

District Councillor Report 2020/21

This report is one of the strangest reports I have written in 38 years of being a Councillor and that is apart from the Covid 19.

Lock down has changed everyone's lives and the way everyone operates at the West Suffolk Council. Over 20 years ago I heard an Officer say "it would be so much easier if we didn't have to deal with Councillors". I laughed at the time.

I must admit without being able to go in and talk things through with Officers has made life difficult for me as a Councillor and countless emails is not the answer neither is just phone calls.

Business still has to be done and it probably is quicker without Councillor interference :-)

That said the "Home But Not Alone" has been a great initiative and one that has been my get out of gaol free card as this service has been a real benefit to me as a centre for solving residents problems.

Staff/Officers from the Families and Communities Team have done a great job in getting real co-ordination between services of Suffolk County Council, West Council and Health Services. If nothing else this year has taught us the benefit of working together, I just hope the idea of team working is something that can be built on.

I usually start with Finance.

The bottom line is that Covid had a 20% deficit effect on finances according to calculations on the West Suffolk Council over the last 12 months.

That said the West Suffolk Council has still managed to produce a balanced budget. I have spoken before about the equalisation of West Suffolk Council Tax between Forest Heath and the old St Edmundsbury Borough Council.

There was the usual concern by some of the previous Forest Heath Councillors on the rate of increase of West Suffolk Council as shown below.

Forest Heath predecessor area:

	2020/21	2021/22	Increase
West Suffolk Council	£163.98	£175.59	7.1%

St. Edmundsbury predecessor

	2020/21	2021/22	Increase
West Suffolk Council	£183.78	£185.40	0.9%

I believe the increase is justified. There has been extra investment in the old Forest Heath area car parks for example which really needed improvement.

You will be aware that work has started on the New Local Plan. There will be a working party set up to go through the various consultations. I have put my name forward to be on this Working Party although apparently there is a qualifying criteria which will be cross party and account for North, South, East, West, Rural and Town. I was previously on the Rural Task Force and tried to make sure low cost housing for local people was an agenda item and highlighted the shortage as per Council Tax Banding. I am not confident that I will qualify as a member which will disappoint me as I made when I was elected 2 years ago to fight for housing to suit resident's needs.

Most of you will be aware that we moved out of our house last year, that has fun. I couldn't believe how difficult it was to use the West Suffolk Council website. It is not until I tried using the Website as the only way to communicate with the West Suffolk Council that I realised the difficulty my residents were having.

I took this to Overview and Scrutiny Committee this was accepted and a working party has been set up, for the record I am on that Working Party. Hopefully this Working Party will deliver an improvement to the Website.

This has been a very difficult year for me, I have tried to keep in touch but like most Councillors I have felt detached. That is because I have not had the benefit of going into West Suffolk House talking through proposals or even better debate.

I hope next year I can sound more positive.

Questions:-

Terry Clements

3rd May 2021