

East Suffolk Council Annual Parish Report 2024

Following District Council elections in May 2023, the Green, Liberal Democratic and Independent Members formed the GLI group to become the new Administration at East Suffolk Council, and Tom Daly, Sarah Whitelock and I, Katie Graham were very proud to be your elected ward representatives.

It's been a whirlwind first year, with many elected members first time councillors, and many including myself, suddenly finding themselves with portfolio roles, on planning committees and chairs of task groups. Tom Daly is our new cabinet member for Energy and Climate Change, Sarah Whitelock is the member for Communities, Leisure, Culture and Tourism and I am her deputy.

Throughout this year the energy and spirit of collaboration in our group has been a driving force for good. Our leader Caroline Topping has from the first made transparency, accessibility and cooperation across our multi-coloured council a key tone of her leadership, and our brilliant chair of the council Anthony Speca – a politics lecturer by profession - has conducted our Full Council meetings with impeccable fairness and efficiency. It was notable at our recent Full Council that he was unanimously re-elected as chair by all parties.

What does this new council stand for and how have we spent our first year? We have condensed our principles into four key areas, the pillars of our strategy which we have called, Our Direction. These are 1. Environmental Impact, at the heart of all we do. 2. Sustainable housing 3. Tackling Inequalities and 4. Thriving Economy

Here are some examples of ways in which we have followed this new direction so far.

On our **environmental impact**, we are working closely with officers to bring our carbon emissions as an organisation to net zero by 2030, a large part of this remains the decarbonisation of our leisure centres. Look out on our website next month for our updated Climate and Biodiversity Action Plan, which lays this all out in over 60 pages.

On water, we are working with Essex and Suffolk Water as well as the charity Waterwise to help promote water efficiency across our district. As the most water-stressed county in the country – not that you would think it of late – and with hotter summers forecast, we need to help our providers address water leaks across our infrastructure as well as inefficiencies in our households and businesses.

Storm Babet was a wake up call for us all. Too many homes had to wait too long for relief payments to reach them. To prepare for future flood and climate change events, we have

created a Resilience Fund as part of our budget. This means that emergency funds can be allocated to our residents immediately, while we wait for payments from higher up the chain to be released to East Suffolk Council.

In April we declared an Ecological and Biodiversity emergency at Full Council, to project the call for urgency on this issue, in parallel with our already declared climate emergency. The previous administration launched an important campaign to address biodiversity loss in our district – Pardon the Weeds We're Feeding the Bees. We are taking this further still as we establish relationships with schools and businesses to participate in the scheme, educating the public as part of our strategy. We're conscious that wild spaces are not immediately embraced by all, and that communications and management around this are important. This is a key focus for us, as we rebrand the scheme to reflect the more positive ambition of this intervention: Nature at Work .

The new central government requirement for developers to leave behind a biodiversity net gain of 10% was a step in the right direction, but as ever, not going far enough. In consultation with Suffolk Wildlife Trust we are exploring mechanisms to push for a significantly higher net gain from our developers. We have made it clear to our planners that we look most favourably on developments that aim for 20% net gain and we hold applicants to account when their projects come to committee.

Sustainable Housing

We are facing a national housing crisis, but under the current National Planning Policy Framework and existing Local Plans, too much of what comes our way is profit driven, in favour of the developers, built to a low environmental standard yet often very difficult to refuse under the existing planning system.

Our Local Plan is due for review in 2025 and we are preparing our new sustainable construction policy that will set out specific targets above and beyond the bare minimum of building regulations, joining a growing network of Local Authorities that are setting higher standards. These will include embodied carbon targets and a requirement for a higher Biodiversity Net Gain, and will aim to join up with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy to enable green corridors becoming a part of green infrastructure for new developments.

As the new Local Plan will not be implemented before 2029, we're also exploring any opportunity for fast tracking our climate policies by way of single issue and partial reviews as well as interim measures that will aid in the transition once these policies are adopted in the Plan. One such interim measure is to build some of our own housing stock to these exacting standards, to prove deliverability. We'll do this by exploring Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) and championing bio-based systems that support local agriculture, soil condition and improved biodiversity. We're looking at rural exception sites for these projects, which can be used to help address the lack of quality temporary accommodation and homelessness.

In the meantime, we now have an arms-length company East Suffolk Property Limited to enable us to buy houses for temporary accommodation as well as general use. East Suffolk Lettings now let private sector housing affordably and we are undertaking digitalisation of our mobile repairs service for greater efficiency and monitoring.

We also had a recent meeting with the new managing director from Newtide Homes, formerly Flagship, who provide a large proportion of our homes for social rent. It was a constructive meeting with councillors in attendance from across the district to press for progress on a history of poor repairs, damp and mould, and lack of available housing. We were pleased at the transparency and tone of the discussions with the new director and will be continuing to hold Newtide to account.

Tackling Inequalities. As the largest district council in the country, our broad geographical area exposes some stark inequalities with a difference of ten years in life expectancy from our most deprived ward to our most affluent. Not all of this deprivation is always visible, but exists in every one of our parishes, particularly our most rural communities.

We have a very active Communities Team of 25 officers who work closely with existing networks and providers such as Community Action Suffolk, Citizens Advice and the Suffolk Community Foundation. Our East Suffolk Ease the Squeeze campaign will continue this Autumn with a range of 14 programmes to support our residents during a continuing Cost of Living Crisis. One particular ambition of this administration is to make our community help services more accessible and more visible, and as such we are in the process of establishing a series of Community Hubs across our towns, from which our own financial inclusion team and outreach officers can work directly within the community. We have also partnered up with the Integrated Care Board to host Be Well Buses that travel throughout our district, offering advice on physical and mental health conditions, and signposting our residents to services.

Food poverty and food waste are a twin crisis that does not belong in the 21st century of a first world nation. We have recently recruited a Food Network Coordinator, to focus on opening up food supply pathways and supporting the establishment of Community Pantries and other food-related projects, creating a whole system approach to helping residents access good quality, lower cost food.

During the school holidays, East Suffolk Council officers put together a brilliant programme of events for the Holiday Activity Fund - this is a fully funded day or days of catered events targeted at those children who qualify for Free School Meals. This Easter Holiday we provided 3931 places – up on 800 from the previous year. 383 of these were in the Aldeburgh in Leiston ward. Sarah and I visited several of these activity days and were very impressed with the programmed events – photography classes, high calibre sports activities and cooking classes outdoors to name just a few.

Every councillor at East Suffolk Council has a small budget for the year to allocate to initiatives within their communities. By making new connections with schools in our district such as at the Alde Valley Academy, Tom and Sarah and I were pleased to give a significant share of our budget to fund a free breakfast club to cater for the many children in receipt of Free School Meals who are coming to school hungry. We decided collectively, to make this a whole school offer, so as not to discriminate between those who needed it and those who don't. We are looking at ways to make this much needed support more permanent.

Finally, across our 8 East Suffolk Council Community Partnerships, a persistent theme is the level of poor mental health in our district. As such we have teamed up with Suffolk Mind to produce 10,000 booklets called Well Minds East Suffolk to support our residents, offering solutions to common mental health problems as well as signposting for more serious mental health issues. Residents in this ward should all receive a leaflet through their door directing them to a digital copy of this booklet, or a library or other location where they can collect a physical copy. We will soon also be launching our Suffolk Mind Mental Health toolkit training for interested groups to help identify mental health issues in their community.

A Thriving Economy. When formulating our strategy Our Direction, we were careful to use the headline of a Thriving Economy, rather than purely a Growing Economy. In Lowestoft, the centre of most deprivation in our district, we continue to implement several large-scale regeneration projects, funded in large part by the Government's Towns Fund. Lowestoft's economy is set to expand as it plays host to a burgeoning renewables industry, but a thriving economy goes beyond this. We are taking a place-based approach to enhance Lowestoft's reputation as an attractive seaside destination and town to live in, investing in an ambitious new cultural quarter around the Marina Theatre, refurbishing and repurposing the Victorian Post Office building into a Creative Hub and Arts Space, and engaging a Heritage Action Zone to bring shop fronts in the old high street back to their former glory. We are proud to support the hugely successful free-to-the-public midsummer First Light Festival in all their activities, which has helped to bring many new visitors to the town for the first time and to put Lowestoft on the map.

In Felixstowe also, we continue with tourism regeneration development on the sea front and were proud to host the Tour of Britain last summer.

These two towns at the ends of our district are the most populous, and much of their regeneration has been possible due to the central government Towns Fund. However Tom, Sarah and I are acutely aware of the need to address many of these same issues within our ward, in Leiston in particular. Under the previous administration Leiston Town Council and the Community Land Trust engaged East Suffolk to design a masterplan vision for their

town, and Sarah and I sit on the Place Board for this, where we are pushing to get things moving. The first stage of this will be improved shop fronts, and the first phase of a Market Square.

Finally, on energy: this year has been about changing the approach of the council from one of neutral acceptance of the impacts of the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (decided by central government) to one of challenge, engagement and even opposition. This has included bringing campaign groups, Parish and Town Councils into the conversation and being open and explicit about discharge requirements and the statutory role of our council in the roll out of Sizewell C build operations and the onshore element of offshore wind generators. As well as pushing for strategy, offshore coordination and brown field landfall at every opportunity.

This approach will be consolidated into a twelve-member councillor working group beginning in the new municipal year and a new senior officer position of Head of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPS). This will allow Tom Daly, cabinet member for Energy and Climate Change, to spend some of his time focussing on Community Energy around the district. Encouraging and enabling communities to become more energy independent thereby reducing carbon footprints as well as lowering energy bills. Any communities interested in this approach should contact Tom for more information.

There is more to tell – we have set up a Working Group to turn our East Suffolk Cycling and Walking Strategy into reality, with our pilot scheme underway for Benhall, connecting it with neighbouring Saxmundham. We are taking a bold line against unsustainable investment in our district – such as discouraging tenancies in our new power park in Lowestoft from energy firms still prioritising oil and gas development, and lowering business rates for renewable industries. We are extending the pilot scheme for the Katch scheme and exploring new routes that cater to customer demand.

I can assure you that we are all deeply committed and honoured to serve our very special district and its residents.