



# Suffolk councillors

People, places and perspectives



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With thanks to Simon Lee Photography and Suffolk County Council Communications

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# Foreword

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**Mari Davis and Bridget Harris**  
Local Government Leadership Advisers

We often hear that politicians only care about getting people to vote for them, as if this is an end in itself. “They’re all in it for themselves” is the accusation that gets made, not helped by scandals over expenses, leaflets and electoral frauds.

So what are politicians really in it for? After our interviews and shadowing we are left with an overwhelming impression from Suffolk County councillors. They really, really care about people. They empathise with people. They spend their time talking and listening to people. They want to help people. They want people to help themselves. That’s why they became councillors in the first place.

This research set out to find out how Suffolk’s locally elected councillors might be an integral part of the County Council’s re-design of service delivery. We started with the question – “what can councillors do that officers cannot?”

Our approach was independent and did not take a view either way about the New Strategic Direction (NSD). Our interest was in you as councillors – your motivations and ideas about what will work and what needs to be improved. We have written this report as a series of quotes as we feel this tells your story rather than ours. We’d like to extend our sincere and warm thanks to everyone who gave up the time to talk to us – we have hugely enjoyed the experience.



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# Introduction

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**Councillor Colin Spence**, Chairman, Councillor Learning and Development Reference Group

Sudbury East and Waldingfield, Suffolk County Council

I found the discussions at the councillor workshops held over the summer fascinating. Well over half of you attended. Thank you. We talked about what we do as councillors, what we enjoy, what we find hard and what we want the council to do next. All your ideas are a vital part of implementing the profound changes ahead of us. Whatever challenges the New Strategic Direction (NSD) throws up, it is clear to me that as councillors, we are more than capable of rising to them.

We are a member led authority and all councillors have a role in making the NSD work at a local level. I can only emphasise and repeat that democracy is at the heart of everything we – the Council – do and must stay there.

Councillors have a role beyond their division – a role that involves a significant contribution to the strategic leadership of Suffolk. We have to ask what happens when councillors come to Endeavour House and what the demarcation and tensions are between the different roles. We need very many skills to do our roles well now and in the future. To be approachable, to have a high profile in our community; knowledge of

what is happening locally and also current thinking on broad issues; honesty to be able to tell people how it is and perhaps most importantly good judgement is knowing when a battle is worth fighting and where and when you need to influence others.

As Chairman of both the NSD Democracy and Community Capacity joint working groups I accepted the support offered by Local Government Leadership to listen to the day to day experiences of a cross section of Suffolk councillors – different parties, different places. This research report and accompanying audio slideshows are the result of their research. I would like to acknowledge the financial support and expertise that Local Government Leadership have provided and I would like to thank you for your time and enthusiasm in getting involved.

The message is refreshing – it confirms we have some fantastic, hard working and dedicated councillors. It concludes that as the voice for your division, you will be the lynch pin in making the NSD meaningful and real in your local communities. It has reminded me that there will be multiple perspectives on democracy and service delivery in Suffolk. There is no single right answer.

This work is just the start – I hope it will stimulate discussion, enthusiasm and ideas about how to support and strengthen the role of being a 21st century councillor in Suffolk.

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# Headline messages

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## Celebrate your success

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**1** The Suffolk councillors involved in this research are very committed to the people, communities and places they were elected to represent. They are one of Suffolk's greatest assets.

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**2** People in the villages, towns and city are already very active in supporting each other and running clubs, societies and community groups. That's what makes Suffolk such a great place to live.

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**3** The professionalism and skills of officers are recognised and many make positive contributions in their communities.

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## What might be different going forward

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**4** Rural, urban and city communities are different. All communities are different. Different people, different needs, different approaches.

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**5** The anticipated community role of councillors will be different and so development and learning will be important. Councillors need to lead this.

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**6** Officers are willing but the systems are not able. Change the steps, sort problems with less bureaucracy and bring officers into the places.

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**7** Local democracy is crucial. Councillors are at the heart of the democratic process – which raises lots of questions about how much might be devolved to a local level.

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## Next steps

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**8** Actions speak louder than words. The thinking and planning has been very well done and worthwhile. This is an exciting opportunity so **now** is the time to try some things out and learn by doing.

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**9** Cast the net wider. Involve anyone and everyone now and listen and learn from their ideas.

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# Celebrating Suffolk's success

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There is no shortage of success stories in Suffolk. Councillors, communities and officers have all worked together to create this success. Celebrate and be proud of what you have achieved together and use this as the base to build your future.

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## 1 Celebrate, respect and value Suffolk's excellent councillors

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The Suffolk councillors we met are very committed to the people, communities and places they were elected to represent. They are one of Suffolk's greatest assets. There is every reason to think that the other councillors in Suffolk are just as able. They have a passion for and know the people and places they represent. Everyone knows who they are, so walking down the street can take some time! Above all they care very deeply about people and show genuine kindness in the support they offer to those in greatest need. This is why most of them became councillors.



"I can honestly say I get a great deal of pleasure out of what I do as a councillor. In my total of 74 years as a parish, district and county councillor I have always tried to help as many residents as possible to sort out their problems and to improve their lives. It's all about knowing and being known in your community – if you do a proper job people get to know who you are."

**Bill Bishop**, Brandon, Conservative



“I became a councillor so that common sense and the voice of reason could be heard. I wanted to make a difference and improve things for people.”

**Bill Mountford**, Lowestoft South, UKIP

“You have to have a passion about where you live to do this work. I have lived in Felixstowe all my life. I want to build capacity and bring people into the area. Part of this is putting my energy behind developing an internal bus system connecting the town, the port and the beach. If Felixstowe is successful as a place, people will enjoy where they live.”

**Nick Barber**, Felixstowe Coastal, Conservative

“As a relatively new councillor it’s been important to get to know all parts of my community so that I can represent everyone not just the area I live in. Everyone is different and it’s people and what I can do to make a difference for them that matters most to me”

**Carol Debman**, Gainsborough, Conservative

The purpose of this work was not to assess the political working of the County Council. That said, democracy seems to be alive and well! The administration and the opposition parties seem clear of their different roles and differences but have a healthy respect for each other.

“ I would like to give Jeremy a “pat on the back” – asking questions at Cabinet allows opposition Members to contribute to the democratic process.”

**Sandy Martin**, St Johns, Labour Group Leader

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## 2 Community spirit is thriving in Suffolk

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Without exception all councillors are rightly proud, not just of their towns and villages but also of the many ways that their communities are already involved in supporting each other and enjoying life. Many councillors are at the heart of their communities and not afraid to roll their sleeves up and get involved on the football touchlines, painting the scout hut or digging out local ponds. It’s part of what makes community life so buoyant in Suffolk. This is only a small sample of the fantastic examples provided by councillors.

“We have an excellent base to start from in Stowmarket. The recent community pilot project really connected with people and they came out of the woodwork. Priorities were identified, money was found, not just from the project funds but from all sorts of unexpected places and we started to see the things that mattered most to people happening in the town such as toddler clubs setting up, bus shelters being built, resources used in different ways. It’s amazing how you pick up and find the same people doing so

much in the community. We need to collect more examples of what has worked and is working well in Suffolk and celebrate these.”

**Anne Whybrow**, Stowmarket South, Conservative

Active communities, active councillors. They are chairs of local groups, trustees of local charities, school governors, they represent the County at parish council meetings – to name but a few. They are out most nights of the week and when they are not the phone “goes” constantly. But no one was complaining. They see it as a privilege to serve their community.

“The Oulton Broad Community Enterprise has gone from strength to strength and is certainly right to be proud of and celebrate its achievements. We have run all sorts of community events to be enjoyed by the wider community. One such was a “going green

on the green day” where people had fun, local groups such as scouts and guides got involved and agencies gave information and advice on waste and recycling. As the current chair, my role is to steer, give a focus and connect the many efforts being made,”

**Colin Law**, Oulton, Conservative

Locality budgets are fantastic. Everyone told stories about the very real difference a few hundred pounds made to a local project. Direct, simple and very little, if any, bureaucracy.

“Locality budgets are a great way of providing direct support and have helped many projects. Volunteers are doing so many things but it doesn’t happen without money. Knowing about and being able to access other grants and direct people would be very useful for us as councillors.”

**Bill Mountford**, Lowestoft South, UKIP



Many councillors wear at least two hats being District as well as County Councillors. Some districts are also looking to devolve services to parish councils and community groups. It makes sense to have shared conversations and a shared approach to this wherever possible.

“At district level we are making every effort to involve our parishes more. A local voluntary group has just taken over the running of Beccles outdoor swimming pool from Waveney District Council and everyone is delighted all round. The group have taken a great pride in what they have done and rightly so.”

**Mark Bee**, Beccles, Conservative

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### 3 Officers respected for their contribution

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Council frontline workers and managers were seen as an important part of councillors being able to do their job well. They have a professionalism developed over many years and councillors feel able to approach them to sort out problems. It is acknowledged as a positive that public service workers are likely to be involved in their local communities, as they know how to make things happen and their way around the system.



“Although the changes represent a lot of uncertainty for officers and staff many of them have been very helpful and are already having conversations with communities and service users about running services and what it might mean in practice.”

**Jane Storey**, Thedwastre North, Conservative, Deputy Leader

There was an optimism that employees would get together and think about the option of running certain services. Why not? They have the expertise and skills.

“At the moment, we know who to contact when we have a problem. With divestment, there is a danger that we will lose the understanding and knowledge provided by experienced officers. We have those who know every blade of grass on our patch, and we have excellent relations with them. This makes contact so much easier and you know the problems will be addressed.”

**Julia Truelove**, Bosmere, Liberal Democrat

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# Day in the life: the rural perspective

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## Councillor Andrew Stringer, Upper Gipping, Green

Andrew is rooted in his rural village and understands first hand the very human desire to want to stay in the place where you were born – and to work out solutions that fit that community and that model.

The day has started with Andrew in Mid Suffolk District Council, where Andrew has been elected since 2003. He is a member of the Licensing Committee, and unless you are a seasoned observer to these events, much of the agenda points and papers pass without seeming controversy. “It’s pretty dry and dusty” says Andrew, “but if you know how the system works you can help people”.

As a ‘twin hatter’ (member of both the district and county council) Andrew has a valuable perspective on his role, but he is very clear about which he prefers, “There’s a lot of the way a district council works that a county council could learn lessons from – cutting the localities slack to get the job done rather than being rather top town”. Having been elected on a promise of planting as many trees as he got votes (“575 as I recall”). The trees were eventually planted at Carters Meadow in Cotton, a shining example of how a local environmental resource can be self sustaining. He’s ended up extending the initiative to planting over 3,000 trees in the area he represents.

Going out into Andrew’s division it is clear that you could plant considerably more trees if you so wished – the quiet roads that run alongside the farms, meadows and fields cut through true rural abstraction. The nature of the scattered villages is obviously key to the matters that concern Andrew in his day-to-day casework and responsibilities – affordable housing, education, and sustainable local services. He tells the story of James – a young man from Andrew’s own home village. James wanted to stay in the village of Cotton but had been priced out of the local housing market. When they got the plans agreed to build four affordable dwellings in Cotton, James was on the waiting list to benefit. He now runs a local plants and gardening business, employs local villagers, contributing to keeping a vibrant social and economic life going in Cotton, “Everything is interconnected in a rural community” says Andrew.

Andrew was able to show innovate ways local communities have responded to pressures in the past over closing services.

Just after a local post office has been shut down, it cropped up again, in the form of a disused ambulance shed in the car park of the local pub or the community room accessed through the local convenience store. Andrew spent the day showing how these services are re-inventing themselves through determined local activity – but also with his support and involvement. Andrew works with people like Paul Allan “he’s the landlord of the pub, the post master, and parish councillor – and incredibly pivotal person in our community”. While setting up the post office in his carpark, Paul says that as the local councillor, Andrew gave him “a lot of support, particularly practical” in liaising between the various agencies involved to allow the scheme to go ahead.

Rather unexpected things also crop up that Andrew is involved with. He is part of a group

who have championed and taken forward the conversion of the disused corn exchange in the centre of Stowmarket into the John Peel Centre for Creative Arts. It aims to help local creative initiatives, budding musicians and to offer a distinctive ‘alternative’ venue for the town.

But his heart is clearly rooted in the countryside, “If you live in a rural community housing is quite expensive, and you’re then almost forced to live in a town – I’m not from a town, I’m from a village – this is my identity – and it’s all about families” says Andrew, and with that he is off to do his ‘day job’ – “I run my own business, I’m a floor fitter” and on this day he was off to fit a disability-adapted shower floor for an elderly lady in the village of Haughly. “I enjoy this as well” he says, “it definitely keeps me close to the ground – quite literally!”



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# What might be different going forward

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The previous section looked at the successes that Suffolk can celebrate and suggested that the NSD might use these as the basis for moving forward. This section considers the future direction of travel and the areas that councillors thought were serious factors to be taken into consideration, would be a change to a way of working and pose vital questions without answers at this point.

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## 4 What works in one community won't necessarily work in another

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Living in Ipswich is different to living in a coastal town such as Felixstowe – is different to living in a market town such as Stowmarket – is different to living in a small village such as Culmore. Most people choose where they live for that reason. All councillors thought this was important in moving forward and any approach needs to take account of this difference. People in different types of places might want and need different things.

“The town is very different from a rural area, and so, in many ways, is the role of a councillor. In addition to dealing with residents’ problems and local issues which concern them, I spend much of my time working with local and national businesses, seeking opportunities for their involvement in a wide range of activities to benefit the wider community.”

**Judy Terry**, Rushmere, Conservative

“We make the assumption that people in rural areas want or have the same need as people in towns. It might not be the case. Many villages are happy as they are and may not be looking for change.”

**Julia Truelove**, Bosmere, Liberal Democrat

Linked to this, councillors said that one size definitely wouldn't fit all. Vary the approach to the actual place as well as the type of place. Councillors know what will work in their place, they have tried many things already.

"We can't necessarily have a uniform approach to divestment. A mixed model is vital with some services being delivered by community groups or groups of employees or the private sector. What works in one community will not work in another."

**Mark Bee**, Beccles, Conservative

People are more involved in some places than in others. So what's that about?

What stops some people getting involved? Some said busy lives, families, commitments, some said apathy. What would encourage people to get even more involved in their local area? Not sure but many councillors seemed happy to ask people the question.

"I am constantly trying to encourage people to get involved, but the expectation that people **will** get massively more involved in their community is unreasonable. I am less worried about divestment to not for profit local groups but doubt that many local groups will really be willing or able to run the sort of services being talked about."

**Sandy Martin**, St Johns. Labour Group Leader

There was a theme of needing and wanting to learn more about what makes people get involved and share ideas with each other.

Councillors are well placed to have these community conversations. They know their people best of all.

A number said careful thought needs to be given to how well community projects will work if 'professionals' are no longer involved. What is it that keeps a community venture thriving and where do they get their support?

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## 5 How councillors see their current and future roles

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Three distinct roles were identified: a community role; a strategic role; and a political role. Each will require different skills. Councillors are aware of the inherent tensions between the roles and manage this on a daily basis. They thought that the changes suggested by the NSD might place different demands on them. This is a key part of the work of the Democracy Joint Working Group.

"We need to be clear what sort of leadership we need locally and strategically and work out how to balance them. There is a difference in a locality between being a leader or a coordinator. We need to be more than just message takers or apologists for the county council. Locally we should be able to lead as part of the complex structures and in the midst of many relationships. Are we thinking the councillor is to be 'the' leader or a leader in their place?"

The roles for the future will be very different and won't be for everyone. We need to be clear about this when we look for future councillors. Do they have the capacity, time and willingness to do what this aspirational role will undoubtedly involve?"

**Joanna Spicer**, Blackburn, Conservative

## The community role

The community role was seen as having many facets. Some councillors do aspects of the role now; some aspects will be very different; some aspects will only be possible with changes to the wider system. These are some of the ways councillors described the role.

### Solving people's problems

"What I value most is solving problems for individuals especially those who are most vulnerable – not just leaving people on their own with their difficulties."

**Julia Truelove**, Bosmere, Liberal Democrat

### Two-way representation

"My local representation role has two aspects. Representing the community to the Council and the Council to the community. We are elected to be the link between the electorate and the authority. Part of this is being honest and explaining why something is or isn't possible, we must be prepared to relay the bad news as well as the good. Too many councillors only want to be the bearer of glad tidings."

**Colin Law**, Oulton, Conservative

### Matchmaking

"This is all about knowing your patch and your patch knowing you. So our role will be about matchmaking – connecting people and organisations, looking for the best fit so that we achieve the best outcome for each community. Many of us do this already. There may be a reality that at a very local level, some villages will not want to take on more but we still need to listen and connect where we can."

**Jane Storey**, Thedwastre North, Conservative, Deputy Leader

### Listening not telling

"The unique identity of parishes and villages is deep rooted and developed over many generations. We are not there to tell residents what to do but to listen and connect them to what is happening outside their community. This makes reporting a vital piece of the jigsaw."

**Julia Truelove**, Bosmere, Liberal Democrat



### **The hub and spokes**

“It’s got to be the wheel! The spokes go round because of the hub in the middle but the hub doesn’t do everything. We are this hub – there to steer, give focus, direct to the right place, encourage, signpost and above all ignite fires. It’s about giving people passion, civic pride and self worth”

**Anne Whybrow**, Stowmarket South, Conservative

### **Sowing seeds**

“Generally, people don’t like interference in their lives, or being told what to do. It’s always best for ideas to come from people and communities. Our role is to sow the seeds, to encourage people, and support them in delivering their ambitions. It’s great to see things work and the credit going to other people.”

**Judy Terry**, Rushmere, Conservative

### **The many sides of divestment**

“It is likely we will have many roles as we divest services. On the one hand we will be having conversations with communities about what they think they might do more of, what they feel equipped to provide and the support they need going forward. On the other hand, we might be assessing their capability and the sustainability of their plans and prospects for growth. I would want to work with the many groups I represent as their community leader to achieve this agenda.”

**Colin Law**, Oulton, Conservative

## **The strategic role**

“The skills of working strategically are different from those working locally. Councillors need to be feisty, articulate, able to speak at meetings, know the rules and have political nous. It’s not for everyone.”

**Joanna Spicer**, Blackburn, Conservative

## **The political role**

“I have a split role – to represent the interests of the electorate to the authority **and** to represent a political ideology and approach to life. Being truthful and honest about what the council can and can’t do is one thing – but I am not there to defend the council to the electorate.”

**Sandy Martin**, St Johns, Labour Group Leader



## Developing and recruiting 21st century councillors

### Learning by doing

Giving councillors the opportunity to develop and test out their new roles will be important. Early needs were identified as:

- understanding divestment as it might apply to their roles and the basics of running a business
- developing the leadership and advocacy role in communities.

Councillors said they want to do further work to develop the needs and also that some of the needs will apply to officers to.

“Advocacy skills will play a major part in our new roles. When representing communities, be they public, private or voluntary sector, they need to have confidence in our ability to represent them. There is still a lot more to do to tease out the skills we need and look at the best ways to develop them. This may be different for every councillor and we will need some sort of process to assess what we want and need.”

**Colin Law**, Oulton, Conservative

### Training will work best if ...

Serious consideration needs to be given to the sort of training and development that will work best for councillors. This is likely to include learning by doing, learning from each other and learning from other places.

“I very much value the experience of other councillors, many of whom have top level business and industry knowledge, both in the public and private sectors, and think training can often work best if we learn from each other, having round table discussions, sharing experiences and ideas, not being talked at.”

**Judy Terry**, Rushmere, Conservative

### Recruiting 21st century councillors

It needs to be remembered that changes to the role won't just impact on current councillors – it has implications for the type of people political groups recruit in the future and for induction.

“It's getting harder to find suitable people to stand to be a councillor. It can be intimidating when you first join the council as there is so much you need to know. The parameters and what is expected of you needs to be clear. It's easy to grow two heads and forget why you became a councillor in the first place – to put back into your community.”

**Anne Whybrow**, Stowmarket South, Conservative

“We must remember the basics and the importance of good induction for councillors – where to get information from, who the contact points are in your community, what is happening and where. This helps you to do your role as a community councillor better.”

**Carol Debman**, Gainsborough, Conservative

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## 6 Officers are willing but the systems are not able

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Councillors described the energy they expended and the bureaucracy involved in making some local decisions. This was extremely frustrating all round. Officers were seen as being hindered by the systems in place.

The systems need to change. Approaches need to put the person first. Approaches need to listen and respond quickly. Approaches need to be flexible and based on common sense.

### **Change the steps**

“It’s incredibly frustrating having to go backwards and forwards and round the houses to get something fairly simple sorted ... and I have been around long enough to know who to go to. And very often it is vulnerable people who are desperate for something to happen and we are the only ones there to help them. Everything takes too long. What would be really helpful going forward is officers involved in helping to sort out issues at a local level, finding out what matters to us in Brandon. We need to change the steps and drop some of the bureaucracy.”

**Bill Bishop**, Brandon, Conservative

### **Engaging hearts and minds**

“Bring officers out into the “place” so they understand it better. This won’t work unless we change officers understanding of how towns and villages really tick.”

**Joanna Spicer**, Blackburn, Conservative

### **Joined up local working**

“The development of our role in communities is to be welcomed but we need to be aware of the extra pressure it will put on us as councillors. We might need to stop doing some things and focus on others. Local support workers might be a way forward.”

**Nick Barber**, Felixstowe Coastal, Conservative



Joanna Spicer, Peter Sanderson (Chairman of Bardwell Parish Council) and Margaret Wells from Suffolk County Council (SCC) Property Department, meeting in Bardwell. The field they met in is part of SCC County Farms Estate. Joanna had arranged the site meeting to discuss the location of a new affordable housing scheme on the field they are standing in (SCC making the land available) and the future land needs of Bardwell Primary School (in the background). It was also an opportunity to inspect the new pavement constructed last year alongside the field by SCC, the issue of the adjacent ditch as well as the public right of way across the field.

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## 7 Local democracy is crucial

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The Council will look and feel very different in the future. Councillors are at the heart of the democratic process – locally and centrally. It is their reason for being. Otherwise, officers would just do everything.

There are many questions about how far the Council will go in divesting local decision-making and what this might mean for democracy. What sort of decisions might be best made more locally? Who would make these decisions – communities, parishes or districts? Could more money be devolved to a local level?

It is right not to jump to solutions but engaging councillors in the debates going forward is vital. The more information and communication the better – for councillors, officers and communities.

### Local decision-making

“At the moment Cabinet makes decisions on issues across Suffolk and often by councillors who have no connection with and sometimes very little knowledge of, the areas affected by their decisions. Council policy is for ‘local planning’ but decisions are still taken remotely. Procedures must change to actually implement ‘localism’. In the case of local issues, we need to think about more local decision making e.g. where schools are sited? Be very useful to devolve more decision making to the locality. Decisions are

made at the top not by local people.”

**Bill Mountford**, Lowestoft South, UKIP

“We need to consider how Suffolk County divests itself of local problem solving so that local councillors are able and seen to bring about change at a local level. This might mean one pot of money at a locality level with all agencies dipping into it and local link workers to support the process.”

**Colin Law**, Oulton, Conservative



### Engaged councillors

“I really want to be involved and for us to get it right. But to do this as councillors, we have to be fully involved at every stage of the NSD especially in the issues that affect our local area. We need to be able to answer questions and give informed answers.”

**Nick Barber**, Felixstowe Coastal, Conservative

“Talk to us as local councillors and involve us in getting local solutions. We know our communities.”

**Bill Bishop**, Brandon, Conservative

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# Day in the life: the urban mayor

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## Councillor Jane Chambers, St Helen's, Liberal Democrat

Jane works towards reaching out and welcoming new communities and incomers to the Suffolk's main urban centre, sharing the past and future with them.

Although Jane is a party politician – a Liberal Democrat elected to both Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council, this year she was elected by her fellow district councillors to be the Town Mayor for Ipswich – a ceremonial position that cements modern Ipswich into its historic governance arrangements. Meeting in the Mayor's parlour, the walls are covered with pictures, photographs and paintings celebrating Ipswich's past, from a portrait of Lord Nelson (most of his sailors came from Ipswich), a statue of Bobby Robson, to a letter from Mayor Bloomberg thanking the people of Ipswich for their support during the attacks in 9/11. Although Ipswich is a far cry from the urban grit of New York, it certainly challenges the assumption that Suffolk is only a 'rural county'.

After having some tea with some American visitors and in her parlour, Jane takes her Mayoral Chain and ribbons off and heads to her local ward, where there is a meeting of the quarterly Central Forum group. Other Ipswich councillors are there, as are the

police and community representatives and officers from both Ipswich and the county council. "There's a great turn out" Jane says – whose role is to listen and to be available to the residents who want to catch up with her. Later the police officer tells us how working with a councillor like Jane is crucial for the police to maintain strong links with the community they serve, "the relationship with councillors is absolutely key because they can use their influence and their knowledge of our partner agencies to get things done that the police can't do" he says.

Walking around Jane's patch it is clear she is not only well known, but hugely liked and warmly greeted by residents. One local resident of Rope Walk, Cecil Davis, with Jane's support, has started to cultivate vegetables in the areas of common ground and disused gardens around his housing estate "he asked me if it was ok and I said yes before the officer had time to think about it!" she laughs. On his way to the mosque to pray, is Fotik Miah, a local shop keeper, taxi driver, and also a community leader who

greeted Jane as an old friend. “I’ve worked hard to get to know the Muslim community” she explains, “and for a long time I was going to them. Now they come to me”.

After some jacket potatoes around the corner from the mosque, we return to the Town Hall, where a group of Community caretakers have been invited by Jane to visit the building and the Mayor’s parlour. “All this belongs to the people of Ipswich” informs Andy, the deputy Sergeant at Arms, whose attention towards the Mayor and the decorations of office – the mace, the swords, the hats and robes is impressive in detail and care. Jane has encouraged many people to take advantage of the offer of a cup of tea upstairs among the regalia and history – especially employees of the council. Jane knows many of these caretakers from her own visits to the housing estates where they work. After sharing the tea and cakes on offer the men promise to bring their wives next time – Jane looks pleased – and suggests to them they offer an invite to

tenants and others helping in the community who need a ‘thank you’ from the council, “If I can’t care for the staff then it’s just empty words” she tells them.

Email, Jane says, is one thing she could definitely do with less of. She’s sitting at one of the ‘hot desks’ for councillors at Endeavour House, patiently clicking through the many emails she’s sent and copied into every day. If she can’t manage them there and then, she forwards them to her home address and will finish them tonight. After this quick burst of office work, she is back out to officially open the winter ice rink round the corner from the council offices. It’s a suitably chilly evening, and Andy meets her to pin her chains over her winter coat. Her Ipswich group leader says “Jane is a councillor from the moment she wakes, to the moment she goes to bed”, but at least this time she is able to combine family and formal duties as she is taking her 7-year-old grandson to have a go on the ice.



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# Next steps

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Politically and personally councillors had different views about the NSD and whether and how it would work. This is no surprise and all perspectives were welcomed. Some immediate next steps were suggested.

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## 8 Actions speak louder than words

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There isn't a blueprint moving forward and the time spent thinking, planning and engaging has been very well done and most valuable. However, **now** was seen as the time to try things out and learn from the experience of doing this. The message was "this will take time so don't expect overnight miracles".

### Practical and real

"This change has to really mean something to people. We need to start using language that everyone understands and build on what is already working well."

**Mark Bee**, Beccles, Conservative

"It's going to be really helpful to know how the planned changes will work in practice and what it will look like. I am keen to learn in my division with the community and with officers."

**Carol Debman**, Gainsborough, Conservative

"We need to do something practical and now. A lot of the easy things are not the first things we are suggesting. The work we did with Community Boards has done a lot of the

thinking already and we must revisit this. A practical focus will give us councillors more confidence that we can then instil in to our communities. We have the catch 22 where we are concentrating on divestment at the same time as making massive cuts."

**Joanna Spicer**, Blackburn, Conservative



"There is a need to explain clearly and simply how the NSD will be delivered over the next few years."

**Judy Terry**,  
Rushmere,  
Conservative

### Scrutiny of place

"There is a real opportunity here to scrutinise what might be possible and take the broadest possible view before we take actions in a community. This will mean community conversations and taking scrutiny, as we know it to a very local level. Scrutiny in localities will be a core part of this agenda."

**Mark Bee**, Beccles, Conservative

### Exciting possibilities

“This is a really exciting opportunity for councillors, officers, the community and voluntary sector and the private sector. Sometimes we are not great in Suffolk at blowing our own trumpet, we just get on with life. It’s going to take time and often we like to mull things over. Regular updates and good news stories will be really important.”

**Jane Storey**, Thedwastre North, Conservative, Deputy Leader

“This is a real opportunity to think the unthinkable and do something different. We can stimulate conversations about other ways to provide services. Does a building really have to be sold? Can you provide this service as a community? How would it look and feel if you did? It’s exciting and frightening - but as councillors we need to be there and be seen as central to making it happen and to know when to step back.”

**Anne Whybrow**, Stowmarket South, Conservative

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## 9 Cast the net wider

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Now is the time for wider conversation – with districts, with parishes, with officers, with local communities, with businesses, with the community and voluntary sector, with other public sector bodies, with Norfolk. Rigid governance changes are to be avoided in the interests of being fleet of foot and able to follow the ideas and energy of people.



“We need to be involving district councillors across Suffolk and also at a local level. We all need to get together locally and listen to each other’s ideas and in turn listen to the ideas our communities have. We will achieve more locally by working together.”

**Nick Barber**, Felixstowe Coastal, Conservative

“Parish Councils understandably, can look very locally to issues that affect them in their area. It would be good, when appropriate, to bring them together for an overview, and encourage strategic thinking about what will work best in the future and their role in shaping it.”

**Julia Truelove**, Bosmere, Liberal Democrat

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# Day in the life: creating a hub

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## Councillor Tony Goldson, Halesworth, Conservative

Tony represents a market town, which has all the issues of bringing together tourism and an active business sector to support not just the town but the surrounding villages.

By his own admission, Councillor Goldson works “at least” 80 hours a week on his job as a county councillor. The original 20 hours that he was told to expect “is a fallacy” he chuckles, as he drives towards his Suffolk division of Halesworth. While speaking to us, his (two) phones ring on and off. Depending on the traffic and the state of his hands-free, he answers one – a call from a police officer who was following up the complaint, “they’ve got a speed camera tucked away in the dual carriage way” he explains, “...the motorist is an easy target – and when they hide them that isn’t on”.

By the afternoon the officer from Suffolk County Council has called back – to explain that the operator was having his tea break and wasn’t filming traffic at that time. Tony is satisfied with the explanation – but also that that the state monitoring of his fellow citizens is also being monitored.

We arrive first at the depot where Tony is collecting shovels and hi-vis jackets. “Where I live we’ve got a very elderly population and they’re very vulnerable” he says, so this year



the parish council and local groups agreed with Tony to spend nearly five thousand pounds from his locality budget to buy grit bins for each of the villages. He points out that these are not just ordinary shovels – but lightweight, especially designed for anybody (young and old) to use.

Our next stop was into Halesworth itself. Tony had been explaining on the way their current focus is getting a town plan together which encompasses the villages and surrounding parishes. As he explained at the meeting convened of all the representatives from the area, to talk about the town plan, “this is about helping you and your villages to get the most they can out of a market town – and how you help us – it’s a two way thing”. There are many aspects of the plan that Tony is involved with – driving forward initiatives, suggesting change, and cementing the strong community and business networks that link together in Halesworth.

Richard Woolner is the community activist currently drafting the town plan and working with Tony on these kinds of meetings. Richard says, “a lot of the services in Halesworth are delivered through and by the county council – it’s vital we work with them – it’s got to be a partnership”. Simon Tennant, the landlord of the Angel pub is also convinced of the importance of working directly with his county councillor, “he listens to people – not only business people, but the community generally and reflects their reflects aspirations for their town.” As well as hosting a small tourist information point, The Angel Pub will also be part of the facilities to support visitors coming in on coaches.

Tony talked of many different initiatives, plans and ideas he’s involved with – the hub, finding sites for affordable housing, a business centre, a swimming pool. This extends even to schemes such as encouraging Dutch holiday makers (taking advantage of cheap train tickets) to come to the local area Tony is currently working on how to provide them with cycle hire and transport as part of the package deal. As he sees it, visitors will “ spend hundreds of thousands of pounds in the village shops – we’ve got to promote tourism, it’s bringing money in”.

The final part of our day Tony takes us to a rural school to show us how between parents, the local farmer and some joined up thinking the community have agreed to put in laybys and safe walking routes along the

road where the children and being taken to and from school. The hard gravel has been found from somewhere, the local farmer is lending his equipment, the council officers are overseeing the work to ensure standards – but, best of all, “it’s going to cost the council nothing”.

This is a far cry from the sort of background Tony has when he was working – a healthcare manager in a Prison hospital – that led him to qualifying as a nurse and midwife. His latter professional life, he says, took him all round the world working on some of the earliest work and research on the AIDS epidemic in Africa. What he says he loves about being a councillor is “The opportunity and time to find out what people want and see if their aspirations and ideas about the town are the same as mine”. But as Tony concedes, the work he is doing needs to be sustainable for he long term – so that the people he is working with don’t have to rely solely on him – as after all, he points out, “I’m only elected for 4 years!”.



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# Conclusion

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This research suggests that whatever the party or place represented, councillors are dedicated to their democratic role. They do different jobs in different places – what they all have in common is that people come first.

Officers do a first class job in implementing and designing services – but this is currently within a framework of agreed standards and a set of expectations that may need to change.

The conversations councillors are having and issues they are dealing with in their communities could never be formalised – because councillors are there to help solve what sociologists have called the ‘wicked’ problems. Problems where there is no obvious solution. Basically, if it **were** easy, we wouldn’t need to have politicians.

Politicians are not ‘vote-seekers’ devoid of purpose. They start with the premise that they want to help others and then they see that becoming elected is one way of giving them the extra leverage to do this. Fundamentally, any system of local governance needs to recognise this as the main motivation for any politician.

The way forward – start from the strengths of your local councillors, local communities and officers and ensure you maximise those strengths in moving forward.

Thank you to everyone who has given their time and ideas so freely.

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