

# The Families and Communities Approach: Building Thriving Communities

## 1. Introduction

West Suffolk is fortunate to enjoy thriving communities with many fantastic community assets in the form of people, organisations, businesses, green spaces and venues. West Suffolk Council is committed to continue being part of the capacity building network for communities, supporting them to thrive by listening to them and working with them on the things they are committed to, and deem important, rather than fixing problems on a short-term basis. We are aware of the challenges communities have faced in recent years and are committed to learning the lessons and moving forward to make the most of the opportunities available in West Suffolk.

We take an 'Asset Based Community Development' (**ABCD**) approach, **with** people rather than **for** them – thriving communities support social connection and increase agency, so they are better equipped to help themselves. Areas of focus are usually the things identified in by communities which build on their strengths or are the early warning signs that things are not right and need action.

Asset-Based Community Development (or ABCD for short) is all about acknowledging a community's skills and resources and encouraging people to recognise what they can offer. It isn't primarily about looking for problems to solve but finding opportunities to develop, not about directing what goes on locally but nurturing development from within.

## 2. How we work

We understand that every community is unique and has strengths and assets ready to be built on, arising from different histories, physical environments, or the presence of groups of residents who share interests or protected characteristics. There is therefore no single right way to work with a community and different communities and places have changing dynamics and relationships. We will continue to base what we do on some core principles, which together make up our distinctive approach:

- **Community-led working.** A key starting point for building relationships in a local area is to explore the community's goals and ambitions. We listen to what communities value and aspire to in order to tailor our involvement in the best way possible. Key to this are the **community connectors**, the go-to people within communities who bring about change, and advocate on their behalf.
- **Strong role for councillors.** The role of the local councillor is vital in supporting communities to achieve their goals. They may take on a variety of roles in response to the community, its characteristics, its strengths and needs. Some of these roles are well described by the University of Birmingham in their [21st Century Public Servant](#) report, including steward of place, advocate, buffer, sense maker, catalyst and entrepreneur.
- **A whole-of-council approach.** We embed our thriving communities approach in everything we do, ranging from how we manage the planning process, to preventing homelessness, enabling inclusive growth and supporting access to employment as well as enjoyment in our open spaces and leisure facilities. The

Family and Communities approach furthers our other strategic priorities seeking to protect and improve the social and physical environment for all.

- **Engagement of partners in this way of working.** Many of the areas of focus that are identified by communities to address are not within the remit of West Suffolk Council. We are therefore ambitious in our approach to partnership working, within our multi-disciplinary organisation and across wider networks. Partners recognise our knowledge of place and our communities' track record of achievement. Through our work, we influence decisions, achieve outcomes and provide partners with a wide range of networks and knowledge.
- **Insight and evidence led.** We triangulate and balance information to ensure we are evidence-led, through listening to community connectors and place leaders and networks. Balancing what the data tells us with 'what works theories' and importantly with insight from our communities' real-time, lived experience, we use our resources and tools to give the biggest impact and reach for our communities.

Measuring the impact of this is inherently challenging (if not impossible) as the effects may not be seen for several years. However, the ABCD approach paid dividends during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when the council was able to respond quickly alongside a network of existing and new community groups as opposed to having to mobilise council staff in isolation.

### 3. The tools

The most valued asset we have is people – our West Suffolk residents and their networks; Councillors, officers and those that make up our diverse communities. In addition we have seen the importance of equipping councillors and officers with effective tools.

- **Councillors** have access to a tool kit and a simple generic plan of working and are supported by a Families and Communities Officer and a locality budget (More below). Our Ward Councillors play a vital role in reaching and connecting people, developing agency and advocating for their areas and their residents.
- **Families and Communities officers** have both a place focus (covering a locality, where they have local knowledge and connections and providing support for their ward councillors) and a specialism used to help enable change in communities. At both a place and specialist level the Families and Communities Officers have a skill and remit to develop networks and connect people, organisations and groups responding to what they hear and learn. The team look at stretching the benefits of projects and adding value by connecting people and developing strategies and networks. This can be by doing option appraisals, finding 'the energy', business planning, forging partnerships and connections, supporting strategy development, and sometimes by "getting out of the way".
- For projects that need funding a **£645,953 package of financial support is available** to support the councillors, and local groups through the [West Suffolk Thriving Communities funding](#). As well as a wide range of regional and national funding opportunities which can be accessed by [Funding 4 Suffolk idoxopen4community.co.uk](#) or through discussions with the Families and Communities team.

- **Our multi-disciplinary team of Council staff** Our investment into our communities does not stop at the Families and Communities Team but is across the whole council's staffing and budgets. We take a similar approach in everything we do.

## 4. Our priorities

While much of our work is driven by the aspirations of individual communities, our 2024-2028 strategic priorities set out the specific areas of focus for our investment in communities. Across the council services and through our leadership, our local connections, our commissioning role, our investment, and our assets, we will continue to work with communities from 2024-28 to:

- work alongside community and voluntary groups to build their capacity and access funding and support
- develop opportunities for residents to participate in health and wellbeing activities through community initiatives
- develop and improve access to a programme of activities and advice for residents facing challenges as a result of the cost-of-living crisis
- develop a network of youth engagement opportunities, activities and support across the district
- build on cross-Suffolk work to ensure residents have access to food
- improve community safety, including working in partnership to tackle antisocial behaviour, County Lines and criminal exploitation
- review the role of different public and voluntary sector organisations in supporting local places and communities, to ensure services are delivered at the most appropriate level.