established in 2016. The Council has two wholly-owned companies – [VERSE facilities management](#) and [Barley Homes](#).

Councillors are supported by an officer team of around 700 employees, led by Ian Gallin (Chief Executive of West Suffolk and both predecessor councils since 2012) and a Leadership Team (LT) of five senior managers: a Deputy Chief Executive, Chief Operating Officer and three Directors. The overall Senior Management Team (SMT) of the council also includes the 19 Service Managers and meets fortnightly, alternating with Leadership Team meetings.

# Our finances

## Key facts relating to 2024-25

(full details are in section 6)

Gross Budget (excluding Housing Benefits)  
**£78 million**

Gross Budget (including Housing Benefits)  
**£105 million**

Council Tax base  
**58,684.97**

Council Tax generated  
**£126 million in total across West Suffolk**

Business rates collected  
**£83 million in total across West Suffolk**



# Our population

West Suffolk is a large, predominantly rural district (1035 km<sup>2</sup>) with a population of 182,228 (ONS 2022). The district has six market towns, Brandon, Bury St Edmunds, Clare, Haverhill, Mildenhall and Newmarket, with 42 per cent of the population living in villages and countryside areas.

In spite of its ageing population (see below), levels of health among the population are generally good, and mental health and wellbeing is above average for England.

## Health

Percentage of people who considered themselves to be in very good health.



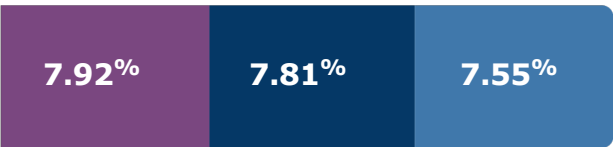
**47.7%** : **48.5%**  
**West Suffolk** : **England**

Census 2021

## Mental health and wellbeing

■ West Suffolk ■ Suffolk ■ England

Responses to: "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'".



"Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is 'not at all anxious' and 10 is 'completely anxious'".

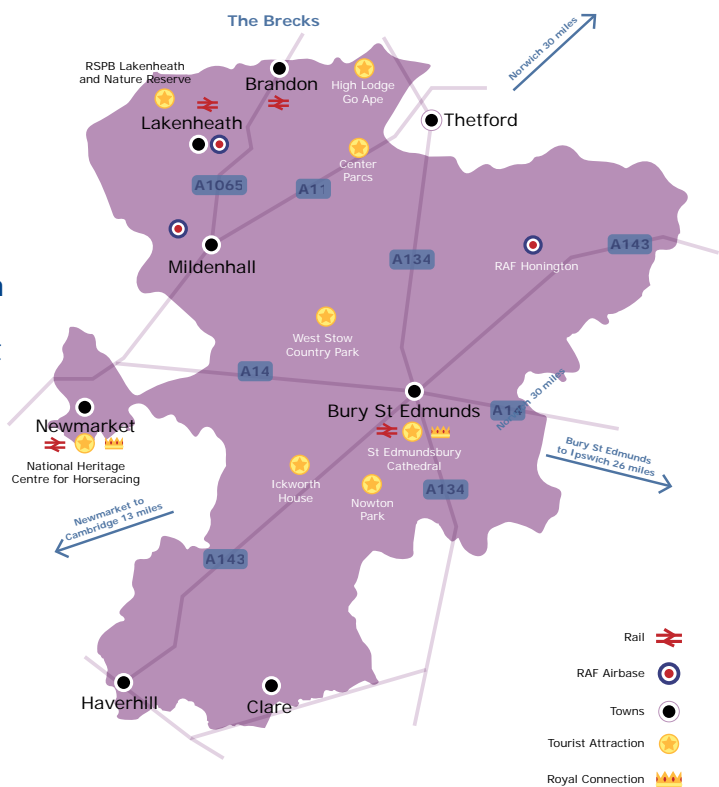


Personal well-being in the UK:  
April 2021 to March 2022

# Our local area

West Suffolk is well-connected to London, Cambridge, the port of Felixstowe and the Midlands with train routes and major trunk roads – the A14 and A11. The Port of Felixstowe is Britain’s biggest and busiest container port handling more than 4 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) each year.

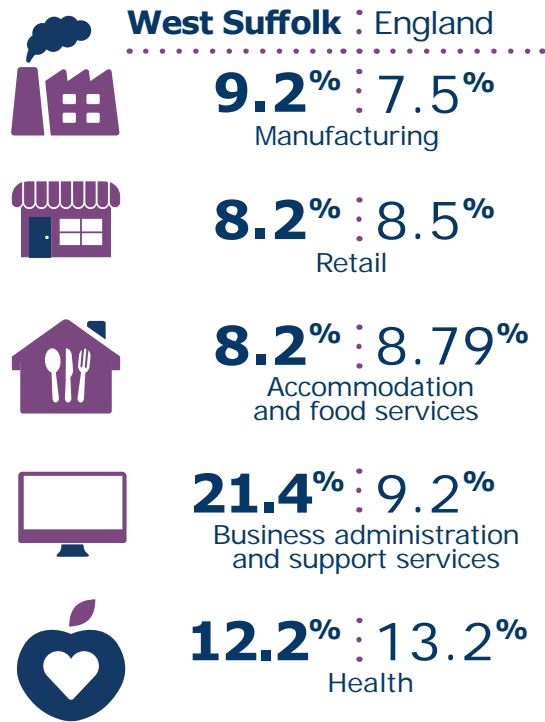
While its history is mainly agricultural, today, West Suffolk has a diverse economy, embracing a number of business sectors. These include health, business administration and support services, accommodation and food services, retail and manufacturing. West Suffolk also hosts the international home of horse racing in Newmarket and a number of businesses trading with the two major US Air Force bases in West Suffolk, the two largest in Europe.



## Employment sectors

West Suffolk’s main industrial sectors are business administration & support services, health and manufacturing.

### Percentage of employees working in



Nomis Business Register and Employment Survey 2022 (BRES) : open access

As well as our strong economy and small business sector, we are proud of our strong family and community networks, that came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic, with scores of volunteers supporting vulnerable and isolated people within their neighbourhoods.



West Suffolk’s countryside and heritage assets also contribute to its appeal to residents and visitors alike.

Further information about West Suffolk is available on our [About the Area](#) page.



# West Suffolk's five largest settlements

**Bury St Edmunds**, the largest settlement in West Suffolk, and third largest in Suffolk (population 42,444 (ONS 2022)), has been a prosperous town for centuries. People are drawn to its abbey, market and Georgian architecture, shops, leisure and cultural facilities.



**Haverhill**, the second largest settlement in West Suffolk and fourth largest in Suffolk (population 27,503) is a modern town, with significant housing developments completed in the second half of the twentieth century as part of the Greater London Council's expansion programme. The town includes a large industrial area, home to a number of manufacturing and scientific firms, and a research park.



**Newmarket** (population 17,013) is known as the international 'home of horseracing'. It has more racehorses, trainers, stable staff, stud farms and racing organisations in and around the town than anywhere else in the world. Racing accounts for around 9,300 full-time equivalent jobs (source: [Newmarket's Equine Cluster \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/))



**Brandon** (population 9,599) and **Mildenhall** (population 8,933) are traditional market towns, the latter dating back to Roman times but which also expanded significantly in the 1970s due to the construction of new housing to accommodate families moving out of London.



# Local challenges

While in large part, many of West Suffolk’s residents benefit from a good quality of life, the district faces a number of challenges – some of which are common to many rural areas, and others of which are unique to West Suffolk.

The ways in which West Suffolk Council is working to address these challenges are set out in the next section of this document – Local priorities and outcomes.

West Suffolk’s proximity to Cambridge and the presence of the US visiting forces population (more than 11,000 personnel and dependents) have a significant impact on the affordability and availability of housing in the district, with the ratio of lower quartile earnings to lower quartile house prices being 9.46 (compared to an England average of 7.36 (ONS, 2022)). Delivering large numbers of new homes is challenging in the district, however, because of the constraints presented by the needs of the US military and the horseracing industry, as well as significant areas of land with conservation designations (around 30 per cent of the district), particularly around Brandon. These affordability and availability challenges have impacts on a range of issues, including social and economic mobility, deprivation and homelessness.

## Need for more homes

Between 2011 and 2021, the number of households in West Suffolk increased by

**10.60%**

compared to an increase of

**6.20%**

in England.



Census 2011 and 2021



## Rates of homelessness

**7.49**  
households

**1000**  
in West Suffolk  
were  
assessed as  
homeless

(relief duty owed)  
between April 2021 and  
March 2022, compared  
to 6.06 in England.



DLUHC data

## Cost of renting a home

The average (mean) cost of renting a 3 bedroomed home per month in West Suffolk in 2022-23 was **£1,171** in West Suffolk, compared to **£1,039** in England as a whole.



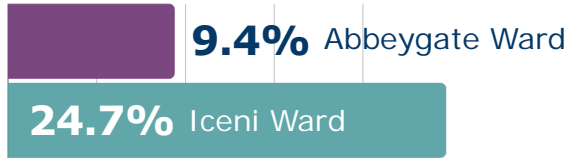
Office for National Statistics private rental  
market summary April 22 – March 23

An additional challenge faced in relation to hosting US Visiting Forces is that they are exempt from Council Tax and business rates, and while the US Government pays compensation to the UK Government, this is not passed to the relevant local area, unlike for UK Armed Forces. Rather it is distributed through the local government finance settlement using a formula based on 2013 data (which has been the subject of reductions and cuts since). As such, West Suffolk Council, Suffolk County Council and parish councils are not adequately compensated for hosting the 11,000 US Visiting Forces personnel and dependents, in spite of continued lobbying of the UK Government, over the financial impact.

In common with many other rural areas, West Suffolk has an ageing population, with some wards having over 34 per cent of the population aged over 65 (compared to 18.6 per cent in England and Wales (Census 2021)). As well as many benefits, this brings challenges in relation to the need for more specialist housing and measures to tackle rural isolation, given the historic under-investment in transport. In two of our towns, the proportion of over 65s in receipt of housing benefit and pension credits is significantly above the England average (DWP 2023).

### Local variations

The proportion of the population aged under 16 varies considerably across the Wards of West Suffolk.



Similarly with the proportion of the population aged over 65 years.



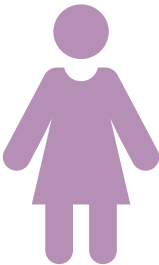
Census 2021

### Future population change

**↑ 86% increase**

**= 10,500 people**

**is predicted in the population aged 85+ in West Suffolk between 2020 and 2040 (70% in England)**



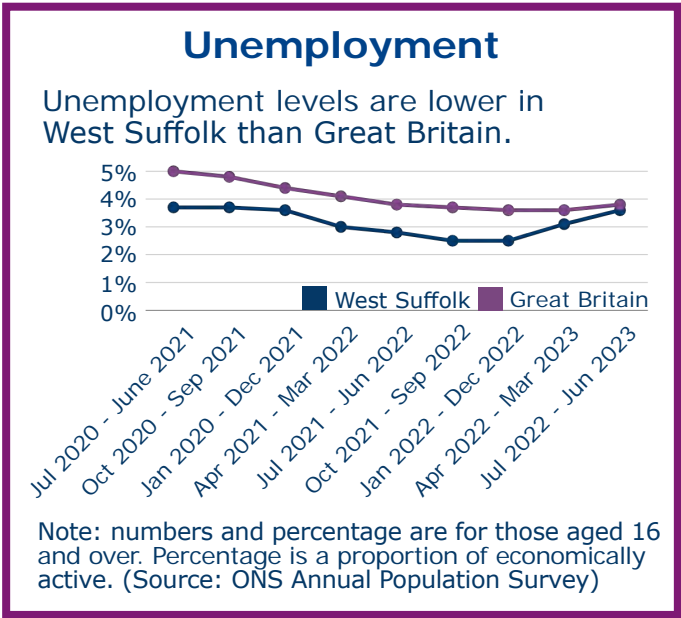
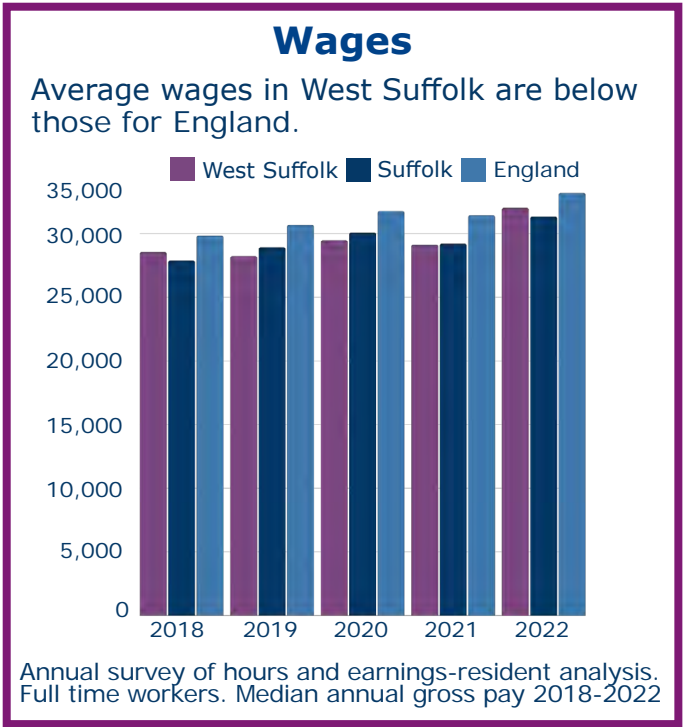
The **age group 65+ is the only age group projected to increase over the next 20 years.** The proportion of people of working age is projected to decline.

Office for National Statistics (ONS),  
Sub-national population projections - 2018 based



While unemployment is generally low in West Suffolk, wage and skill levels are also low, with only 83.1 per cent of people aged over 16 with NVQ level 1 or equivalent qualifications, compared to 87.7 per cent in England (ONS 2021).

Some pockets of deprivation in West Suffolk’s market towns meant that overall West Suffolk ranked 176th out of 317 English local authorities in the 2019 indices of deprivation. The dispersed nature of these pockets do not enable West Suffolk to attract funding (for example Levelling Up Funding), due to the formulae used by government, however, which makes regeneration in areas which are experiencing market failure challenging.





# Our journey from shared services to the present day

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- 2009** Shared Service Steering group established between Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council, building on earlier informal shared arrangements
- 2011** Both Councils join Anglia Revenues Partnership (previously founded by Forest Heath District Council)  
First joint West Suffolk officer appointed and first joint policy produced
- 2012** Single Chief Executive and Leadership Team appointed
- 2013** Single staffing structure with single payline and terms and conditions  
Suffolk business rates pool established  
LGA Corporate Peer Review of Shared Services arrangement
- 2014** Joint strategic plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy adopted, including the six broad MTFS themes that are still in place  
Suffolk-wide Transformation Challenge Award funding secured
- 2015** Suffolk and Norfolk devolution talks  
Leisure trusts merge across West Suffolk
- 2016** Shared Legal Service established with two other councils – an arrangement that now includes Information Governance  
Barley Homes (wholly owned housing company) business plan approved  
Toggam Solar farm purchased
- 2017** Single Council business case submitted to Secretary of State
- 2018** Investing in Growth Fund established
- 2019** West Suffolk Council created on 1 April  
Climate and Biodiversity emergencies declared
- 2020** West Suffolk Operational Hub recycling centre opened, following earlier opening of Hub in 2019
- 2021** Mildenhall Hub opened
- 2022** Current transformation programme launched – 'Change and Service Improvement'  
Creation of £9m Net Zero Investment Fund for fleet, property and solar projects. (Increased to £11.75 in 24/25).
- 2023** Consultation on Single West Suffolk Local Plan
- 2024** LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

# The creation of West Suffolk Council

The single council business case, submitted to the Secretary of State in 2017 set out how we believed the new West Suffolk Council would continue to bring the benefits secured through shared services for local businesses and communities, including value for money, financial savings and self-sufficiency, simplicity, democratic accountability, influence and resilience. The decision was also supported by extensive, representative polling commissioned by the council and carried out by ComRes which showed strong support among residents for the creation of the single council.

Since the formation of West Suffolk Council however, the benefits have proven to be far wider and deeper than first envisaged, albeit some were delayed as a result of COVID-19. The creation of the new council enabled us to retain the savings, capacity and political focus that had been brought about by shared services, but beyond that it has given further and greater financial resilience and brought about a stronger focus for delivering for our communities. More specifically:

- We have been able to strengthen both member and officer leadership, through a single, larger organisation, with clear democratic accountability, enabling us to drive forward an ambitious investment agenda
- Our future vision and strategy has been clear and coherent, through our single strategic plans, Medium Term Financial Strategies, and our first draft Local Plan for West Suffolk
- Our financial position has been safeguarded, allowing us to continue to invest in services, in spite of reductions in Government grant, inflationary pressures and increasing demand due to the cost of living crisis
- We have been able to exercise strategic leadership over a larger area, and to enter into wider partnerships to work towards greater public sector integration
- We have had a louder voice through our lobbying

“ Since the formation of West Suffolk Council, members and officers have been putting in place the infrastructure and creating the conditions for our communities and businesses to flourish, through partnerships, strategic investments that generate a blended return and good quality services, based on strong foundations of governance and against a backdrop of well-managed change. ”



Ian Gallin,  
Chief Executive of  
West Suffolk Council

# 3 Local priorities and outcomes



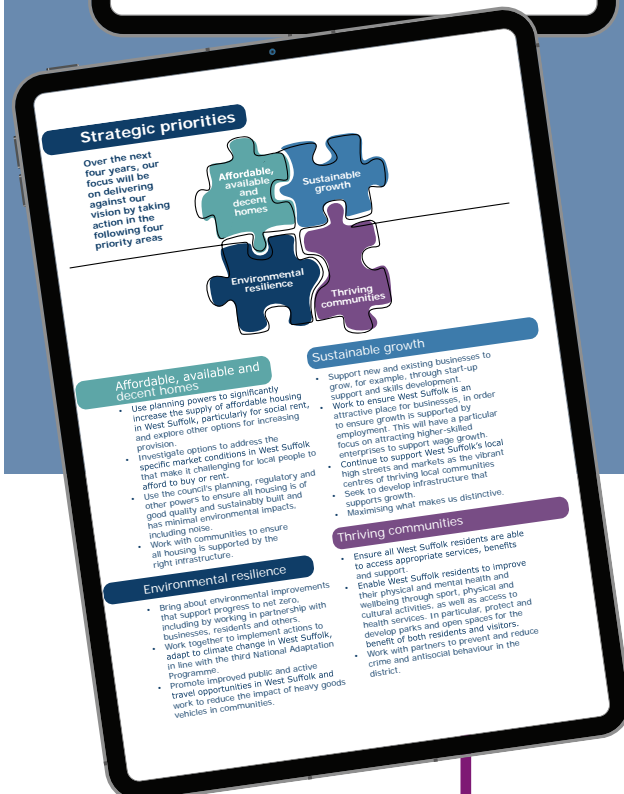
In December 2023, West Suffolk Council adopted a new vision, values and strategic priorities, in response to evidence about the local area, the political priorities and the challenges and opportunities faced. The vision, priorities and values that are shaping everything the council does were developed through a series of Member-led workshops involving the West Suffolk Working Partnership and facilitated by the LGA and external consultants.

**Our vision is that: Working across West Suffolk, we will support the district to flourish by focusing on the delivery of:**

- affordable, available and decent homes
- environmental resilience
- sustainable growth
- thriving communities

The new strategic priorities also included an enhanced focus on engagement, and on 'getting the essentials right'.

Alongside the new strategic priorities, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy was reviewed in 2023-24 – the detail of which is covered later in this document – and a two-year balanced budget was set, in order to ensure a strong basis for the delivery of the priorities.



Click on the images to read our strategic priorities

Work is underway to refresh and renew West Suffolk's **major strategies and approaches**, in line with the new strategic priorities.

- Engagement on a new **housing strategy** began in December 2023 and continues, alongside work on the development of new projects and actions that will address current challenges (see case study opposite).
- The new administration set up the Environment and Sustainability Working Group to review the Council's **action plan and commitment to reach Net Zero by 2030**. This review was completed in September 2023, and work continues to monitor progress against the plan.
- Work is in hand to shortly reconfirm our approach to **thriving communities**, building on and developing the asset-based ways of working that have delivered results in the district in recent years
- The current priority for our strategy for **growth** is to understand the Strategic Economic Plan for Suffolk, and to understand the implications of LEP transition for the renewal of our own strategy. This work has started, with a workshop for senior managers in early July.

We also continue to undertake periodic reviews of our other policies strategies and plans to ensure they remain fit for purpose or in response to changes in legislation or local circumstances.

Underpinning the delivery of our strategic priorities is a suite of **corporate projects** and **service-level plans**, overseen by Portfolio Holders and Leadership Team, which cover business-as-usual delivery, and monitored through our **performance management** arrangements (all covered in later chapters).

## Case study Housing strategy

From December 2023, the council undertook work to develop a new housing strategy, which is being combined with the statutory Homelessness Reduction and Rough Sleeping Strategy to form a single strategy document. Through the development of a Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, we will strengthen our commitment to housing and homelessness, setting out how services and partners will continue to work closely together to support local people.

The consultation and engagement have consisted of an online survey with a total of 145 respondents taking part and engagement with West Suffolk councillors through Member workshops focusing on each of the emerging priorities of delivering more homes, improving standards, supporting local people, in particular vulnerable groups, and the environment.

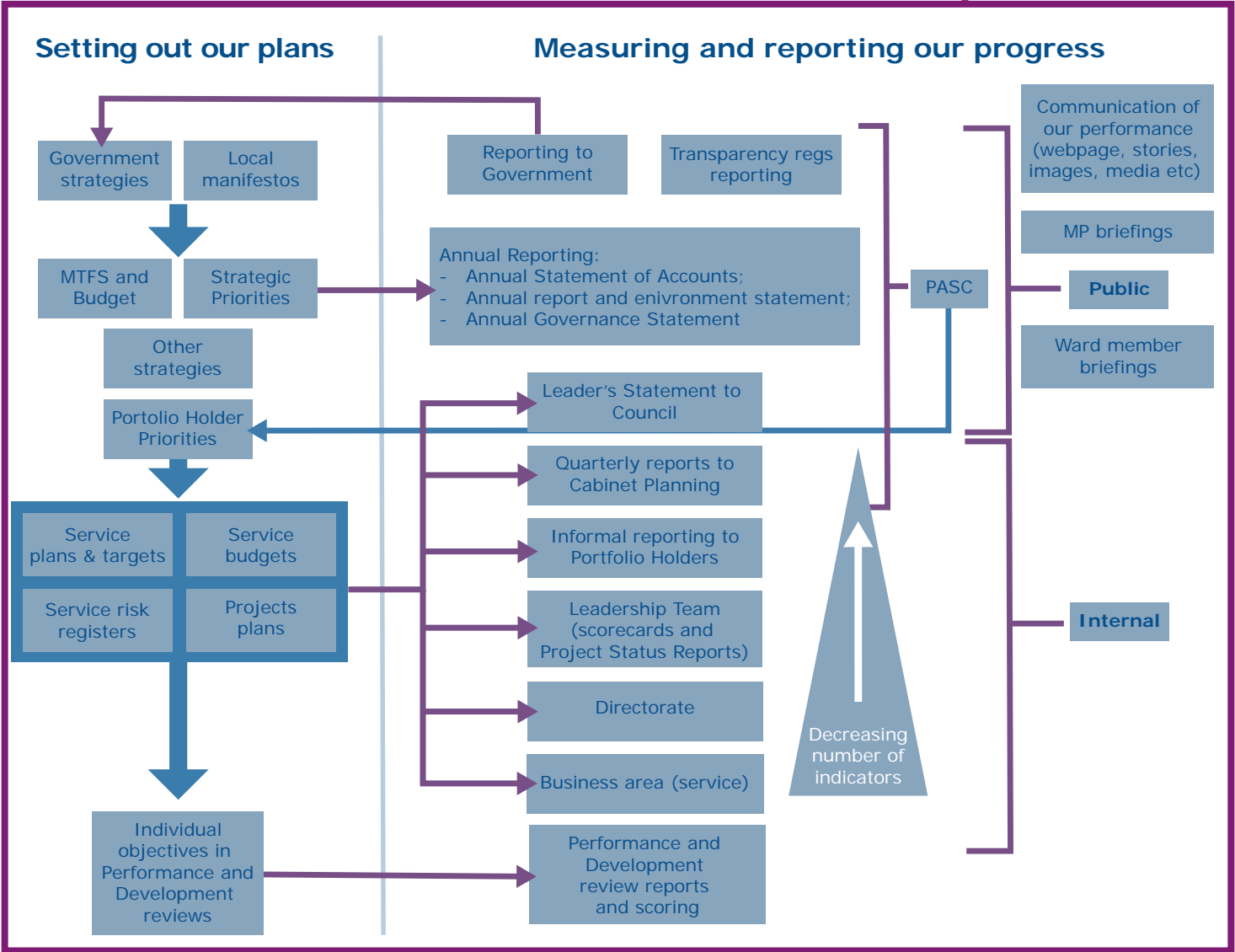
A consultation workshop for partner organisations was held in June 2024 at which over 25 different organisations were represented. The focus was on (1) gathering insight and feedback on the council's proposed priorities and actions that will be delivered through the strategy and (2) how we can work in partnership to deliver on our priorities to benefit residents.

We have also engaged with people in a number of localities and specific groups to understand the challenges they face and how we can continue working together in the future. These include the council's Environment and Sustainability Reference Group, private sector landlords, the horseracing industry and council staff.

Engagement sessions are also planned with young people at West Suffolk College, registered providers, housing developers and disability groups. The engagement undertaken and planned has helped to shape our priorities, strengthened our links with partners and provided valuable insight and feedback from councillors, residents and stakeholders.

Over the duration of the strategy we will continue the conversation with councillors, residents, partner organisations and stakeholders to understand local need and how we need to respond through our approach to delivering on our priorities.

# Our planning and reporting arrangements





# Shaping our priorities through evidence

West Suffolk Council has a strong focus on the use of evidence and data to inform decision-making. Through regular analysis of published and unpublished datasets, shared with officers and members, and through the evidence gathered through performance reporting, we ensure that decisions are informed by evidence, whether quantitative or qualitative. Recent examples include analysis of housing data to inform the draft housing strategy, analysis of

customers attending performances at the apex (the council’s performance venue) and analysis of Local Housing Allowance rates versus local rents to inform lobbying. We are also able to draw on the work of the [Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics](#), initially hosted by West Suffolk, which has carried out sector-leading work in linking datasets from across the public sector system to provide insights.

# Shaping our priorities through engagement

Through our [consultation statement](#) and strategic priorities West Suffolk Council has established a strong commitment ‘to ensuring that everything we do takes account of the needs and views of local communities, residents, businesses and interest groups’. We do this through a wide range of mechanisms, depending on the issue, but with examples including:

- **Mildenhall skate park** – co-design by young people from Mildenhall College Academy
- **Single Council – telephone opinion polling** of 2000 residents using stratified, random sampling (by ComRes)
- **Rural Taskforce** – stakeholder meetings in village halls

## Case study Local plan engagement

The Issues and Options stage consultation on the first West Suffolk Local Plan took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. An innovative online virtual exhibition hall was used to make sure the consultation could proceed and 3,385 responses were received.

The next stage – the Preferred Options consultation - took place between May and July 2022. The consultation reached over 23,681 people through Facebook and Instagram adverts alone, including more young people than previous engagement.

The final consultation on the submission draft took place between January and March 2024, generating 947 representations, which were addressed ahead of submission to the Secretary of State, which took place in May 2024.



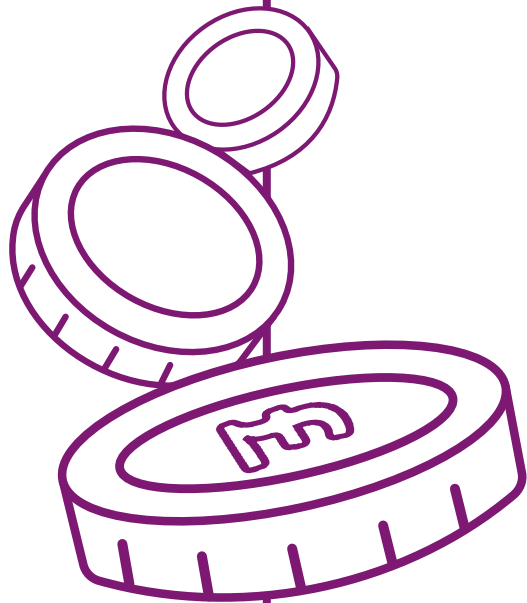
## Focus for Peer Challenge:

We welcome the input of the Peer Challenge team in helping us to renew our approach to engagement both internally and externally, with councillors, officers, partners, stakeholders and communities, in order to enhance decision making and collaborative working. We would value insights on how to move from bespoke engagement on specific themes to a more ongoing conversation to support us in this aim.

# Funding our priorities

A detailed description of our financial management principles and financial position is included in section 6 of this document, but our overarching approach to finance is a core part of our approach to improving outcomes for local people. Over the years, West Suffolk Council has consistently maintained that balancing the budget is not enough: rather, by basing all financial decision-making on the six themes of the [Medium Term Financial Strategy \(MTFS\)](#), the council has been able to deliver on its priorities, while still taking a robust and prudent approach to our finances.

The council’s Behaving Commercially model (see case study in section 8) and our approach to taking advantage of new forms of Local Government Finance, for example, have enabled West Suffolk to take bold decisions, such as ringfencing New Homes Bonus receipts for strategic priorities rather than including them in the base budget. This financial capacity has enabled us to invest both in our service delivery and directly into our communities, often creating a new or improved income stream and/or reducing costs – but always with the view to deliver improved outcomes for our communities.



Toggam Solar Farm- part of our Behaving Commercially approach



# Delivering on our priorities

## Some of our highlights in the last few years

The Council's achievements are summarised in our annual reports (the draft 2023-24 annual report will be made available to the Peer Team), but some of our highlights have been:

### Housing



The creation of Barley Homes – our housing development company, creating a dividend for the council and delivery of 63 new dwellings since 2016 of which 19 were affordable.



Investment in temporary accommodation to reduce the impact of subsidy loss.



Reduction in the number of people sleeping rough in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23 through the use of Rough Sleepers Initiative funding and partnership working.

### Environment



Declaring a climate emergency.



Creation of a £1 million Decarbonisation Initiatives Fund to support parishes in upgrading streetlights to LEDs.



Preventing 3957 tonnes of carbon being released into the atmosphere by signing up more than 90 businesses to our Solar for Business scheme.



## Growth



Eastern Relief Road and Suffolk business park near Bury St Edmunds – 72 hectares of employment land with an Enterprise Zone.



Redevelopment of the old Post Office building in Bury St Edmunds to create retail spaces and housing and improve public realm.



Innovation space at Haverhill Epicentre.



Investment in skills initiatives – for example escalator sessions.



Investment at Provincial House, Haverhill to secure jobs locally and integrate public services.

## Communities



Community Asset Transfer and redevelopment of Newbury Community Centre in Bury St Edmunds.



## Getting the essentials right



Best year in financial terms for the apex (council-owned arts venue in Bury St Edmunds) in 2023-24, with 73 per cent of all tickets sold.



Investment of £200,000 in grass cutting and grounds maintenance operations following a cross-party grounds maintenance review.



Supporting community groups with £2.5m in funding since 2019 through grants from the Thriving Communities Fund.



Creation of a Civil Parking Enforcement service in 2020 following a transfer of powers from the police.



Investments in our leisure centres at Newmarket, Brandon, Mildenhall and Haverhill.



Addressed the backlog in food safety inspections caused by the COVID-19.

# Looking to the future

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As well as continuing with service and project delivery in support of our priorities, we will also be focusing on a number of strategic issues in the coming months that support the priorities outlined earlier, for example:

- Working with district councils over its negotiation, Suffolk County Council and the Government have signed a proposed, in principle, devolution deal which would transfer certain powers and funding from the Government to Suffolk. It would mean more decisions about Suffolk's future being made in Suffolk, rather than nationally. If the proposed deal is finalised, Suffolk would receive new decision-making powers and greater local control of funding in areas including adult education, regeneration and transport, as well as control of a new investment fund worth £480 million over the next thirty years. The role of district councils in future decision-making was included in the deal document in a way not found in other areas.
- The Suffolk Waste Partnership has been developing and reviewing options to implement Simpler Recycling, including reviewing infrastructure requirements, for example, depots, transfer station and materials recycling facilities, the procurement of vehicles and containers, the recruitment of staff and a strategy for communication. There are significant challenges and risks associated with this important initiative to increase recycling rates, including agreeing the best way forward for Suffolk, understanding the available funding from central government, undertaking procurement against a backdrop of increasing supplier lead-times, recruiting staff and determining the impact on our trade waste service and income.
- We are working to establish a Commission of expert advisers and stakeholders to oversee the exploration of viable options for West Suffolk council to consider in respect of the future delivery of growth in Brandon, while supporting biodiversity. Brandon is in close proximity to a Special Protection Area (SPA) (designated because of the landscape and habitat features that are preferred by stone curlews and other priority species). This severely restricts the nature and scale of new development. This is a major piece of work for the council, with the aim of the Commission

being to engage with residents, developers and local and national stakeholders (including government and statutory agencies) to help shape the future options for Brandon.

- Work is also underway to anticipate and respond to longer-term opportunities for growth in West Suffolk in the next 30 years, particularly around Mildenhall, which is ideally placed as a strategic opportunity for growth, being centrally located along the A11 corridor connecting Norwich and Cambridge. The project is considering the role of the potential employment site at Barton Mills and other future options, such as housing and infrastructure, which will contribute to an ambitious and impactful change for Mildenhall.
- Investment in our town centres will be continuing through the allocation of UK Shared Prosperity Fund monies to town councils through a £192,000 Town Centre Fund. Alongside this, Members will be considering next steps on improvements to Haverhill High Street, in order to keep pace with changing patterns of retail and enhance the economic vitality of the town centre through highway and public realm improvements.

## Focus for Peer Challenge:

We welcome the input of the Peer Challenge team in assessing the robustness of the council's strategic priorities and the alignment of the budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

# 4 Organisational and place leadership

## The council as an agent for change in West Suffolk and beyond

Our strategic priorities document sets out clearly the role the council plays in the local area and how it is uniquely placed to make a difference because of the powers, assets, knowledge, finances and connections it holds, strengthened by the local expertise, democratic mandate and leadership role of its elected members.

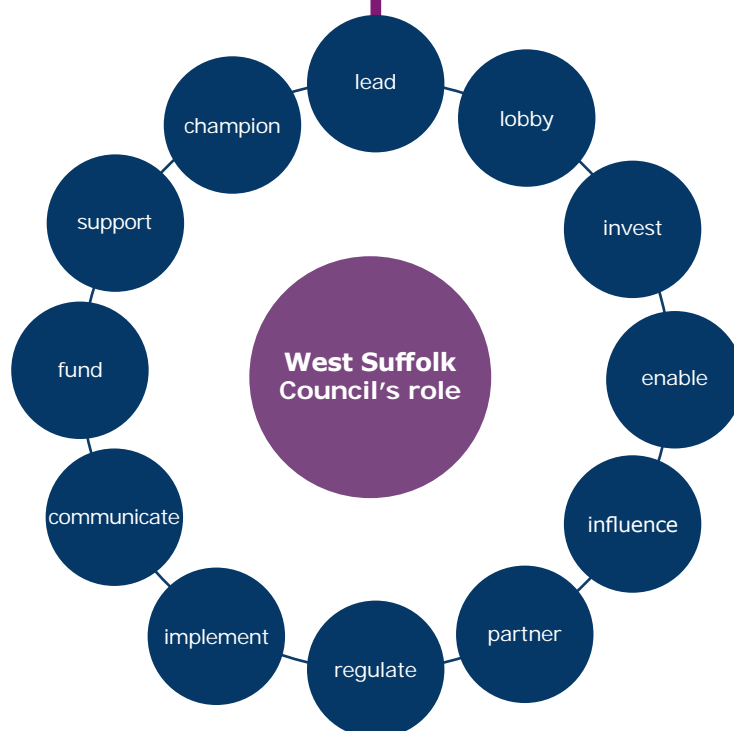
From our regular engagement with our local MPs to our support for ward members and our ongoing involvement in local schools, West Suffolk's approach is characterised by a **collective and partnership-based approach**, at a variety of different scales.

### Partnership within the council

The **Environment Taskforce** (that has now developed into the Environment and Sustainability Reference Group), the **Rural Taskforce**, the **Grounds maintenance Group** and the **Markets Review Group** are all examples of recent all-party groupings that have provided leadership for these issues across the council, by investigating and advising Cabinet on key issues.

The establishment of councillor **Advisory Panels** will also ensure collective leadership of priority issues such as environment and climate change, high streets, health and transport. At their core, these groups will bring together members from all parties who represent the council on outside bodies in relation to these issues. These panels complement the **Horseracing Industry Panel** which has already met and established its Terms of Reference, and which supports liaison between the council and the industry in Newmarket and surrounding areas.

Further, the **'town tours'** and **rural ward visits** that took place in the first half of 2024 have allowed Cabinet members and ward members to listen to one another and share their understanding of the issues and challenges facing the local areas within the district, in order to inform future planning and prioritisation.





## Partnership within wards

Each ward councillor has access to £2,800 of locality budget to spend throughout the year on projects that benefit their local community. Since 2019 West Suffolk Council has, through councillor nominations, awarded £923,640 in locality budget funding, enabling not only projects to be delivered, but stronger social capital to be built within local areas through the partnerships that are formed, in line with our Families and Communities approach. This funding has been drawn from New Homes Bonus receipts, which have been specifically ringfenced to support local areas, as opposed to being included in the council's base budget.

Ward councillors are also supported by the Families and Communities team, who offer advice, guidance, signposting, connections and specialist knowledge to support councillors in building the capacity of the communities and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector organisations in their localities.

## Partnership within the district

Within West Suffolk, the council provides leadership, convening and facilitation across a wide range of areas. Within the public sector, the West Suffolk One Public Estate programme has enabled significant progress in rationalising the public sector estate and integrating services, for example, at **West Suffolk House**, the **West Suffolk Operational Hub** and **Mildenhall Hub** (see case study in section 8).

### One Public Estate Case study: West Suffolk Operational Hub

The West Suffolk Operational Hub, completed in November 2019 was a £31m joint project between West Suffolk Council and Suffolk County Council. It replaced two waste depots for the district council, and provided a waste transfer station and public recycling centre for the county council. The co-located modern, energy efficient facilities adjacent to the major trunk road network was delivered on time and under budget and was awarded the Construction News Community Engagement Project of the Year award in 2020.

More widely, we also play a key role in the ONE Haverhill and Newmarket Vision partnerships, both of which the council was instrumental in shaping and which include not only public sector but also private and voluntary sector partners.

Achieving outcomes through joint working with health partners such as the **West Suffolk Alliance** (attended by the Council's Chief Executive), West Suffolk **Integrated Care Board** and **Integrated Care Academy** in West Suffolk has been a significant element of the council's local leadership in recent years. It has enabled impactful joint projects to be brought forward, for example, **social prescribing, personalised healthcare pilots for homeless individuals** and **leisure centre refurbishments** that integrate health facilities into leisure centres and have created the conditions to deliver integrated health and leisure pathways.

Looking to the future, these strong partnerships will be critical to ensuring the successful **delivery of a new West Suffolk Hospital**, planned to be completed by 2030.

Joint working to promote economic growth has also been successful due to strong partnerships that the council has facilitated – for example, through the West Suffolk Manufacturing Group and West Suffolk Business Festival - and between the council and the local **Business Improvement Districts** and West Suffolk College (including through the allocation of UK Shared Prosperity Funds).

Notable recent successes involving these partnerships include the establishment of two **Destination Management Organisations**, the development of a **Memorandum of Co-operation with the Horseracing Industry**, participation in the Abbey of St Edmund Project, which has secured a grant of £730k from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the co-ordination of Christmas events in Bury St Edmunds, following the closure of the Christmas Fayre,

The council also convenes a bi-annual **Parish Forum**, to share information and engage with parish and town councils. Recent agenda items have included the cost of living and winter pressures, town and parish elections, community emergency responses, planning and highways.



## UKSPF and REPF

West Suffolk Council was awarded £1,943,467 through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), and £753,701 from the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). The Council's investment plan, developed through engagement and agreed with DLUHC in 2022, has seen funding allocated to a wide range of projects covering activities including the following list. The council has met the Government's requirement of spending more than 80 per cent of the 2023-24 funding, so is proceeding with 2024-25 plans.

A number of the funded initiatives were achieved in partnership, notably major business support and skills contracts which are Suffolk-wide, but also many smaller projects where funding was allocated to existing strategic partners who were able to maximise its impact through match funding and to deliver results quickly – something that was very important given the significant delays in the council receiving the funding from Government.

- Access to healthy food
- Active travel
- Advocacy and advice services
- Arts and creative outreach activities
- Drug and alcohol recovery
- Encouraging energy efficient behaviours
- Feasibility studies for community initiatives
- Grants to small businesses
- Grassroots sports clubs (grants)
- Greenspace improvements
- High street and town centre improvements
- Improvements to community buildings
- Increasing sports participation
- Incubation space for entrepreneurs
- Markets facilities (electric chargepoint)
- Play area improvements
- Physical activity for older people
- Start up support and advice for small businesses
- Tackling rural isolation
- Tourism promotion
- Voluntary sector capacity building
- Warm hubs
- Youth employment

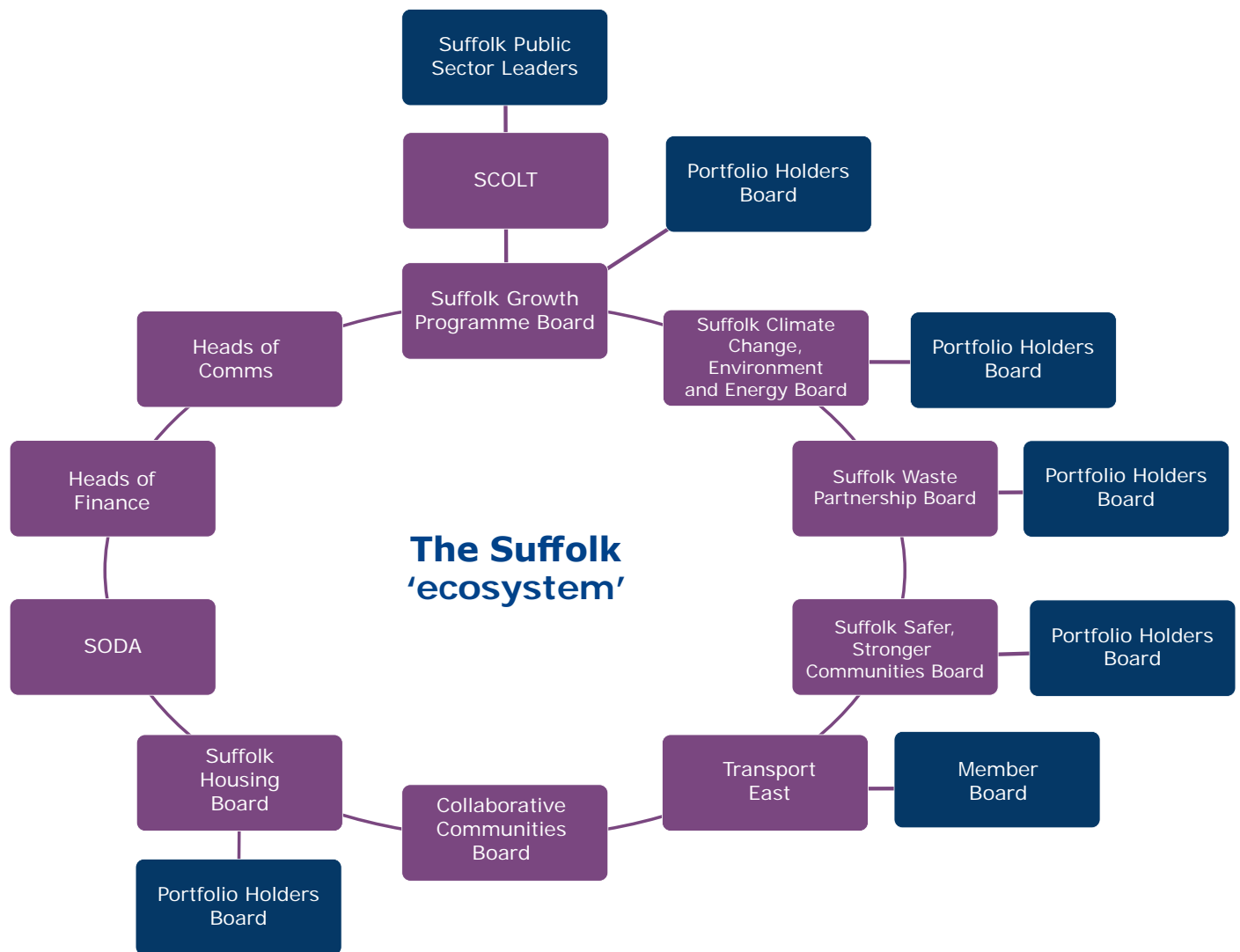
Our strengths in partnership working extend to partnerships beyond both our district and county boundaries, as follows:

### Partnership beyond West Suffolk

- Suffolk Chief Officers Leadership Team (SCOLT)
- Suffolk Public Sector Leaders
- Suffolk Climate Change Partnership and Suffolk Climate Change, Environment and Energy Board
- Suffolk Collaborative Communities Board
- Suffolk Housing Board
- Suffolk Safer Stronger Communities Board
- Suffolk Waste Partnership
- Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics (SODA) and Suffolk Observatory
- Suffolk Joint Emergency Planning Unit and Suffolk Resilience Forum
- Safe Suffolk Renters project
- Sizewell C Oversight Partnership
- Suffolk One Public Estate (West Suffolk previously had a separate Property Board but we have recently agree to join a wider Suffolk one)
- Feel Good Suffolk partnership delivering healthy behaviours support across Suffolk







## Partnership beyond Suffolk

- Transport East (sub-regional transport body)
- Norfolk and Suffolk Local Nature Recovery Strategy Board
- Work with other council areas who host United States Visiting Forces
- Partnership working with Cambridgeshire authorities, for example, on housing, growth, infrastructure and Sunnica solar farm development
- Joint lobbying with others through the District Councils Network, Rural Services Network and Local Government Association, for example, for councils with Internal Drainage Boards
- Anglia Revenues Partnership Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP) – founded by Forest Heath and Breckland District Councils and now made up of 5 councils from Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. This is now the largest revenues and benefits partnership in England, with the third largest caseload.

## Focus for Peer Challenge:

We welcome the input of the Peer Challenge Team in exploring further integration and system-working within the public sector system, including through the proposed Suffolk devolution deal and LEP transition.

# Communication at the heart

## of organisational and place leadership

West Suffolk Council's role as an agent for change is strengthened by our effective communication and engagement to bring the council's vision and strategic priorities alive.

From highlighting the very human story of hardship, determination and hope for rough sleepers and the council's work to reduce homelessness to encouraging people to be Bin-fluencers - creative, thoughtful targeted and planned communications is at the heart of what the council does. With our audiences in mind and objective measures at the forefront West Suffolk uses a variety of channels, including but not limited to a Leader's column in the local newspaper, live streaming of meetings, joint communications with partners, traditional media, social media campaigns, a virtual village hall and face to face methods.

West Suffolk's social media work on elections has been used as an exemplar by a nationally recognised public services communications trainer and blogger, and the LGA has used some of our work as examples of good communications, for instance, around the creation of a single council and projects such as Mildenhall Hub.

More importantly, however, these communications methods are driving understanding, engagement and benefits for residents such as beating national targets on people who were able to vote, to encouraging record numbers to have their say on the Local Plan.

We go where people are having conversations online rather than waiting for them to come to us. Our improved website saw a step change in engagement (a year on year increase in the number of users of 46 per cent and the number of unique page views of 40 per cent) and at the same time we have improved our staff and member communications with blogs, videos, better intranet and staff briefings.

### Case study: public attitudes to rough sleeping

Housing rough sleepers can be challenging because they may not be ready to accept support or may relapse due to issues like addiction. Despite the council's efforts, the public can sometimes share their concerns on social media and misunderstand that the council is already doing all it can to support them.

We've raised awareness of our rough sleeper support service and its success in reducing rough sleepers in West Suffolk, encouraging people to report via StreetLink. Our most compelling advocates are those we've helped, like "Dave" who we invited to tell his story on our social media channels.

Dave became homeless around Christmas 2022 due to family tragedy, addiction, and a mental breakdown. Our support team quickly housed him, and he fully engaged with addiction support for the first time, becoming clean for over six months, moving into his own property, and was enjoying rebuilding his life.

Sharing such success stories has led to greater public understanding, less social media negativity, and more community support directing rough sleepers to our services.



## Case study: Reverse Vending Machine

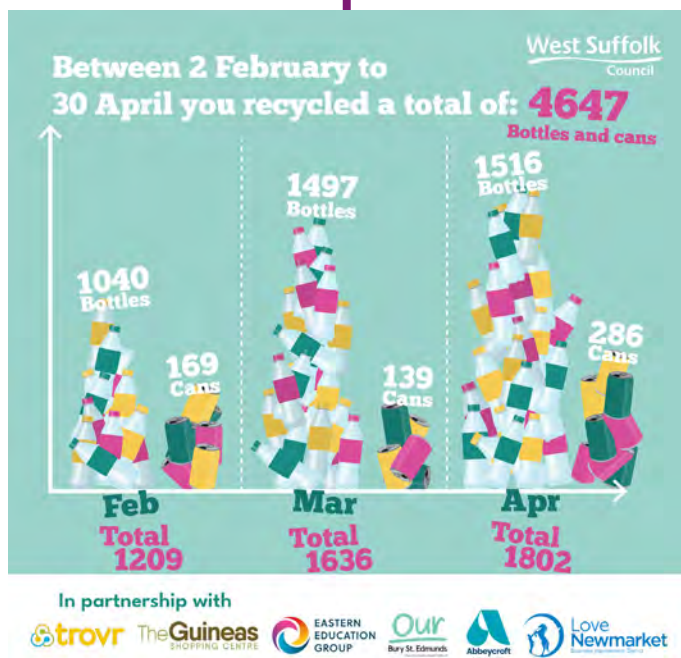
As part of the council's strategic policy of environmental resilience the authority has run a campaign to promote a UK-first pilot of a reverse vending machine.

The UK government plans to launch a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for drinks bottles and cans across England in 2025. It is hoped that people will likely be incentivised to recycle their drinks bottles and cans, reducing litter and plastic pollution.

The council have worked with Trovr and partners (Bury and Newmarket Business Improvement Districts, The Guineas Shopping Centre, Abbeycroft Leisure and West Suffolk College) to deliver a trial DRS in West Suffolk to get our communities understanding DRS ahead of the curve and learn something about public reaction/interaction.

Using in-house resources to promote the machines, we have supported the partners at a launch event, capturing content of school children and residents using the machines to utilise across social media. We have also created social media graphics, videos and posters for ourselves and partners to use to keep messaging clear and consistent.

The increased monthly use of the machines is evidence that the promotional messaging is working as the numbers of recycled items increase. The council is also receiving requests on social media for the machines to be rolled out across our other towns as interest in them, and the rewards, grows.





# 5 Governance and culture

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## Strong foundations – West Suffolk's governance arrangements

The creation of West Suffolk Council in 2019 gave an opportunity to review and refresh our governance arrangements – bringing forward to the new council those mechanisms and arrangements which best suited our local circumstances. However, we continually look for ways to improve the clarity and transparency of how decisions are made and scrutinised, funding is allocated and risks are managed. We do this through internal evaluation, responding to Government guidance and learning from best practice and lessons learned from other councils.

The basic elements of the council's governance arrangements are described in the [Code of Corporate Governance](#) (currently a draft, due for Council approval on 16 July) and reported on annually in our **Annual Governance Statements** (in draft for 2023-24 at page 138 of the [draft Statement of Accounts](#)).

### Continually improving our governance

In recent years, we have undertaken a number of specific initiatives to continuously update our governance. These have been overseen by the **Constitution Review Group**, which was formed in 2019 and makes recommendations for change in how the constitution operates where necessary and appropriate.

Our **Statutory Officers Group** also meets fortnightly to horizon-scan, assess and address governance risks across the council, including those associated with the Council's companies ([VERSE facilities management](#) and [Barley Homes](#)) or with partnership working. This group has also carried out horizon scanning work around the role of Oflog and the development of the Government's Best Value Statutory guidance to ensure West Suffolk met or exceeded expectations of a 'well-run' authority.

During 2023-24, we embarked on a review of learning from other councils around council failures, covering issues such as commercial borrowing and equal pay claims. This included the Statutory Officers Group reviewing formal reports of council failures, horizon-scanning research to gain a deeper understanding as necessary and a session with Senior Management Team to ensure that this learning was embedded in our governance structures.



### Case study: strengthening of audit committee arrangements

In January 2024 a report with proposals to strengthen West Suffolk Council's audit committee arrangements was approved. These proposals were set out to align West Suffolk's audit committee arrangements to the CIPFA Position Statement on Audit Committees in Local Authorities and Police published in 2022 (with further practical guidance following in 2023). The proposals included a review of the committee's work programme to now include oversight and governance of significant partnerships and collaborations, monitoring of peer reviews and intervention action plans and continued annual review of committee membership. Agreement was also reached on a separate proposal to co-opt two non-elected independent members to the Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee in order to provide additional knowledge and expertise alongside political neutrality and continuity of membership. Recruitment is currently underway.

# Maintaining good internal relationships

## Member-officer working

Councillors and officers at West Suffolk enjoy positive working relationships, based on a culture of respect, transparency and challenge. As well as weekly meetings between the Chief Executive and Leader, regular meetings between the Chief Executive and Group Leaders, and quarterly meetings with the Leader, Deputy Leader and Scrutiny Chairs, individual Portfolio Holders regularly meet with their corresponding Directors and officers. Officers are also invited to attend informal Cabinet briefings to provide advice and support on particular items and technical briefings for Groups and all-councillor briefings are offered ahead of all major decisions. A programme of regular all-member communication is also in place, plus a dedicated set of intranet pages.

In a similar way, committee chairs have regular engagement with supporting officers and Ward members have access to locality officers in the Families and Communities team for advice and support.

## Case study: Western Way Development

The new administration in May 2023 carried out a manifesto pledge to review the long-running Western Way project, which had an approved capital budget of up to £75 million and was in its final stages before construction. They concluded that, in the current climate, proceeding carried a greater risk than stopping and, accordingly, the project was cancelled at a Council meeting in September.

To support the decision-making process, the officers provided clear and transparent advice, through reports and briefings, on the risks and implications of the political wish to cancel the project and replace it with an alternative scheme. This included an independent appendix to the main council report prepared by the Council's three statutory officers. This document examined whether all of the financial, legal and reputational risks, as well as impacts on third parties, had been taken into account in the Cabinet's report to Council.

By considering and mitigating these risks alongside the political considerations, the cancellation of the project proceeded smoothly with a clear narrative that has been understood by the community and partners whether or not they agree with the decision.

## Staff engagement

The ways in which information is shared with all staff and the views and opinions of staff are listened to have changed rapidly in recent years, in line with the formation of the new council and the new ways of working relating to home working.

**Chief Executive's briefings** (both virtual and face to face), **i-blogs** (short blogs on the council intranet by senior leaders in the organisation about topics of interest) and **intranet news items** (that pop up when officers log in each day) all help to ensure staff are kept informed of recent developments.

Meanwhile, **staff surveys** have been used to gain insight into staff wellbeing, responses to new ways of working, and a wider set of workforce issues, in order to shape future initiatives.

A number of **staff networks** exist within the council to support staff inclusion and engagement, including networks for managers, young people (NextGeneration), mentors, managers with apprentices, Learning and Development Champions, Mental Health First Aiders and Domestic Abuse and Wellbeing Champions.

As well as regular, informal engagement with **UNISON**, we have two mechanisms for more formal engagement. The Joint Staff Consultative Panel, comprising of Members and officers meets quarterly to consider policy development, workforce strategy updates and workforce data. In addition, every four months, Joint Consultative meetings take place, consisting of a Strategic Director, Service Manager, HR team members and union representation, to cover forthcoming changes and issues.

# Managing performance and risk

## Performance management

At West Suffolk Council, we monitor and report performance in a number of ways, for example,

- Annual reports
- Annual environmental statements
- Infrastructure Funding Statements
- Key Performance Indicators
- Financial performance
- Transparency data
- Benchmarking
- News releases
- Project management and reporting

This approach, and links to the relevant reports, are summarised on our performance management webpage [How we are doing](#).

At the heart of our performance management approach are our **performance dashboards**. These collate data on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) from across the council's service areas and report them to Leadership Team on a monthly basis (in a longer format) and to Portfolio Holders and Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee (in a shorter format) on a quarterly basis. The reporting is done through PowerBI dashboards, which are interactive and so allow officers and members to interrogate the data in more depth. The collation and entry of performance data into PowerBI remains manual however, in order to ensure proper scrutiny by officers before the data are reported. We use commentary from officers on the dashboards to explain the trends and patterns emerging, and to set out the actions being taken to address any issues arising.

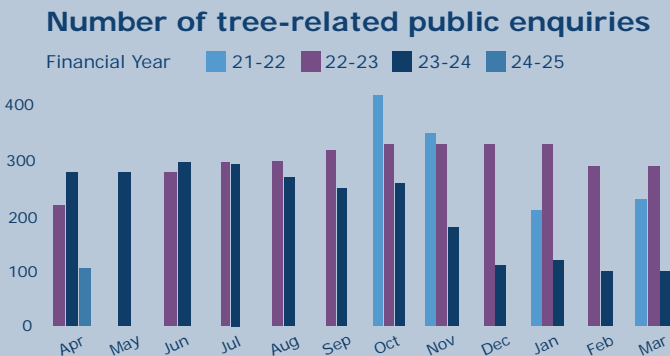
The current dashboards – the latest public versions of which are available here [2023-24 Quarter 4 dashboards](#) – were developed in 2022-23 following a full review of each service's priorities and potential output and outcome measures. The KPIs are continually updated in response to feedback from Leadership Team, Portfolio Holders and Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee to ensure they remain fit for purpose in terms of data quality and new pressures arising that need monitoring. Recent examples of developments include ensuring that all indicators from Oflog's data explorer are included on the dashboards; adding national benchmarking information to housing indicators; and increasing the granularity of housing benefit and Universal Credit data to cover the different localities within West Suffolk.

The focus of the council's current approach to KPIs is trend monitoring and benchmarking as opposed to performance against targets, building on the system of Statistical Process Control used in the NHS. This change in approach was a lesson learned from the previous approach to performance, where attention tended to focus on those areas that were 'below target' but where there was an element of subjectivity to the setting of targets.

Questions, issues and actions arising from reviews of the performance information by Leadership Team or members are fed back to services in order to continuously improve performance or to guide transformation work.

## Case study: Tree-related public enquiries

An example of where our performance reporting arrangements fed back into real-world service delivery changes and outcomes through transformation is tree-related public enquiries. Utilising a system already used by another operational team, we established a process of recording tree enquiries received by our Customer Service Advisors directly as Service Requests on our operations IT system (Bartec). By creating a simple workflow for the Arboricultural Team and removing the double handling within the Greenspace and Heritage Team we streamlined the process of all involved and improved the speed of service for the customer.





## Risk management

West Suffolk's approach to monitoring and managing risk is set out in our [Risk Management Toolkit](#). As well as the processes in place to identify and manage risks within services, the council has a [Strategic Risk Register](#), which is regularly reviewed and updated by the officer-led Strategic Risk Group, before being reported to Leadership Team on a monthly basis and Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis.

A review of the Strategic Risk Register was undertaken in 2023-24 to ensure it remained fit for purpose. This included a review of the original principles for risk identification, assessment and rating. The most significant risks to West Suffolk Council identified through our risk management approach are:

**Cyber security.** Actions have been undertaken, including raising awareness among staff through detailed staff training in data protection, business continuity planning to manage any potential incident (including a cyber-risk exercise with Senior Management Team), as well as monthly testing. This work builds on the lessons to be learned from other councils who have been badly affected. All information governance risks are overseen by the council's **Senior Information Risk Owner**, supported by an **Information Governance Working Group**.

**Recruitment of staff.** In common with many councils, West Suffolk faces issues around filling posts, especially when other similar roles in the local economy can attract a higher salary. Our approach to recruitment strategies in hard-to-fill areas focuses on wider recruitment programmes, which consider service delivery, succession planning and career pathways to ensure the continual development of internal talent. This is also reflected in external recruitment campaigns opening up interest from a wide range of applicants which may be considered through apprentice and career pathways, held against established posts. West Suffolk Council's organisational structure and design principles provide for a flexible workforce, providing skills, resources and capacity to deliver its services. Alternative recruitment may be considered in terms of agency or consultancy arrangements in the short term.



# Programme and project management

West Suffolk operates a system of **corporate project governance**, with a Projects Team within the Deputy Chief Executive's Team, which provides support to Portfolio Holders and officers with implementing effective project management approaches, using bespoke West Suffolk materials. Four qualified Project or Programme Managers are deployed flexibly across the organisation to lead major projects.

Small projects are managed and reported on within Directorate areas. Larger projects are overseen by either a **Programme Board** (Commercial or IT) or Leadership Team and Portfolio Holders, with monthly reporting to the Programme Boards and Leadership Team and quarterly reporting to Portfolio Holders. The role of these oversight mechanisms is:

- to decide whether new projects should form part of the corporate suite and agree project scope, resourcing, funding and governance;
- to troubleshoot and request actions to ensure projects remain on track;
- to identify risks and agree mitigations;
- to ensure a corporate overview of project performance; and
- to learn lessons from close-out reports once projects are completed.

## A fair and inclusive West Suffolk

One of West Suffolk's core values is 'fair and inclusive', supported by our equality objective for 2024-28 of: To continuously improve access to our services for all members of our community, by learning from best practice and listening to feedback.

Our Families and Communities approach to working with communities, supported by the use of small area data about West Suffolk, means that the diversity of local neighbourhoods, and their differing needs and opportunities is identified and fed into wider council approaches. This covers not only locality-based communities, but also communities of interest, through mechanisms such as the **West Suffolk Disability Forum**, convened and funded by the Council.

Through the application of our Public Sector Equality Duty – set out in our Equality Scheme - we have also identified specific interventions needed to ensure fairness and inclusion in the delivery of our

services. For example, in 2023, as part of our work to improve standards in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) in Newmarket, we identified that many HMO residents were speakers of other languages. In response, **we translated the information letters for tenants**, explaining how they could raise concerns, into the main languages spoken by workers in Newmarket.

In 2024, we ran a workshop on the reasonable adjustments that could be made for customers with disabilities or neurodivergence, in response to a report from the Local Government Ombudsman. This was followed by the introduction of a new **cross-council process for capturing requests for reasonable adjustments** so that all services that dealt directly with customers could make sure these requests were acted on without the resident having to repeat their request.



# 6 Financial planning and management

## A balanced budget due to sound financial planning and management

West Suffolk Council has an excellent track record in robust financial management which has meant it has continued to deliver high quality services as well as meeting the strategic vision of the authority. This is despite a series of challenges that all UK authorities continue to face.

We have continued with annual year-on-year savings and income generation, alongside the £5 million in annual savings made from shared services and the creation of a single council in April 2019, to put the council on a stronger financial footing as well as the right size to better champion West Suffolk communities. In addition, £1 million will be made in savings or new local income over the next two years (2024 to 2026) as part of the council's continuing service improvement and Behaving Commercially programmes. This is on top of the £1 million already achieved last year to make the council as efficient as possible.

Due to this sound financial management, and despite previous reductions in national funding as well as the severe impact of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis on finances, the council has been able to put forward a balanced budget for 2024 to 2025 and an indicative balanced budget for the following year 2025 to 2026. This is in spite of an additional £5 million in pressures (around 6 per cent of the overall £78 million gross budget) caused by increased inflation, cost of living pressures and higher demand for services, additional demands from Government and reductions in traditional funding streams.

The council will continue to invest in initiatives that generate income and/or wider benefits for residents and businesses in West Suffolk. Business cases for investment are assessed on the basis of external borrowing to ensure that financial provision is established up front, ensuring external debt can be serviced (through the appropriate repayment and interest provisions) and is prudent and affordable before capital decisions are taken.



Over 70 per cent of West Suffolk's gross annual budget is funded locally. The remaining 30 per cent comes from central government in the form of grants and the redistribution of business rates under the current retention scheme. Our biggest financial risk comes from the uncertainty over government funding, both in terms of quantum and timing. Our share of government funding includes a higher-than-average proportion of business rates retention growth to that of other local authorities. In the short-term this is positive as it reflects the economic growth in West Suffolk and also the benefits of being in the Suffolk pooling arrangement. In the longer term, however, this represents a risk as the long-awaited Fair Funding Review and Business Rate Retention Scheme (expected from April 2026) could significantly change the amounts that West Suffolk is able to retain.

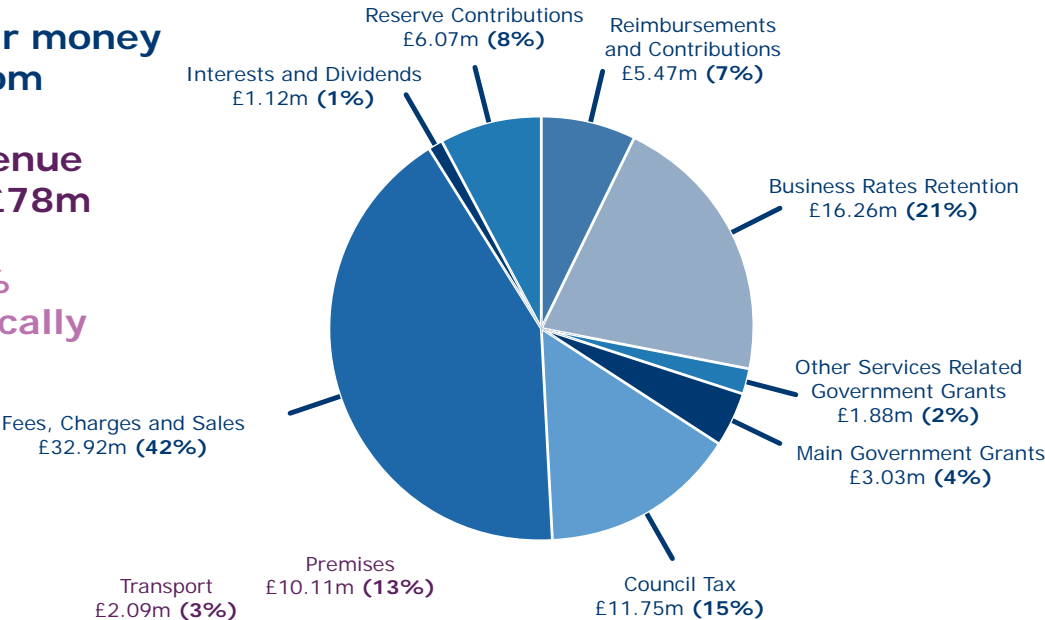
The council will continue to deliver annual savings and income generation in anticipation of reduced funding at a district level from central Government. However any significant cliff-edges from the medium term assumptions would require the use of council reserves (specifically the business rates equalisation reserve) within its current medium term plans. Scenario planning has taken place to consider political choices in the longer term if such a reset had a significant income loss to the council.

# How West Suffolk is funded

## Where our money comes from

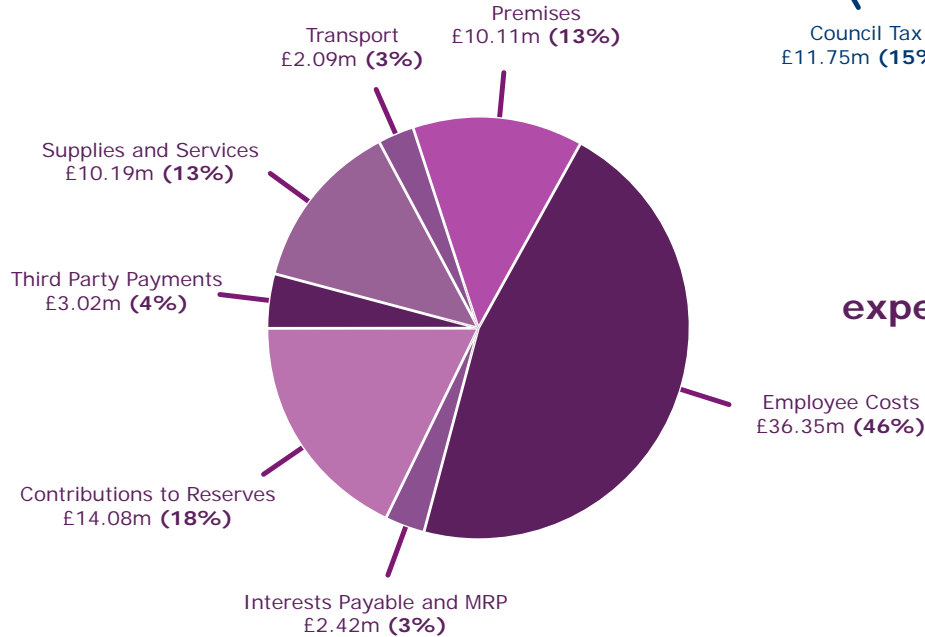
Total revenue income: £78m

Over 70% funded locally



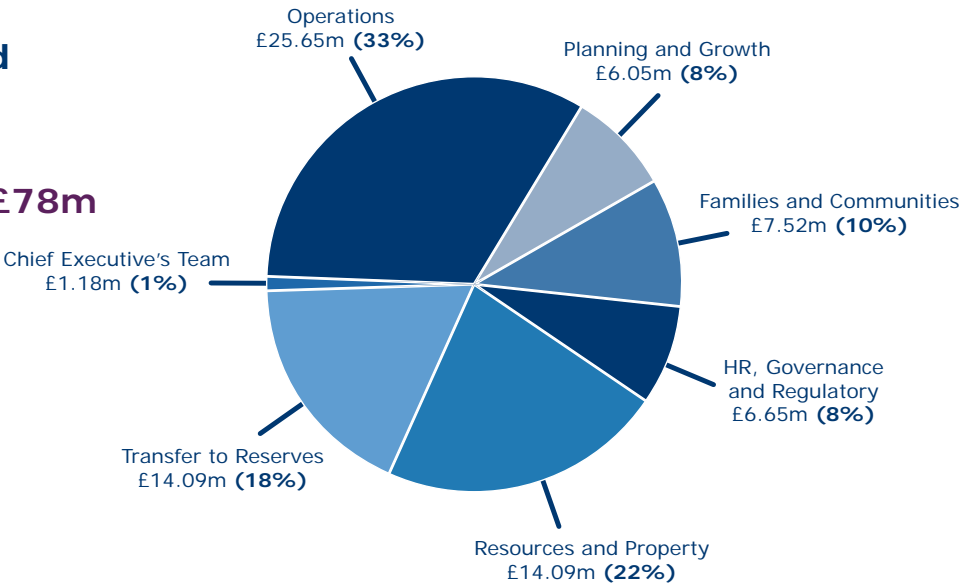
## How we spend our money

Total revenue expenditure: £78m



## How we spend our money

Total revenue expenditure: £78m



# Levels of reserves

## Position at 1 April 2024

Our current balances and reserve levels are healthy, with commitments planned to utilise these in part over the medium term as set out below. Reserves are not being utilised to balance annual budgets and we have a number of revenue reserves that have been established to provide prudent financial planning in the support of operational delivery requirements (including capital requirements) such as replacement waste freighters and building asset management plans.

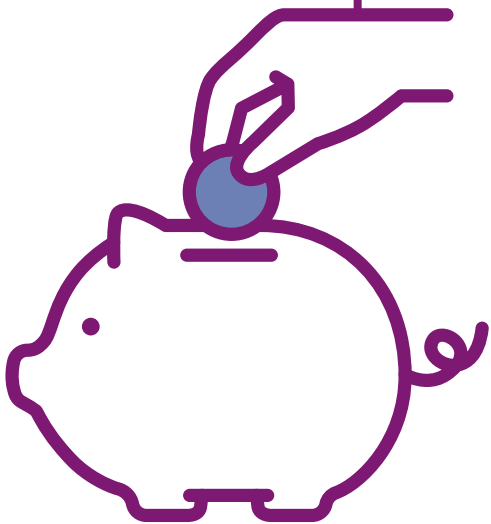
It is envisaged that the Strategic Reserves will be further allocated as part of the 2025 to 2026 budget process as further actions are agreed in the delivery of the 2024 to 2028 Strategic Priorities.

- General Fund balance: £5.5m (20 per cent of net expenditure or 2-3 months spend)
- Earmarked Revenue Reserves: £44.4m
  - Strategic reserves £6.3m
  - Financial planning reserves £24.4m (includes Business Rates)
  - Service delivery reserves £11.7m
  - Other reserves £2.0m
- Usable Capital Receipts balance: £10.5m

Our reserves are currently budgeted to hold the following balances as at 31 March 2028, the end of the current Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

- General Fund balance: £5.0m
- Earmarked Revenue Reserves: £39.1m
  - Strategic reserves £5.0m
  - Financial planning reserves £25.3m (includes Business Rates)
  - Service delivery reserves £7.0m
  - Other reserves £1.8m
- Usable Capital Receipts balance: approx. £7.4m

Following the adoption of the strategic priorities 2024-2028, the Budget approved in February 2024 for 2024 to 2025 and the medium term contained a number of in support of the delivery of these priorities, where they were sufficiently developed in terms of their financial ask. Work continues with Cabinet to further develop the initiatives and projects in support of the delivery of their new priorities, including the development of some key strategic plans such as the Housing Strategy. It is envisaged therefore that further requests to drawdown and/or allocation of the strategic reserves will take place during 2024 to 2025 and in the development of the 2025 to 2026 budget.





# External audit - challenges

The backlog in the publication of audited accounts of local bodies in England has grown to an unacceptable level. The number of outstanding opinions peaked on 30 September 2023 at 918. As of 31 December 2023, the backlog of outstanding audit opinions stood at 771.

To clear the backlog of historical accounts and 'reset' the system, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) proposes putting a date in law (the "backstop date") – 30 September 2024 – by which point local bodies would publish audited accounts for all outstanding years up to and including 2022-23.

The backstop date is likely to be a factor in local auditors issuing a modified or disclaimed opinion on outstanding accounts if they do not have enough time to complete all audit work before that date.

The West Suffolk 2022 to 2023 final accounts remain without an audit opinion and our audit partners (Ernst & Young (EY)) have informed us they are not planning to complete the work for this audit, as they have not started the 2022 to 2023 audit of the accounts for any of their local authority clients. As a result, a modified or disclaimed opinion issued by 30 September 2023 is the expected outcome of this process. EY have however conducted their value for money work and have concluded that the council has arrangements in place to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (value for money).



A letter has been sent to our local MPs requesting them to lobby on these audit issues with a call for Government to consider one or a combination of these options:

- reconsidering the timing of the proposed backstop dates themselves (to ensure that as many current audits, 2022-2023, can be completed in full as possible)
- reconsidering who the backstop dates relate to (for example, they may only apply to those with multiple year audits outstanding)
- directing local audit firms to prioritise their work on single year outstanding audits which are from 2022-2023 to complete as many as possible by the backstop dates.

In addition, responses expressing this dissatisfaction with the proposals have been submitted to consultations held by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA).

The 2023 to 2024 draft statement of accounts was issued and signed by the councils S151 officer by the 31 May deadline and the council is currently in the process of having these accounts externally audited by EY.



# Medium Term Financial Strategy

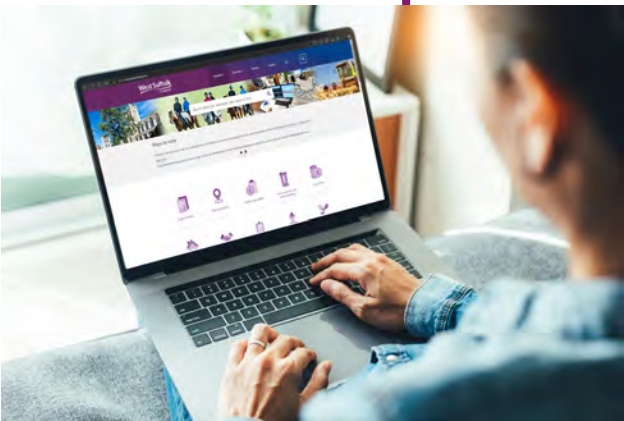
West Suffolk Council’s response to the financial challenges and opportunities will continue to follow our six key themes. Our opportunities include capturing and building on learning and innovative ways of delivering our services, experienced in recent years.

## West Suffolk’s Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) six themes, are as follows:

Aligning resources to the West Suffolk strategic priorities and the delivery of essential services
Sharing services and innovation in service delivery
Behaving commercially, delivering a return to our communities
Considering new funding models
Supporting online access to council services
Taking advantage of new forms of local government finance

The MTFS is also based on a number of other principles. As follows:

- Moving towards self-sufficiency and the generation and maximisation of local income, underpinned by ‘user pays’ principles and cost recovery
- Avoiding adding to the cost base unless fully justified, for example recent investment in extra skills and capacity to address new legislative requirements placed on us
- Not including New Homes Bonus in the base budget, but rather using as a reserve to support the delivery of the Strategic Priorities and MTFS
- Delivery of efficient and value for money services underpinned by our target operating model
- Maximising the use of our resources and assets, for example through initiatives such as a shared depot and transfer station, and renting out of space in operational offices
- Prudent asset management
- Services being delivered and supported at the appropriate level of government



# Capital investment and borrowing plans

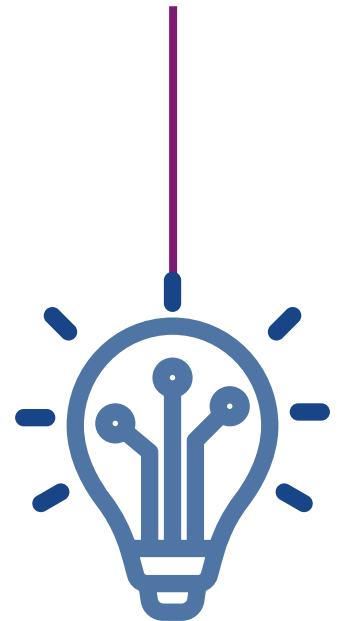
West Suffolk plans to invest over £110m in our current 5 year capital programme (£131m over 10 years), supporting our day to day services, assets and priorities as follows:

- Disabled facilities grants - £0.9m per annum
- Waste vehicle replacements – in line with vehicle replacement programme
- Asset management – in line with Asset Management Plan
- Car Parking improvements
- Leisure improvements (including Bury St Edmunds, Haverhill and Newmarket Leisure Centres)
- Transitional costs for introduction of weekly waste food collections
- Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Units, Suffolk Business Park - £11.0m (£15.1m total cost)
- Barley Homes - £12.2m (£14.3m total cost)
- Investing in our Growth Agenda - £30.0m
- Net Zero Plan - £7.3m (£11.75m total cost)
- Specific works on Provincial House, Anglian Lane Warehouse, 2 Hollands Road - £4.3m (£4.3m total cost)
- Newmarket sports provision - £2m (£4m in total, jointly funded project)

The council's borrowing currently stands at around **£57.25m**, predicted to be £129m by the end of the MTFS period. This is made up of £9.5m external borrowing (an initial £10m 40 year loan with Public Works Loan Board (PWLb) 1.84% equal instalment payment to 2061 – current balance £9.5m) and £47.75m of internal borrowing, using cash balances.

The interest payable budget for 2024 to 2025 is **£1.58m** (2.3% of gross revenue budget). The interest payable budget to cover this predicted borrowing could be £4.34m by the end of the MTFS, including amounts for some larger projects not yet in the revenue budgets (circa 9.7% of gross revenue budget).

A number of our capital investment plans create income generating assets for West Suffolk and its communities for years to come. The level of borrowing to support these investments and their outcomes to West Suffolk residents and businesses is considered to be proportionate and affordable.



# Key financial risks and challenges

## CIPFA Financial Resilience Index

West Suffolk's CIPFA financial resilience index for 2021-22 (latest information) showed that West Suffolk had a low or average risk score across most indicators. 'Council Tax Requirement' was shown as a higher risk, which reflects our lower level of Council Tax and supporting income through fees and charges. As Council Tax is a statutory charge having a higher requirement is seen as greater financial resilience. Our higher risk around 'Growth above baseline' reflects the reliance on Business Rates growth under the current retention scheme.

**The key challenges** facing West Suffolk in terms of future finances are as follows:

- Government grant uncertainties:
  - Business rates retention scheme post reset and beyond
  - Fairer Funding Review
  - New Homes Bonus
- Government policies such as Simpler Recycling, planning and levelling up white papers, with uncertainty around new burdens funding
- Income recovery and then maintaining and growing income streams
- Increases in demand for services, such as housing, and a greater complexity of demand
- Inflationary cost pressures outweighing income growth
- Inflationary and supply pressures within our capital programme
- Continued pressures from the wider public system
- Changing risk profile within our budget, such as greater reliance on income generation compared to in-year secured government grant receipts

The council is tackling these challenges through a range of mechanisms, including:

- Financial planning and management
- Lobbying of Government
- Prudent creation and use of reserves
- Forecasting of worst, base and best cases for income generation
- Using robust assumptions around inflationary pressures
- Savings plans
- Strong project management and governance



# Savings plans

The council is facing cumulative budget gaps as shown below. This table is directly from our 2024 to 2025 budget report and shows the budget assumption changes made during that annual budget setting process:

Budget assumption changes pressures/improvements	2024 to 2025 £m	2025 to 2026 £m	2026 to 2027 £m	2027 to 2028 £m
Budget gap - February 2023 budget process	0.00	2.67	3.69	4.26
Inflation and demand changes:	3.46	3.20	3.26	3.31
Strategic Priorities and Statutory demands:	0.65	0.56	0.55	0.56
Financial Planning impact:	0.78	0.71	0.22	0.21
Income assumptions impact:	(4.46)	(6.11)	(0.98)	(1.03)
Budget delivery programme:	(0.43)	(1.03)	(1.03)	(1.03)
Total budget assumption changes	0.00	(2.67)	2.02	2.02
Remaining budget gap as at January 2024	0.00	0.00	5.71	6.28

However, there is a significant amount of uncertainty with the government grant and business rate retention scheme assumptions that underpin these indicative budget projections. The following table sets out the potential range, as a best and worst case scenario depending on whether the current level of grants and business rate retention scheme growth continue across the longer term (best case scenario) or that all growth currently received through the business rates retention scheme is removed alongside no grant being provided (worst case). The assumption within the MTFS is that only 50 per cent of business rates retention growth is available.



	2024 to 2025 £m	2025 to 2026 £m	2026 to 2027 £m	2027 to 2028 £m
<b>Current budget gap as set out above</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>5.71</b>	<b>6.28</b>
<b>Best case scenario</b> (if current level of government funding is rolled forward annually): Additional income to that currently assumed – retain the current level of grants and all business rate retention scheme growth from 2026/27	0.00	0.00	(5.22)	(5.30)
<b>Revised budget gap – best case scenario</b>	0.00	0.00	0.49	0.98
<b>Worst case scenario:</b> Reduced income – remove all business rate retention scheme growth from 2026/27 alongside no grant provided	0.00	0.00	3.27	3.34
<b>Revised budget gap – worst case scenario</b>	0.00	0.00	8.98	9.62

Plans are in place to make savings of £1m from April 2025, as follows:

- Change and Service Improvement Programme (covered in section 7):
  - Process and structural reviews to drive out efficiencies and greater use of technology £400k
- Behaving Commercially
  - Fees & Charges reviews - car parking - £300k
  - Rent and lease renewals on our asset portfolio - £100k
  - Review of asset portfolio to generate new/additional income through investment



# Budget monitoring and financial decision making

West Suffolk has a range of mechanisms in place to ensure its decision-making is robust and transparent.

We have improved the sophistication of the budget-setting process, now looking at a higher level of detail (for example, across income and expenditure types, key assumptions, scenario planning and risk analysis).

The Finance Team work on a business partner model, whereby each Director and Service Manager is assigned a finance business partner who offers advice and monitoring information about their budget(s). Collated summaries of these monthly monitoring reports are presented to Leadership Team and Senior Management Team, who review the major under- and overspends and highlight and record areas where action and mitigations may be required.

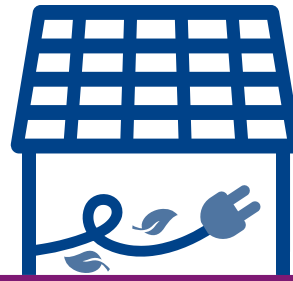
The Resources and Property Portfolio is briefed monthly on a formal basis about the state of the budget, as well as in between by exception. Quarterly reports are then made to all Portfolio Holders and in turn to Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee.



Financial decision making takes place in line with the constitution, based on the following principles:

- Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee play a key role in providing advice and scrutiny on financial decisions
- The s151 officer sits on the Leadership Team of the Council
- The business partner model described above enables decisions to be made informed by ongoing knowledge of the service areas
- Reports to the Council's Leadership Team and formal committees must include the financial implications of the decision being proposed, the latter reports being in the public domain
- The Council's project monitoring approach includes monitoring of project finance, particularly through the Project Accountant and Commercial Programme Board

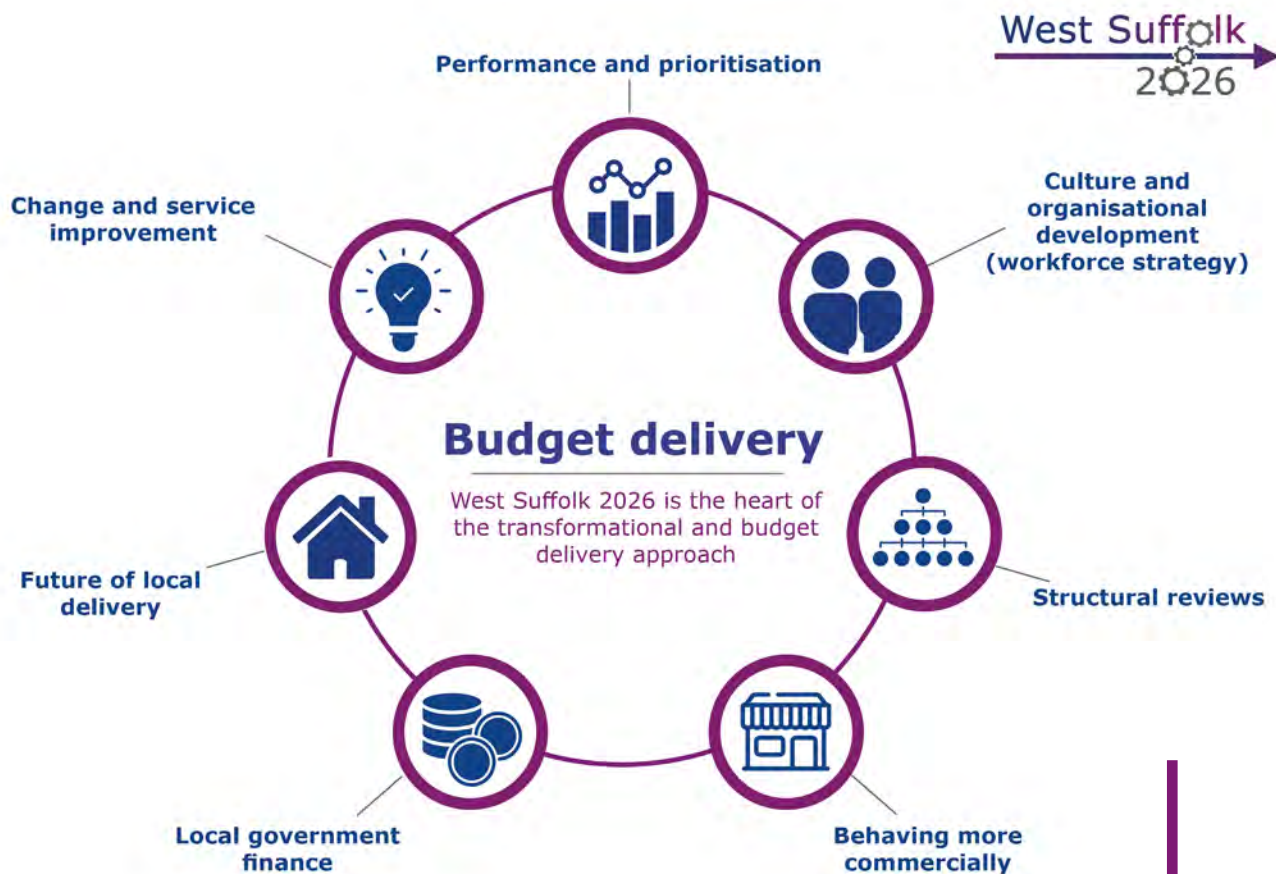
# 7 Capacity for improvement



## Improvement and transformation

The West Suffolk approach to continuous improvement includes both ongoing evaluation and improvement through performance monitoring for individuals and teams and bespoke programmes of change and transformation.

Service transformation has been an integral part of our continuous improvement journey since the establishment of the single council.



In 2022 we extended the approach to include the following themes and established it as a **Budget Delivery Plan** to provide a clear focus and direction to the programme.

The Budget Delivery Plan is built up of the following workstreams:

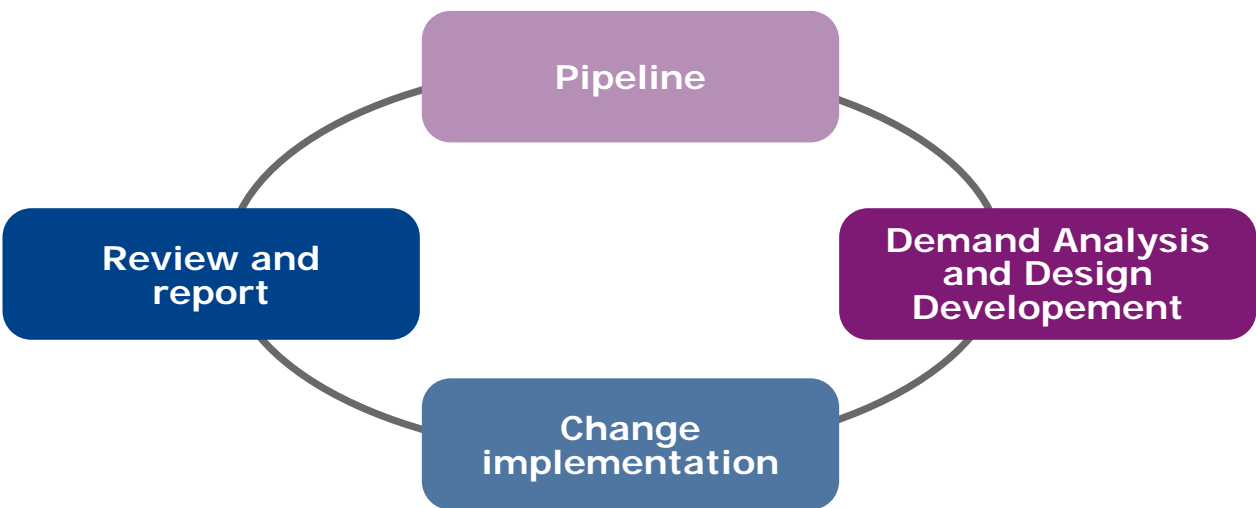
- Structure reviews linked to work by HR to review capacity (see below)
- Change and Service Improvement
- Behaving Commercially
- Future of local government finances
- Review of the role of towns and parishes
- Review of service levels through performance management

Working with partners we undertook an authority-wide systematic review of council services. Over a three-month period we completed a Resource Optimisation exercise. Service areas were asked to look at all of their activities at a work-package level

and were asked to identify:

- Whether resources were focused on the top priorities of the business
- Whether there was potential for savings, by identifying which work could be slipped, reduced, deferred or stopped, with minimum adverse impact on outcomes
- Productivity gains and to optimise deployment and utilisation of resources.
- Critical capabilities which are essential for successful business delivery.

This exercise created the first pipeline of work for our **Change and Service Improvement (CSI) Programme**. This programme is designed as a continuous programme with the aim of working across the organisation. The pipeline of work is determined by Leadership Team, having regard to performance data, budget pressures, staffing resource levels, service requests and customer feedback.



The CSI Team work with individual teams to undertake detailed Demand Analysis work, moving through to Demand Management. The **Target Operating Model** (see below) is a key consideration of these reviews. By understanding demand, we can identify opportunities to align demand and capacity appropriately. Common areas of focus include,

- **Communications** – helping teams create new improved web pages.
- **Improving self-serve** – uploading additional content to the website and developing new functionality as required such as online forms.

- **Enabling triage** – by moving first point of contact to the Customer Service Team and developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for staff on new processes and procedures.

The work of the CSI Programme and capacity reviews generated savings of around £300,000 in 2023/24. Demand reviews in Greenspace and Heritage, Highways, Parking, Licensing and Families and Communities have delivered improved user experience and reduced processing time for customers, improved processes, and increased capacity for services. A targeted review in Licensing saw a significant reduction in outstanding debt and the development of processes to ensure that gains are maintained.



## Case study: Licensing Team – process re-design

As part of the Change and Service Improvement (CSI) programme we worked with the Licensing and Finance teams. Inconsistent processes and inconsistencies between systems had created discrepancies meaning that debt data relating to licensed premises were not reliable. Over a 10-week redeployment an exercise was undertaken to:

- Review all licensees for premises, clubs and gambling and compile a new set of contact details for all current licences.
- Confirmation of the debt position of all licensed premises.
- Prepare a lesson learned document including recommendations for the establishment of accurate and sustainable data records going forward.

The original estimate was that debt was outstanding in respect of 335 premises amounting to an estimated £100,000 in debt. Following this exercise an updated list was created, removing duplicate premises records, creating a cleansed list of 318 premises with a confirmed debt value of £93,144.

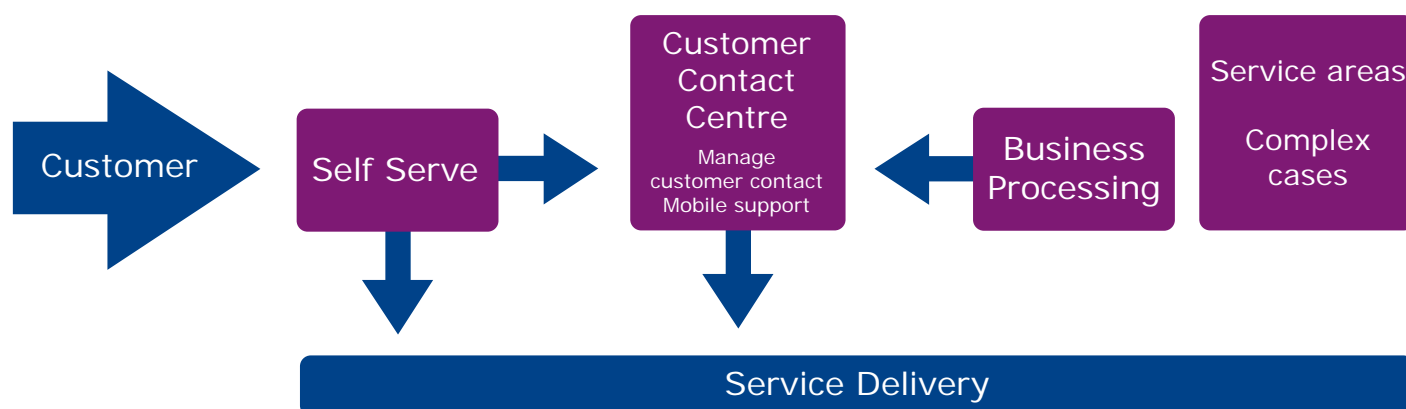
Contact was made with each of the 318 licensed premises by telephone and email. In some cases, invoices and subscriptions were suspended to allow time for detailed investigation.

At the conclusion of the project the debt position of 124 premise licences had been confirmed and the Licensing team will now follow up on the open queries with the remaining 194 premises.

A new debt management process has been developed and is being implemented by the Licensing Team ensuring that the cleansed debt data remains accurate, and that debt recovery can follow standard council processes.

### The Target Operating Model

The West Suffolk Council Target Operating Model (TOM) sits at the core of our Change and Service Improvement programme. It was designed to ensure that we simplify our processes and to ensure that customers could find the information they needed quickly and easily. The TOM's simplicity of approach has stood the test of time; technology and customer expectations have changed but the TOM has kept pace and continues to be the model of choice.



## Service reviews

During the resource optimisation work that was carried out during the summer of 2022 a common challenge was noted across many teams. Teams highlighted a perceived imbalance between demand and capacity.

The first stage of CSI work with services is to review their 'as-is' position in the demand analysis phase. Demand work packages are reviewed, considering corporate priorities set down during the resource optimisation phase. The CSI team overlay the data gathered in this phase with the corporate priorities and make recommendations designed to manage the demand. These recommendations include, where possible, the transfer of demand management to customer self-serve or to the customer services team, thereby freeing up capacity within teams and allowing them to focus on higher value or higher complexity tasks.

Demand management interventions encourage teams to embrace our digital agenda. 'Digital by default' plays a fundamental part of design of processes. By enabling residents to fulfil services online, we aim to ensure that services are more easily accessible, better value and more effective. This strategy aligns with our aspirations to reduce paper usage. In 2024 we will commence rollout of an electronic signature solution which we expect will reduce the need for printing and postage, and for avoidable travel for residents and officers.

We recognise that digital by default does not mean digital only and ensure that we have processes in place to ensure that residents who wish to contact us directly can continue to access services.

West Suffolk won the Best Migrated Local Authority in the 2024 Land Data Awards for Excellence. The award reflected the work done by the Council's Planning Business Support Service and is an example of the importance of accurate data and reliable online services.

## Case study: Anglia Revenues Partnership – Universal Credit data share automation

From 2019, Anglia Revenues Partnership responded to the increase in volume of Universal Credit data shared with the partnership by working with Capita to automate the process. ARP were aware that delays in payments due to reassessments could have devastating consequences.

ARP therefore wanted to reduce the number of customer re-assessments without making radical changes to the Local Council Tax Support schemes, so came up with a solution whereby monthly Universal Credit changes of less than £65 could be ignored. This reduced reassessments and revised bills by more than 30 per cent and also led to a reduction in credits, refunds and direct debit changes, enabling customers to budget more effectively.

ARP also introduced other changes to automate first payment records, thereby speeding up processing times, and in April 2022, changed the tolerance level to £100, introduced fixed-rate non dependent deductions, changed capital thresholds and removed tariff income.

These changes:

Led to us automating  
more **90%** of the records  
than we receive

Generated annual savings of  
more **£200,000**  
than

Resulted in staff savings equivalent to  
**7 full time** equivalents  
when other authorities are taking  
on additional resources to cope

Kept manual processing of records at  
**2017 Levels** | despite a **6.5 fold**  
increase in data received

Ensured **90%** of our  
that customers  
receive a decision from us **on the same day**  
we receive their UC data from DWP

# Learning from COVID-19

The learning from the Council's response to the significant and rapid change and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been embedded into our approaches since the end of the pandemic. During the pandemic, West Suffolk was able to continue with uninterrupted frontline service delivery, while reshaping its services to deliver a bespoke emergency response. Examples of our learning through this time include:

- The potential for **data sharing** to support the development of highly effective policies and interventions. The creation of a vulnerable persons dataset by the Suffolk Office of Data and Analytics (SODA) enabled targeted phone calls to be made to those potentially in need of food, medication and other support. In West Suffolk, more than 2,035 calls were handled on the Home But Not Alone telephone line in 2020-21, which arranged for 120 emergency food parcels to be delivered while working with 200 community groups to support vulnerable households. 4,600 welfare calls made to those who were identified as clinically extremely vulnerable.
- Because of **our approach to working in communities** (based on Asset Based Community Development), the additional work to support vulnerable people through COVID was carried out by volunteers and community groups, rather than council staff. These 200 groups were quickly mobilised because of the strong existing relationships with the council.
- The Home But Not Alone team was staffed through **internal redeployment**, in a similar way to the business grants team, who distributed £70million in grants to 2,397 local businesses in 2020-21 across all the COVID-19 business grant schemes. This internal redeployment approach was subsequently used to deliver the Government's energy grant scheme and flood recovery funding.
- The ability for staff to redeploy and work flexibly was made possible through our strong **IT team** who quickly enabled this rapid change.



## Latest improvements

In May 2024, the Senior Leadership Team carried out a self-assessment using the **LGA's Transformation and Improvement Exchange (TIE) self assessment tool**. The self-assessment found that the main area for us to continue to develop was 'data and digital'. The cross-service conversations generated by the use of the tool were positive and helpful in building a shared understanding of the council's strengths and weaknesses.

The recent changes to the council's leadership team also build on our focus on continuous improvement by aligning the structure to the strategic priorities and enhancing the focus on leadership, delivery and clarity of accountability.

### Focus for Peer Challenge:

We welcome the input of the Peer Challenge Team in exploring options for a top-level strategy around Artificial Intelligence and how it could be used appropriately to improve outcomes for residents and businesses in West Suffolk.

## Member and officer capacity and development

### Member development

West Suffolk has invested in member development, not least through our induction programme which was revised and promoted to members following the 2023 elections. As well as covering compulsory training for certain committees (for example, licensing and planning) and subject specific training (for example, the scrutiny function, chairing meetings, safeguarding and information governance) the programme is focused around raising awareness of operational teams and functions and building relationships across the organisation.

Member development is ongoing and in March 2024 a new skills audit for members was introduced and a skills matrix sent out to all members to provide an overview of different training programmes that members have undertaken and skills they have already acquired with a view to informing the training programme across the rest of the administration. Group leaders were invited to meet with officers to discuss subject specific training needs for their groups to further inform the programme.

A first year evaluation has been undertaken and will be shared with group leaders and senior managers and next steps will be to encourage and share member feedback on training sessions and to invite members attending national training to showcase the training with other members.

### Workforce development

West Suffolk's approach to the development of the officer team is set out in the [workforce strategy](#), which is based on the following five themes:





Our workforce strategy is based around our continued desire to maintain West Suffolk's reputation as a great place to work and to continue to be an ambitious and learning organisation.

Our staff values of People, Responsibility, Integrity, Dedication and Energy (PRIDE) underpin our approach, as does our approach to **agile working** which we introduced in 2021, the implications of which for each team are set out in **Team Charters**, recognising the diverse ways in which different teams need to work. Overall, our agile working guidance has enabled different ways of working to be identified and staff to deliver their best work where they work best. This flexibility has also enabled a more open approach to equality, supporting our ambition to be an employer of choice in recruitment and retention.

The diversity of approach required across different areas of the workforce is also supported by our **HR business partner model**, with business partners supporting each service area by gaining a deep understanding of the business needs and the workforce challenges.

We have prioritised investment in staff development and progression, even through challenging periods, and continue to look for ways to improve and respond to changing circumstances, by reviewing our **learning and development** approach.

Our current approach features a full programme of induction and mandatory training as required, including topics such as Building Safety Act training, which our Building Control Team all completed ahead of deadline. This work is supported by a **skills matrix** which not only helps managers identify areas for development, but also helps understand knowledge gaps within the organisation.

Our **induction programme** includes a welcome and farewell page on the intranet including a photo of new starters along with their name and where they work. We have also introduced a six-monthly corporate induction session during which the Chief Executive gives an introduction, followed by introductions from a Director and a Service Manager, and then new starters are able to

visit information stands where they can find out about the organisation as well as chat to new and existing colleagues.

All staff are encouraged through annual **Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs)** and regular interactions with their line managers to "take time to learn" through the following opportunities to develop:

- Accessing e-learning or booking on training courses through our i-learn online platform
- Self-development workshops (six sessions over eight months designed to support a better understanding of behavioural responses and build emotional intelligence and resilience)
- Mentoring
- Coaching
- Professional qualifications (supported through the apprenticeship levy)
- Matrix working
- Secondments
- Job shadowing
- Leadership programmes (Future Managers Programme – a three-month programme launching in September 2024 and Aspiring Leaders – a six-month programme of self-development, personal reflection, mentoring, speakers and training) both supporting our Leadership Behaviours, introduced in 2021

We have also developed a career pathway framework for all areas which has resulted in bringing young people into the organisation through work experience, **internships, apprenticeships** and our participation in the Suffolk Graduate programme which in turn has resulted in less difficulty in filling hard to recruit roles and provided succession planning.



In common with many councils, we face challenges around **recruitment**, particularly in our operations workforce, which are likely to increase as we implement the Government's Simpler Recycling reforms. As well as holding monthly **workforce planning** meetings with the Chief Executive to review requests for recruitment alongside data on workforce, turnover and sickness absence, we are thinking creatively about how to address these challenges, and how to communicate about the wider benefits of working at the council to prospective employees. This includes communicating our well-developed benefits package and Employee Assistance programme, which includes elements such as access to health advice, services and discounts as well as financial support through Salary Finance, physio, counselling, health discounts, 24/7 health advice and information.

Our programme of regular staff surveys have told us what the five biggest challenges facing some staff are, as follows:

- Workload
- Switching off from work
- Managing stress
- Feeling involved and listened to when changes are made
- Staying connected with colleagues

In response, we are continuing to work hard to address these issues, not least through our **health and wellbeing programme**. We continue to develop the engagement of our Wellbeing Champions, Domestic Abuse Champions and Mental Health First Aiders and continue to provide learning and sharing opportunities through appropriate interventions around health and wellbeing for all staff to access. Examples include the development of a menopause support network for staff, monthly group sessions with our external life coach focused on mental health and connectivity and bespoke events for non-office based staff such as men's health and wellbeing and prostate cancer awareness.

We currently have a **slightly negative gender pay gap** (-1.91 per cent) meaning that females on average earn more than men. Although it would be preferable to have no gender pay gap at all, the current position is favourable compared to the national picture. However, we are not complacent and will continue to be consistent in ensuring that all aspects of people management including recruitment, reward and access to development opportunities and promotion are fair and transparent.

### Focus for Peer Challenge:

We welcome input from the Peer Team in examining the council's track record and future capacity and ability to deliver against its ambitions, including through the continuation of more efficient working and a drive for greater productivity

# 8 Sharing of successful practice

## LGA case studies

### Case study 1: Mildenhall Hub - A One Public Estate (OPE) Programme Exemplar

#### Mildenhall Hub: Integrating Public Services for Community Benefit

##### Case study synopsis:

The Mildenhall Hub, opened in May 2021, exemplifies the One Public Estate (OPE) Programme by bringing together diverse public services on a single site. This includes a new leisure centre, secondary school, health services, library, job centre, and more, serving a market town and its rural catchment. The Hub, recognised as 'Project of the Year' in the Government Property Awards for 2022, aims to enhance service delivery, reduce costs, and support carbon reduction through renewable energy initiatives. The project showcases the benefits of integrated public services, improved community access, and sustainable development.

##### The challenge:

West Suffolk faced the challenge of improving public service delivery amidst budget constraints while enhancing accessibility and reducing costs. Existing facilities were dispersed, leading to inefficiencies and higher operating costs. The goal was to create a centralised hub that could provide comprehensive services efficiently and sustainably.

##### The solution:

The Mildenhall Hub was developed as a single-site facility incorporating various public services. Key features include:

**Comprehensive services:** Integration of leisure, education, health, library, job centre, family hub, and other community services.

**Renewable energy:** Installation of 741 solar panels generating approximately 270,000 kWh annually and a ground source heat pump with over 400 per cent efficiency.





**Shared facilities:** Centralised services and shared spaces to reduce costs and improve service delivery.

**Accessibility:** Extensive accessibility features, including the area's first 'Changing Places' facility.

#### **The impact:**

The Mildenhall Hub has significantly impacted the community and public services:

**Improved accessibility:** Centralised location provides easier access to services.

**Cost savings:** Reduced construction and operating costs through shared facilities and resources. This has reduced public estate costs by over 50 per cent (equivalent to £20 million over 25 years).

**Increased usage:** Leisure and library usage has increased by 60 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, compared to pre-pandemic levels.

**Enhanced educational outcomes:** The new facilities contributed to improved student attainment.

**Economic benefits:** Released six sites for new housing and employment opportunities.

**Renewable energy:** Generated approximately 270,000 kWh from solar panels in 2022, with the Battery Energy Storage System discharging nearly 100,000 kWh.

#### **How is the new approach being sustained?**

The Hub's sustainability is ensured through ongoing multi-agency collaboration, continuous stakeholder engagement, and the flexibility of its design to accommodate future service expansions.

The project continues to evolve with ongoing support and adaptation:

**Future expansion:** Design includes provisions for future expansions of the school, sports hall, and health centre.

**Community engagement:** Continuous feedback and adaptation based on community needs.

**Operational improvements:** Adjustments such as improving drop-off and parking facilities and optimising shared spaces.

A small capital fund is allocated for post-operational adaptations based on user feedback. Efforts to integrate existing services and explore new opportunities are prioritised to maximise the Hub's potential.

#### **Lessons learned:**

**Collaboration is key:** Successful integration of services requires strong partnership and shared goals.

**Flexibility and adaptability:** The ability to adapt the project based on actual usage and feedback is crucial.

**Sustainable design:** Incorporating renewable energy solutions contributes to long-term sustainability and cost savings.

**Community focus:** Ensuring the hub meets the community's needs and enhances usage and satisfaction.

**Innovative solutions:** Customising solutions to address specific challenges can lead to better outcomes.

#### **Links to relevant documents:**

[Mildenhall Hub post implementation review - Overview and Scrutiny Committee report](#)



## Case study 2: 'Behaving Commercially'

### Commercial Transformation: West Suffolk Council's 'Behaving Commercially' Approach

#### Case study synopsis:

West Suffolk Council adopted the 'Behaving Commercially' approach to enhance service delivery, improve financial sustainability, and foster a commercial mindset across the organisation. This initiative included diverse strategies such as trading services, investment in property, and developing entrepreneurial skills among staff. While the approach has led to significant successes, including increased income and improved service efficiency, it also faced challenges such as capacity limitations and the need for enhanced marketing skills. The lessons learned provide valuable insights for other councils aiming to implement similar commercial strategies.

#### The challenge:

West Suffolk Council faced increasing financial pressures and the need to sustain and improve service delivery amidst budget cuts. The council needed a strategic approach to generate additional income and ensure long-term financial sustainability and self-sufficiency without compromising service quality.

#### The solution:

The council implemented the 'Behaving Commercially' approach, which included:

**Trading services:** Establishing new and expand commercial waste services for example Trade and Garden Waste. Establishing trading companies to provide services and generate income. This includes Barley Homes, a wholly owned housing company to develop local homes and generate income for the council; and Verse, a joint venture company for the provision of facility management services at council-owned buildings.

**Property investments:** Investing in our existing assets and appropriate new additions within our commercial, operational and leisure property portfolio to create new or increased revenue streams and reduce costs in operational and leisure estates.

**Developing commercial skills:** Training staff in commercial and entrepreneurial skills to support the new approach.

**Innovative projects:** Initiating various projects, such as the solar farm at Toggam, Solar for Business and redeveloping town centres to boost economic activity and generate returns.

#### The impact:

The initiative led to significant achievements:

**Income generation:** Trading services and property investments have provided substantial income along with net returns after allowing for borrowing to support the delivery of council services.

**Service efficiency:** Improved service delivery through better resource utilisation and innovative practices.

**Economic benefits:** Local economic development projects have created jobs and enhanced community amenities.

In financial terms, the headline change has been that the medium-term goal of ensuring that 70 per cent of West Suffolk's income is generated from local sources and 30 per cent from central Government funding has been achieved – switching the ratio from that received in 2013.

#### How is the new approach being sustained?

The council continues to refine its commercial approach by:

**Ongoing training:** Developing tailored training programs for staff to build commercial acumen.

**Governance and oversight:** Maintaining transparent governance structures to oversee commercial activities.

**Market adaptation:** Adapting to market changes and focusing on high-impact projects while knowing when to walk away from less viable opportunities.

#### Lessons learned:

**Soft skills matter:** Building relationships and communication skills are crucial alongside technical commercial skills.

**Know when to walk away:** Focus on high-impact projects and avoid marginal income-generating activities.

**Patience and persistence:** Commercial initiatives take time and require a long-term commitment.

**Tailored training:** Investing in customised training programs yields better returns than generic training packages.

**Flexibility:** A mix of approaches provides resilience during unexpected challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

# West Suffolk

Council

