

Speech by Councillor Matthew Hicks, Leader of Suffolk County Council
Suffolk County Council Annual General Meeting
22 October 2020

Thank you, Mr Chairman,

Firstly, can I congratulate Councillor Newman on becoming Chairman of the Council and Councillor Busuttil on becoming Vice Chairman.

Mr Chairman, I am pleased to present my third executive statement as Leader of this Council.

Who could have predicted how different our council meetings and interactions would become over the course of the past year as we continue to welcome each other through video calling and remote working.

I am pleased at just how well the Council has embraced the challenges presented through remote working, taking advantage of the excellent range of technology, online systems and services that this authority had the foresight to put in place some time ago as part of our digital transformation programme.

2020 will certainly live long in the memory for a wealth of reasons. The Coronavirus pandemic has affected each and every one of us – some with devastating effect. I would like to express my deepest sympathies for those in Suffolk who may have lost family and friends to this terrible virus. My thoughts and heartfelt condolences are with you all.

I want to pay special thanks to our outstanding staff, who time and time again have gone above and beyond expectations to support those who have been affected by the pandemic, and to ensure people across Suffolk get the tailored support and service they need to stay safe and well.

Many staff, including our carers, social workers, foster families and firefighters, to name a few, continued to work at the height of the pandemic, facing exceptionally difficult conditions, delivering the same quality of care, compassion and professionalism, despite such uncertainty.

And to all those who have found temporary office spaces at kitchen tables, in spare rooms or on bedside tables over the last seven months - thank you for adapting to the situation we find ourselves in and for your continued commitment and positive morale

I know I speak for every county councillor when I say we are exceptionally grateful to all our staff at this time.

I would now like to take this opportunity to provide an update on my five priorities launched at last year's AGM and on what has been achieved over the last 18 months despite the time and commitment we have had to devote to fighting the pandemic locally.

Firstly, Housing for Suffolk.

As the third largest landowner in Suffolk, the county council is in a prime position to support the growing local need for new housing and the supporting community infrastructure. I am really pleased that a great deal has been achieved during the last 18 months towards meeting my commitment to explore potential development opportunities and generate income for the county council

Our revised Housing Approach was approved in January and we have established a Housing Board. We currently have a number of potential housing sites under consideration offering a clear focus on delivering the kind of homes Suffolk needs. We are working closely with registered social housing providers, developers and our borough and district colleagues to explore these opportunities and there are many exciting plans on the horizon.

As an illustration of what's to come, we have now handed over the site at Chilton Woods near Sudbury to a commercial house builder to develop 1150 homes over the next 10 years, offering numerous community benefits including new school provision, new sports facilities and community woodland with children's play areas. We will invest the income from this site in a range of council services.

Two further large schemes are currently being planned in North Lowestoft and West Mildenhall with consultations planned for later this year. These schemes will include over 2,000 new homes, with new schools and an array of supporting community facilities. I look forward to providing further updates.

My next priority was on Suffolk's environment.

I am extremely pleased with the progress and momentum we have put into strengthening our environmental credentials this year, as part of our commitment towards addressing the climate emergency which we declared last March.

A cross-party policy development panel was established last autumn to look at the opportunities available to help us reduce our impact on the environment as an organisation and meet our pledge to make this council carbon neutral by 2030.

The Panel presented its recommendations to Cabinet in July, looking at aspects covering changes we can make to buildings and utilities, transport arrangements, waste management, and even our procurement guidance. A great deal has already been done to review the systems and practices we adopt to reduce our impact on the environment, this means eliminating or vastly reducing the carbon emissions where we can and looking to offset those that remain.

I am also very pleased to confirm that the first three Suffolk 2020 projects have been launched to support local communities and focus on key environmental priorities. We are increasing the number of electric vehicle charging points offered across the county with particular focus on rural areas - it is my hope that the at least 100 additional charging points will give Suffolk one the best, if not the best, rural charging networks. We are creating a series of 'quiet lanes', reducing the number of motorised vehicles using certain single track lanes, and have committed funding to plant at

least 100,000 trees in the next 18 months, improve our maintenance of trees and hedgerows, and manage our roadside verges better for wildlife.

All this builds on a firm foundation. Suffolk has long led from the front on environmental issues since we announced our aspiration of creating the greenest county some 13 years. As I speak today, over 90 of our buildings have solar PV panels installed, we have battery storage at Constantine House, to date Business Energy Efficiency Anglia have supported 850 businesses to reduce carbon and cut their energy costs, and Solar Together Suffolk has supported over 800 households across our county. It is a record of real action of which I am immensely proud, but I am committed to doing a great deal more.

My next commitment was to include a focus on Inclusive Growth

I am delighted that we approved and adopted an Inclusive Growth Framework as part of our 2020/2021 Business Plan at our meeting in February. Specifically, our Inclusive Growth priority looks to achieve important outcomes for the residents of Suffolk which are clearly laid out in detail in the Business Plan. Suffolk needs to improve its economic productivity, levels of educational attainment and build more homes, ensuring that everyone benefits, including people that are vulnerable and facing disadvantage.

For me 'economic opportunities that benefit everyone, so no-one is left behind' is a very strong message.

Over the last year we have developed another one of my priorities our Commercial Strategy Statement outlining our ambitious approach through the coming years to build on our existing successes and take future steps to grow the authority's income, return profits that can be reinvested into public services.

Regarding our three wholly owned companies within Suffolk Group Holdings, they all have been operating effectively throughout the pandemic, mobilising staff quickly in response to the developing crisis.

New contracts have continued to be won over the last year, including the Joint Venture with Derbyshire County Council for Vertas and Concertus which began last month.

The 5th priority was a Suffolk 2050 vision.

As we continue to respond and recover from the implications and effects of Covid across Suffolk, it throws up many questions about what the future of our county holds.

Currently we continue to see so much change that sometimes it seems extremely difficult to look beyond the next few weeks or months, let alone consider ideas about the shape of Suffolk 30 or 50 years into the future.

I remain absolutely committed to us all engaging in a big county wide conversation about what the future has in store for Suffolk. However, right now we should perhaps

pause and consider what that timeframe should look like before we jump in. This commitment arose from our LGA Peer Challenge. While I fully intend to continue working with our partners to develop a long-term strategic vision for Suffolk, a fundamental element of it relies on the engagement and participation of people throughout the county. At present there is no easy way to take that forward.

I now want to touch on other achievements since the last AGM.

Much of our concentration and effort has been focussed on Suffolk's response to Covid-19 and I have already referenced just some of the successes we have shared together.

Suffolk County Council has continued to enjoy strong relationships with our district and borough colleagues, the wider public sector and our local business community. This has enabled us to act swiftly and decisively as needed during the pandemic as we all pulled together. Our county's community spirit has really shone through with families and neighbours looking out for one another. and this is something of which Suffolk should be proud.

I am also very proud of the continued focus and diligence to ensure this council's budget and finances remain stable despite the need for additional, necessary expenditure over the last seven months. Thankfully, as a result our excellent record of financial management we have not had to contemplate an emergency budget

We have delivered on our commitment to create new school places for children with special educational needs, with around 210 young people attending new, special units at schools in East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich this term. This remains part of our commitment to invest £45 million in extending SEND provision over the next five years.

In August this year, a fresh new road surface was laid in Eye as we accomplished our commitment to surface 1000 miles of Suffolk's road over a four-year period. A commitment we have delivered ahead of time.

In September this year we reached a milestone of 98% of premises in Suffolk having access to Superfast Broadband and we will continue to work on the remaining 2%.

This council continues to be committed to representing the views of our communities and this year we have made our position very clear in relation to potential large-scale development in the energy sector. We have put forward Suffolk's case in relation to EDF Energy's current plans for a new nuclear power station at Sizewell and raised local concerns with Scottish Power Renewables, relating to plans for two new off-shore wind farms and we will be doing likewise with Sunnica. We want clean energy in Suffolk, and we want the jobs and investment it brings but this must not come at **any** cost.

This council also continues to make significant progress with the development of Lowestoft's Gull Wing Bridge This is an important project ease congestion, improve transport links and to support the Waveney area with ambitious regeneration plans.

This is something local people have been wanting for generations, and we are delivering on that commitment.

There has been a great deal of challenge and opposition this year as we have looked at how we can develop new Family Hubs to support young people aged 0-19 and their families.

Following multiple opportunities for scrutiny of these plans, I am very pleased to move forward with introducing the new approach in the coming year, re-investing the money previously lost through building costs into recruiting new members of staff whose focus will be supporting vulnerable families and developing services that support young people in Suffolk.

It has been a very busy 18 months in many aspects of our work and one in which this authority should be genuinely proud.

At this point I would like to take the opportunity to formally welcome Cllr Elfrede Brambley-Crawshaw as Leader of the Liberal Democrat, Green and Independent Group at Suffolk County Council.

I am, of course, grateful to you and your group for the support you have given this administration in placing our environment at the very top of our priorities. And I have some sympathy and it must be difficult for you, as a single-issue political party, to see Suffolk lead from the front on environmental issues under the Conservatives. There is much hard work ahead but I believe we in this administration have demonstrated that the Conservative Party are the party that delivers on the environment and we as Conservatives are the party that will rise to the challenge of the climate emergency.

Mr Chairman, I have been clear that I believe in collaboration, positive challenge and one's right to articulate opposing views. As county councillors we each have a vital role to play in expressing the views of our localities. But, in doing so we must not become blinkered or lose sight of the important shared issues that are so important to our wider Suffolk communities.

I fear that increasingly, for the Labour Group the term 'opposition' has been somewhat falsely elevated by some councillors for the purposes of trying to score cheap points wherever possible, rather than focussing on the best outcomes for Suffolk's residents.

I do genuinely think constant Labour criticisms would mean so much more if you could recognise some of the great successes in our county. Instead, it is opposition for opposition's sake.

It was marked that when we discussed the plans for Lowestoft's iconic Gull Wing Bridge at Cabinet there was not a single remark from one of your Councillors. Not one word on such a transformative infrastructure project. Nor did you have anything to say on the Children in Care Annual Report and not a single Labour Councillor attended any of the Children's Centre/Family Hub Consultation events.

You have so much interest in making negative comments in the press but seemingly very little interest in the debate that actually shapes the future of our county.

It is a shame that all too often you are silent on the big issues. I'm proud of this Conservative administration's record but Suffolk deserves debate and challenge from its main opposition, not just sniping in the press.

As part of my executive statement, I am pleased to confirm the reappointment of all my Cabinet Members and Deputy Cabinet Members into their current roles. I would like to pay tribute to their continued drive, support and commitment during this exceptional period.

Each and every member of my Cabinet team has risen to the challenge, demonstrating their experience, insight, sensitivity and leadership to make sound strategic and financial decisions that protect the Suffolk purse, drive projects that deliver on the promises we have made to reduce our impact on the environment and to care for the most vulnerable people in society. I would also thank all my Group individually for the extra efforts to which they have all gone since March. This year has without doubt been a huge team effort and I thank you all for that.

My passion and my commitment remain as strong as ever. My approach is centred on the principles of listening, collaborating, being open and transparent, being supportive and taking a pragmatic view when it comes to taking tough decisions...

Our track record as Conservatives speak for themselves. The nation was clear that Labour policies were unfit for Government last December. I look forward to bringing forward our manifesto in the New Year. In Suffolk as we head into May 21 we will hold our heads up high as it is the Conservatives with a record on sound economic management, it is the Conservatives that are looking after the most vulnerable before and during a pandemic, and it is the Conservatives with a focus on the environment and now a big focus on recovery. We can be proud of what we have achieved, and it is the Conservatives that actually deliver for all of Suffolk.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.