

West Suffolk Council – Families and Communities Approach



Since 2013, West Suffolk Council has been developing an innovative approach to supporting those who live, work and learn in West Suffolk, through our Families and Communities Portfolio and team. This briefing summarises why we've done this, what our approach looks like, what the next steps are and what we are planning for the future.

Our belief is that strong families and communities are the bedrock of West Suffolk. Where they are thriving, we see successful places that are economically buoyant, healthy and cohesive. But where they are struggling, we see a range of issues and challenges emerging that prevent people from achieving their goals.

Councils have always endeavoured to bring about improvements in local communities to address the issues and challenges they face. But in the past, some of these interventions have been counterproductive or short lived. This is either because they have addressed the symptoms and not the cause of the challenges, or because they have acted on what *they* thought was important to communities. Even where there has been some positive impact, the unintended consequence has been an increased dependence on the public sector, reinforcing its position and role as the one to intervene and solve problems.

For this reason, West Suffolk Council launched its first Families and Communities strategy in 2013, with the aim of supporting families and strengthening communities. The aim was simple, to 'work with the grain' of people – strengthening families and communities to enable them to become more resilient and more able to help themselves. These are usually the things they have identified themselves in their own communities, the early warning signs that things are not right and need some action. In effect, we changed the emphasis of the council's role to helping build 'fences' at the tops of cliffs (preventative action), rather than simply and directly to provide services or 'ambulances' at the bottom of the cliff when things have already gone wrong (crisis responses).

Moving to a Families and Communities approach has not been easy, especially coming at a time of financial cutbacks in local government and public services. By definition, working to build resilience is not highly visible and doesn't often achieve instant and obvious results and it can look like the councils are 'not doing enough' to address presenting issues. It might have been easier to step back completely and hand responsibility for addressing challenges over to statutory services. Or the council could have reverted to a more traditional, more visible, interventionist approach. But we have stuck to our Families and Communities approach on the basis that it is the right thing to do for our residents, as well as being the most cost-effective approach in the longer term, by reducing demand for public services and as a result, better value for the taxpayer.

The story so far

This approach has been received positively by members of the public, local groups and councillors alike. Residents get to work on the problems they see, they see the councils' efforts are now aligned with their own and they can use us for the things they need help on and cannot manage themselves.

The [case studies](#) on our Families and Communities Approach webpage illustrate the wide-ranging work that has been done so far by West Suffolk Council to support families, communities and local groups/organisations to address the challenges they have identified and to help them achieve their goals.

How we work

Our work with Families and Communities is based on some core principles, which together make up our distinctive approach.

Everything we do is framed by these principles. We have given them a name, the 'West Suffolk Way'. When working with individuals, families or communities and developing new initiatives, we use the five key elements of the West Suffolk Way to understand and assess where they are, who they are, how they are connected, what they can do and where they want to be. This framework ensures all our efforts are aligned; the West Suffolk Way is described on our Families and Communities webpage.

Some of the characteristics of this way of working are:

- **Community-led working.** A key starting point for providing support to a local area is the community's goals and ambitions. We listen to what communities value and aspire to in order to tailor our support in the best way possible. Key to this is the role of community connectors, who are the go-to people within communities who bring about change and advocate on their behalf.
- **Strong role for councillors.** Local councillors are a vital part of helping communities achieve their goals. Depending on the councillor and the local circumstances, they may take on a variety of roles in response to their community, its characteristics, strengths and needs. Some of these roles are well described by the University of Birmingham in their [21st Century Councillor report](#), including steward of place, advocate, buffer, sensemaker, catalyst, entrepreneur and orchestrator.
- **A whole-of-council approach.** We are working to embed this Families and Communities approach in everything we do, ranging from how we manage the planning process, to preventing homelessness and enabling inclusive growth. This is key to the future, moving beyond strategy to embedding this as a way of doing local government.
- **The growing engagement of partners in this way of working.** Many of the issues that we are supporting communities to address are not within the remit of West Suffolk Council. We are therefore ambitious in our approach to partnership working both within our multi-disciplinary and multi-agency Families and Communities Team and more widely. Partners are also recognising the value of what has been started and are actively seeking out our involvement to help them.
- **Evaluating outcomes.** Measuring the outcomes of the council's work with families and communities is inherently challenging as the effects may not be seen for several years, and specific causal links can rarely be made, given the complexity of the issues involved. However, we have developed an [approach to](#)

[evaluation](#) that enables communities to give their view on the scale of the change they have experienced as a result of a project or initiative, and what contribution the council made to that change.

In addition we have seen the importance of equipping councillors and officers with effective tools.

- Councillors are supported with a simple generic plan of working and supported by a Families and Communities Officer.
- [These Families and Communities officers](#) have both a place focus (covering a locality, where they have local knowledge and connections) and a specialism used to help enable change in communities
- Communities can access a total of over £550,000 in annual funding from Councillor Locality Budgets and the West Suffolk Community Chest as well as from a wide range of regional and national funding opportunities

Looking to the future

Our West Suffolk Strategic Framework 2018-2020 sets out our three strategic priorities, the second of which is 'Resilient families and communities that are healthy and active'. In particular, we have committed to the following areas of focus:

- foster supportive networks to improve and sustain the lives of individuals, families and communities
- use our community, leisure, open space and heritage assets to support wellbeing and education
- work with and influence partners including the voluntary sector in our shared endeavor of improving the health, wellbeing and safety of families and communities.

A more detailed list of the [specific actions](#) we will take is included on our Families and Communities Approach webpage.

West Suffolk Families and Communities Team
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