

Cllr Matthew Hicks
Suffolk County Council Leader
Executive Statement
23 May 2019

Mr Chairman, I am proud to stand here, as Leader of this council, and to present my second executive statement.

When I was elected Leader 12 months ago, it was fundamental to my approach to break the mould on the way we work. I wanted to deliver a new way, based on listening, cooperation and collaboration with our partners, Suffolk businesses, county council staff and most importantly our residents.

It's what I am, what I know, and what my leadership is all about. It comes from my journey into politics.

Eight years ago, I became aware of a highly contentious local planning issue that was causing enormous distress to people in Worlingworth. It may not have affected me personally, but I could see that local residents were left with nowhere to go. Their voices were being lost in the crowd. Suffolk's neighbourly nature felt under threat.

I faced a choice. I could let it happen, getting on with my life or I could stand up and do something about it.

I chose to stand up and enter politics to make a difference and give people a voice.

I well remember my first discussion about being a councillor as I was told "don't worry Matthew, there is not too much of a time commitment." I doubt that is the reality for any of us in this chamber.

Yet, I don't mind, because time is not what motivates me. Making a difference motivates me. Helping people motivates me. I think it's what motivates all of us, regardless of our political persuasions.

Just before I was elected Leader, someone said to me: "you can do this Matthew, just make sure you take people with you". Sound advice for any politician. But what does that actually mean?

To me it means listening, working with people, being flexible, being open and transparent, being supportive and pragmatic while taking tough decisions.

So, have I put my values into practice? I believe - yes I have. Throughout my first 12 months in office, I have worked with my Cabinet team, with my group and with officers to co-operate and collaborate for the greater good of Suffolk.

We have significantly improved our relationships with district and borough councils, the wider public sector and business community. We have listened to and involved residents and service users on key decisions and made it possible for councillors, of all political persuasions, to influence policy. I will return to this point in a moment.

We have moved more of our finite financial resources into services that protect and support Suffolk's vulnerable adults and children. And Tuesday's outstanding Ofsted Report on Children's Services is a credit to Gordon Jones, Sue Cook, Allan Cadzow and all our staff on the frontline.

We listened to the views of others when making some of the toughest decisions this authority has faced in recent years. We phased in the changes to home to school transport over a seven-year period, we reviewed and ended the Upper Orwell Crossing project, we delayed funding changes for Citizens Advice and found alternative sources of income for them.

We have committed new funding to create new school places for children with special educational needs. We secured £9 million of additional Government funding to improve Suffolk's roads. We pushed forward with the Lowestoft Third Crossing.

Last year Suffolk was shocked by the senseless murder of Tavis Spencer-Aikens. I was at the public meeting at Inspire Suffolk. I saw the heartache. I heard that community crying out for support. We have responded, not just with words, but with actions and investment. We are now working much more closely with local people to help them move forward.

For the first time in a decade, we have invited local authority experts from around the country to Suffolk County Council to review and challenge our work through a Peer Review.

Suffolk County Council ran some 20 formal public consultations last year, with a further 20 informal consultations also delivered.

I doubled the number of We are Listening events. This year we are adding Saturday sessions so I will be meeting hundreds of residents and hearing about the issues that matter most to them. Two weeks ago, I presented to our Scrutiny Committee our draft consultation and engagement charter, which sets out our commitment to meeting the highest standards of community engagement.

These are not the actions of an administration that doesn't listen. These are the actions of a visible, sensible and considered leadership, tackling difficult issues and doing everything possible to involve and reflect the views of other people, especially our residents and service users.

You can be confident that this will continue because it is what I stand for.

I've been a backbencher, and I know how it feels when decisions affecting my residents are made by other people. That's why as Leader I established Policy Development Panels as a genuine attempt to involve more councillors, from all parties, in key decisions.

We've had some great success, with the PDPs on special education needs and disabilities and on local member highways budget and on sponsored bus services. All delivering sensitive, pertinent and well-thought through recommendations which

have been adopted by Cabinet. This is a perfect example of all members influencing policy, and I commend it wholeheartedly.

Contrast that to the Family Services PDP - where I'm disappointed to say that sense of collaborative working has been sabotaged through leaks entirely driven by political opportunism of the worst order.

What was a genuine attempt to engage councillors in some challenging policy development, under trust, has broken down. Intentions have been misrepresented so parents, their young children and our staff have been scared unnecessarily and unjustly for cheap political gain. This is wrong. The timing of this coinciding with the recent local elections is lost on no one.

I believe that the Labour group in its actions have betrayed that trust, my trust, and their duty to this council. It was shameful.

I want to be very clear. When I extend the hand of collaboration across this chamber, I hope it will be welcomed and respected.

Excluding people and ignoring the views of others are not my style or my values. Not at all. I didn't enter politics to behave like that. I want to, and will, involve as many people in our work as I can, but I expect honourable actions in return.

I want us together to make some big strides for the greater good of Suffolk.

Now is the time to take those strides as we look forward.

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, published two weeks ago, made it very clear that Suffolk County Council is a good authority, it's well-run with visible leadership and dedicated staff and members working closely with partners to improve the lives of Suffolk residents.

I express my sincere thanks to our staff for everything they do to make Suffolk what it is. I understand it's difficult. Our resources are often too scarce, demand is ever increasing and the environment in which you are working is constantly changing.

Whether it's the children you protect from harm, the frail elderly people you look after or the potholes you fix, I speak on behalf of my Cabinet team and the Conservative group and say thanks you. Every day we see the impact you make and the lives you improve, and we are grateful.

Mr Chairman. No authority can stand still. We must, and will, continue to take big strides forward.

Mental health services in Suffolk are not at the standard that we expect, or people deserve. Gangs, drugs and knife crime remain a threat to our communities. Services and support for people with special educational needs and disabilities must improve - and swiftly.

Together with our staff we are improving our services in Suffolk. We are fixing our roads; we are striving to protect Suffolk's natural environment; we are helping increasing numbers of children needing protection and adults needing care, but we know we need to do much more in all these areas. We know our care leavers need more support, we know that our education standards and outcomes for young people must continue to improve. We must ensure the proposed advantages of the Sizewell C project significantly outweigh the disadvantages for Suffolk and the residents of East Suffolk are heard as the many energy projects come forward.

These are all day to day activities we are tackling with partners, staff, residents and service users. My administration will maintain our focus on these areas, so Suffolk continues to grow stronger and become more prosperous.

I want Suffolk County Council to look beyond the day to day and explore new ideas and develop a new vision for our county.

We know it is not the Suffolk way to boast or brag about achievements, but we also know it is the Suffolk way to declare we are Suffolk and proud.

I want us to develop and deliver a vision of Suffolk of which we can all be proud.

Today, I am outlining five new priorities for my administration.

Housing for Suffolk

The first is housing. The chronic shortage of housing, in Suffolk and throughout the country, is well-known. What is less well-known is that Suffolk County Council is the third largest landowner in Suffolk. Much of that land is put to good use, as county farms, operational depots and office accommodation.

There is scope to convert some of our land into much needed housing. And that would present an opportunity to generate income for the county council to reinvest in vital public services.

My administration will develop proposals to make best use of our significant land asset, with a focus on delivering the kind of homes Suffolk needs. This will include the creation of a new Housing Board, to drive our ambition forward.

I am clear: district and borough councils are responsible for housing. I recognise their hard work to ensure enough homes are built in the right locations and with the right community facilities and services to support them.

We are not seeking to impede their work. We are seeking to make best use of the land that we, as Suffolk County Council, own for the benefit of Suffolk. I see our vision as complementing and supporting the good work of our partners.

Suffolk's Future

I have already commended to you the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge report, including its well-considered recommendations.

One recommendation is that we, with our partners, develop a long-term strategic vision for Suffolk, ambitions that unite our work and make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

I will act on this recommendation.

What do we want Suffolk to be like in 30 years? Where should our communities be? How should we move around the county? How should older residents be cared for? What kind of future do we want for our children? And as important: How will we pay for it?

These are big questions on which no individual person or organisation holds a monopoly of wisdom. No one can lay claim to having all the answers. Indeed, arriving at the answers and achieving the outcomes requires teamwork. I believe that the people of Suffolk deserve unity of purpose.

We will not own it, or 'approve' it. This will be Suffolk's long-term vision, drawing on the views of residents from all backgrounds, public sector organisations, the business community, charitable and voluntary sectors.

If we're going to create a big vision, Suffolk first needs a big conversation. We will put resources into making this happen, in the most and productive way possible.

For Suffolk to grow stronger, we must all pull in the same direction. Together we can achieve so much more.

Inclusive Growth

Now my father built his own business, and through it supported our family. As the business grew this helped my parents feel more secure.

I want to see Suffolk grow too and with it our communities can flourish.

These are the fundamental principles that sit below our inclusive growth priority. I want these principles to be better understood - by us, our partners and Suffolk people. Only then can we truly unite around a common understanding and a common goal, and make real, long-term progress.

We are planning a significant review of our approach to inclusive growth, including a workshop for partners this autumn.

As one of our policy priorities, we need to ensure we have sufficient resources to translate our ambitions into reality. Therefore, I have instructed officers to conduct a review to ensure we can deliver our inclusive growth programme.

Suffolk's environment

Earlier this year, we voted in this chamber to declare a climate emergency.

This was a progressive step forward. For me, the need to sustain our environment is greater now than ever.

We pledged to make this council's carbon emissions neutral by 2030 and to work with our partners to deliver the Government's 25-year environmental plan.

This is not a surprising decision, given our authority's positive track record on reducing energy consumption, carbon emissions and waste.

We have work to do. Shortly we will launch a new cross-party policy development panel and I look forward to the panel's recommendations.

We can act now.

My administration is refreshing Suffolk's Greenest County programme and I look forward to the relaunch with renewed vigour, profile and commitment later this year.

Commercial approach to doing business

And now my fifth priority is on our commercial approach to doing business. Suffolk County Council has earned a strong reputation for working commercially.

Whether that is our staff managing contracts and building relationships with partners, or the Suffolk Group Holdings companies winning business all over the UK and returning a dividend to the county council.

There is more to do.

We will continue to be innovative and creative in how we deliver services, but will be more ambitious.

My administration will bring together our commercial activity and produce a comprehensive Commercial Strategy Statement, setting out our plans and aspirations for the coming years and how we will deliver them.

Appointments

As part of my executive statement, I wish to confirm the reappointment of my Cabinet Members and Deputy Cabinet Members in the same roles. Together we have worked hard during the last year to put Suffolk County Council on a strong financial and strategic footing. I would like to pay tribute to their work and thank them, for all they do. I would also like to thank Cllr Evans who has been an excellent Deputy Leader and I must say I can always count on you to offer support and importantly to be an honest sounding board.

As confirmed last year, I have the constitutional ability to appoint an additional Cabinet Member. I am therefore announcing that Councillor Nick Gowrley is joining my team as Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Housing. Nick's fantastic and relevant experience in housing, will be invaluable.

I conclude with my message to you, and to the people of Suffolk.

My message is this.

No matter how difficult the decision, how strenuous the challenge, my administration will not shy away from it nor will it fail to involve people.

We will be bold.

We must have the humility to recognise that we don't have all the answers, but can find them by working productively with others.

I recognise that Brexit means we are living in unprecedented political times, with great social change and uncertainty, but also there is opportunity. No one should underestimate the impact of this wider context on our county. Our role, all of us in this chamber, is to ensure Suffolk makes the most of these opportunities, for the benefit of our residents. We will continue to work with our MPs to lobby for more funding and support for Suffolk.

Progress will not be achieved by selfishly following our own interests. Progress will be achieved by working together, by putting Suffolk and its people, first.

That's what inspires and motivates me, that's why I am a councillor and that's why I enjoy making a difference every day.

We must be ambitious for Suffolk. We must strive to make our County proud of all we achieve.

I'm calling on you all to play your part.

That work starts now.

ENDS

Check against delivery