
June 2021 District Councillor report for the Annual Meeting of Hargarve Parish Council

COVID-19

This has been an incredibly hard and challenging year for West Suffolk District Council (WSDC); however, we have managed to maintain our many roles supporting our communities and businesses while delivering services in pandemic conditions.

More information will follow in the annual report but to give an idea, WSDC has helped businesses access £105million in grant and business rate relief. Some 600 food businesses were provided with advice on how to switch to takeaway and delivery services, and around 300 hospitality businesses were undertaken to ensure adherence with COVID-19 restrictions to protect local people. Of course, we also continued to deliver our ambitious programme and services, while dealing with the pandemic.

Also:

- secured £205,000 from the Suffolk Inclusive Growth Investment Fund to aid recovery and bring new prosperity to West Suffolk's town centres.
- Supported the most vulnerable, working with over 600 volunteer groups and organisations as part of 'Home but Not Alone' and our families and communities work – with over 2035 calls handled on the 'Home but Not Alone' telephone line and some 120 emergency food parcels delivered.
- Continue to collect thousands of bins a week despite the challenges of COVID and, when safe to do so, opened our markets in all our towns seeing an increase in new traders. Our parks stayed open and not only achieved National Green Flag Awards but were essential for people to improve their well-being and mental health during the pandemic. All of this was highly valued by many in our communities and businesses who showed their appreciation in several ways from social media posts to pictures on bins.
- Secured £425,000 funding from a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy grant and will deliver a park home insulation scheme across three parks. This was part of a £1.2 million bid where West Suffolk was the lead authority to help achieve our environmental goals.
- Completed the £2 million upgrade of Brandon Leisure Centre this year – part of a multi-million investment in health and wellbeing across West Suffolk.
- Our Local Plan – due to the pandemic, innovated with online engagement which saw around 3,400 people give written comments – more than we have ever had before and reaching people we had not engaged with so effectively before.
- Despite restrictions on construction, have forged ahead with various much needed projects, such as the innovative Mildenhall Hub which is due to open this year and is a nationally ground-breaking achievement.

Affordable Homes

The Council secures affordable housing primarily through its local plan which controls where housing growth can take place, and through planning policies which developers must adhere to. This includes our policy that developers of sites of 10 homes or more, must deliver 30 per cent of them as affordable homes. We then work with our local registered providers to secure this affordable housing.

The good news is that despite the pandemic, WSDC have achieved a higher proportion of affordable homes due to partnership working with developers and registered providers including bringing forward 100 per cent affordable housing schemes, a rural exception scheme and additional purchases for shared ownership.

Out of the 840 new homes or conversions delivered in West Suffolk in 2020/21, 297 were classed as affordable homes giving a delivery rate of approximately 35 per cent.

One of the biggest success has been on one of the development phases at the new Marham Park estate in Bury St Edmunds where 37 per cent of the homes were delivered as affordable homes. These are now managed by Clarion Housing.

‘Affordable Housing’ includes affordable rent which is based on 80 per cent of market rent, social rent which is around 65 per cent of market rent, and shared ownership schemes. Of the 297 new affordable homes, 149 were classed as affordable rent, 53 as social rent, while 95 were made available under shared ownership schemes.

WSDC currently has 2,147 households on its housing register. This compares to 1,980 this time last year. Being on the housing register does not mean that a household doesn’t already have a home or even an affordable home. What it does mean is that the household, whether it be a person living on their own, a couple or a family waiting to find suitable affordable housing for their needs within West Suffolk, whether through up or downsizing, or moving to a different location.

The Future

WSDC are meeting our targets for housing development and the shoots of recovery for our economy are clear here in West Suffolk. But we need to maintain our focus on encouraging economic growth through our emerging local plan and managing development for the benefit of our communities and businesses.

In addition, like all public services we are still fighting for fairer funding – especially after the impact of COVID-19 and reviewing policies Government can and will look at in relation to how public services work best in the future. We will continue to lobby, especially around issues such as the Comprehensive Spending Review, and use our success and status as a still relatively new single West Suffolk Council to give weight to our arguments.

Tackling climate change while protecting and improving our environment is a priority for West Suffolk Council

As you may know, WSDC declared a climate change emergency in 2019 and Cabinet agreed an ambitious environmental action plan in July 2020, that included establishing more Electric Vehicle infrastructure to support residents and businesses in switching to EVs.

WSDC have now installed chargers in The Corn Exchange car park in Haverhill. It brings the total number of EV chargers we have installed in West Suffolk to 46 across 15 locations. We are also in the process of installing EV charges in the George Street car park in Brandon to go live later this year and are continuing to look at other locations.

The Government plans to end the sale of petrol and diesel cars in the UK by 2030 with new hybrid vehicles allowed until 2035. By working with the Government and other partners we hope to make that choice easier for residents and businesses now.

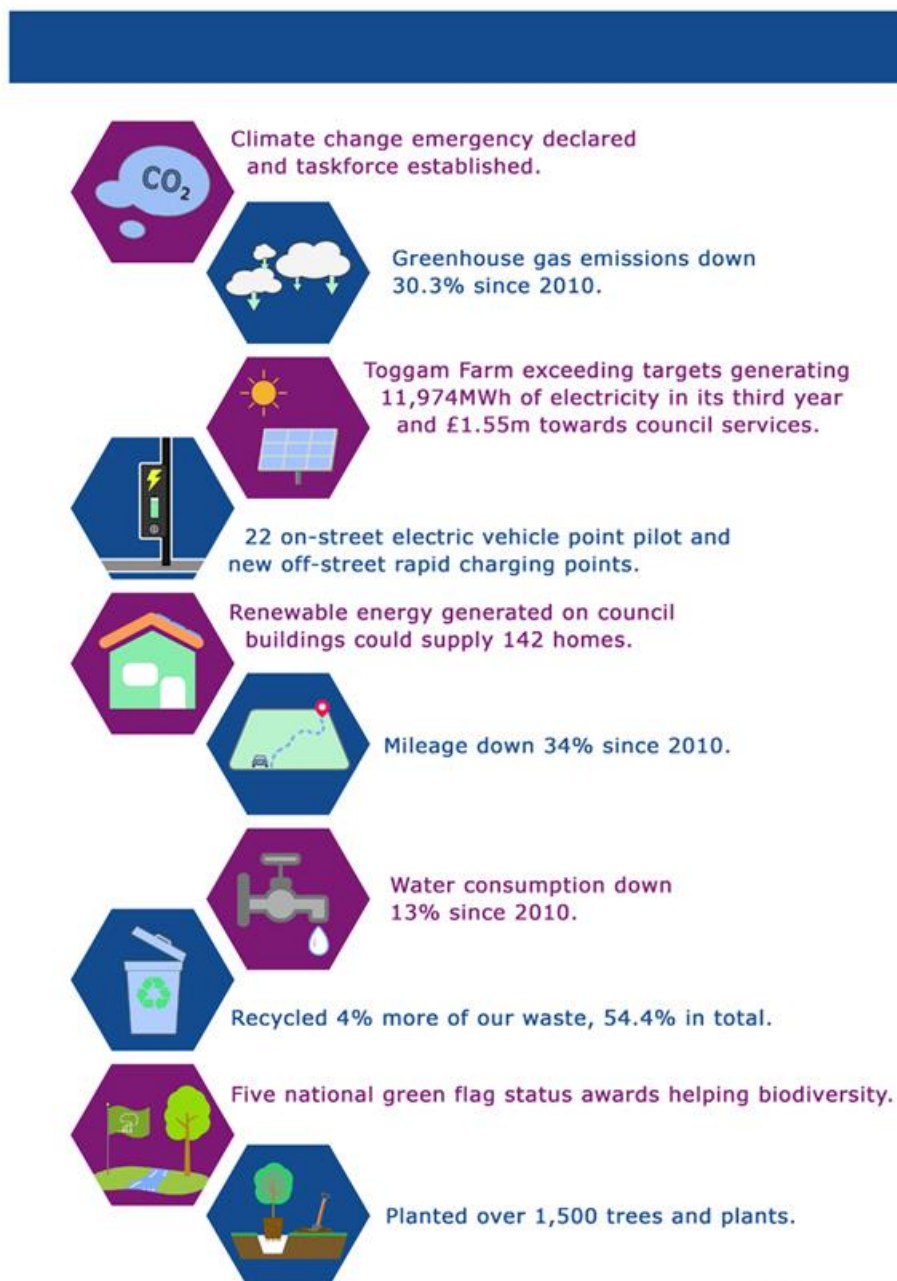
EVs are cheaper to run than petrol or diesel vehicles – generally 3p per mile instead of 10p a mile. Improvements in technology mean that EVs can make many long journeys on a single charge and they are becoming a more realistic option not just for residents but for businesses including trades people and small-scale suppliers. It is worth remembering that by switching to EVs people are helping reduce air pollution which cost this country at least £16 billion in health costs each year according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

Both the Haverhill and Brandon EV charges are being paid for through investment secured from the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) and BP Chargemaster – and investment of approximately £60,000.

As with our other car parks, the charging stations will be available on the recently rebranded BP Pulse network. Users will need to register for a BP Pulse account to use the charging bays.

For more on this work visit www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/protecting-our-environment/index.cfm

WSDC has a good track record of reducing our impact on climate change and has been monitoring this since 2010.



In 2019/2020

Between 2019-2020 WSDC planted 1,500 trees and plants (1,000 of those since Christmas). Since 2010, Greenhouse Gas Emissions have fallen by 30 per cent and the council now recycles 54 per cent of its office waste. The council owns one of the largest local authority solar farms in the UK, a 12.4MW facility delivering energy to the National Grid. In May 2020 it produced 2007MWh of electricity –the equivalent of powering 600 homes for an entire year. In addition, it works with businesses to reduce their carbon footprint and use renewable energy which is also installed on council offices. We are providing new on-street and off-street electric vehicle points and rapid charging points to encourage alternative greener forms of travel.

In addition, five of the council's parks have achieved national Green Flag status awards and the council continues to generate renewable energy – power and heat – at many of its sites. At Nowton Park in March, the council has procured electrical equipment to replace petrol driven items that had reached the end of their useful life. The new equipment is lighter to haul and quieter. We also have looked at our own buildings and practices. Many of our buildings have solar panels and environmentally friendly measures such as reusing rainwater. Our buildings have generated enough renewable energy to supply 142 homes. Mileage has reduced by 34 per cent since 2010 and water consumption is down 13 per cent since 2010.

The authority is also reducing the amount it cuts on verges and increasing the use of plants that help pollinators, so important as we seek to improve biodiversity across West Suffolk.

Mike Chester

District Councillor for the Chedburgh and Chevington Ward

Vice-Chair of West Suffolk District Council