

Consultation version

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Communities Strategy 2019 – 2024

1. Foreword

We are proud of our districts, they provide an excellent quality of life and an outstanding natural and built environment. Our Towns and villages each have their own unique identity, spaces and places where people come together, where ideas and ambitions are discussed and where planning for the inevitable changes to community life are discussed.

We understand the importance of our communities and the variety of achievements carried out by the people who live here is remarkable. These range from providing village halls, sports pitches and playing fields, managing good neighbour schemes, local charities and alms-houses, developing affordable housing, Community Land Trusts and running sports clubs and associations. It is perhaps even more heartening that they do much of this work as unpaid volunteers because they care what happens in their towns and villages and they know if they didn't commit their time and energy, then much less would get done.

Our strategy builds on examples of local action, to understand why and how people choose to commit to worthwhile projects that make a real difference to local people. What we call community capacity building is key to getting things done, for people to feel energised and enthused that their time as volunteers really does make a difference.

This strategy helps us to understand when we should intervene and when we should use our powers to help resolve local issues. More importantly it helps us to understand when it is right for us to take a step back and simply let people get on. We need to avoid thinking, even worse telling, a Community that we know best. This comes at a time when we face difficult choices because our budgets are under much pressure, we don't have unlimited resources, so we need to be much smarter about how we work.

Building much closer relationships across the wide range of communities, not only with Town and Parish Councils, but also with other groups and organisations has helped us immensely to understand the local landscape, but this is only the start. Ensuring relationships are resilient means they won't break down when a contentious local issue arises, and this takes time and effort on both sides. We recognise that It is much easier to write a strategy than to implement one, but we are committed to making this strategy work

Our vision is for our communities to “work”, to be places where people feel happy, healthy, safe and prosperous. We invite you all to work with us to achieve this vision for our district's bright future.

Councillor Julie Flatman, Mid Suffolk Cabinet Member for Communities and Councillor Margaret Maybury, Babergh Cabinet Member for Communities



2. Executive Summary

Babergh and Mid Suffolk are proud to present our first Communities Strategy. This is our response to the big changes we are experiencing and the future challenges we face. It sets out our vision for the type of future we want to develop with our communities and provides the foundations we need to achieve this. It builds on the excellent existing local partnerships with voluntary organisations, both big and small, some which are formalised and others which have grown to respond to local issues.

We want to continue to deliver high quality services that our communities' value, but we must be realistic that this means working in different ways. We recognise the positive and negative impacts that development has provided for some communities, so we need to ensure local development and housing development in particular is brought forward in an inclusive way, so that more people experience and benefit from what it can deliver.

The focus of the strategy is to create the right conditions for communities to work, to bring volunteers, community leaders and publicly funded services together to plan and provide the most sustainable support for each other so our communities are resilient and connected places for people to live and work. We all share the same ambitions, we certainly all have a part to play but the relationship between a community and the public sector is often complex. Our working relationships are dynamic, they evolve over time and sometimes events occur which strengthen our bonds or undermine previous achievements.

Community relationships, particularly when they are so interdependent on whole organisations needing to be cohesive and connected, don't always work well and the relationships which are important for all staff to develop and maintain can be undermined. We know we can do better but we can't do it all by ourselves.

The delivery of improved services to communities will only be realised through greater collaboration with local people, voluntary organisations and our statutory partners. We firmly believe that leadership and collaboration, and not separation, is the best way to achieve this.

Our Strategy is intended to be a dynamic process and not a detailed implementation plan. It needs to inform policy makers across the statutory and voluntary sectors about the key issues within the districts and highlight work they can contribute to.

It needs to be cross cutting and sufficiently flexible, so we can adapt to change over time as more people become involved, our collective thinking evolves, and new challenges and opportunities emerge.

3. Vision and Draft Strategy

Our vision for our Communities seeks to provide guidance and inspiration as to what we and our partners are focused on achieving now and in the next 20 years

We want to achieve a **vision** where our communities “work” now and in the future - they will be stronger and healthier places, built on a balanced and targeted range of services and support, equally accessible to all our residents and their future generations.

Our **strategic aim** is for all our communities to be attractive, successful and connected places where people have choice as to where they live and work. These places provide opportunities for everyone to have a good quality of life, a strong sense of community spirit and the confidence to influence things that matter. This will be achieved through working closely together with our key partners and delivering essential and quality services and facilities needed to ensure our people live healthy and happy lives.

Going through the process of developing this strategy with Councillors, partners and local organisations who work within our communities, it is clear that we need time and space to refine our **priorities** into very precise actions. Partners have been keen to affirm their own contributions to this agenda, for instance in promoting volunteering opportunities or combatting loneliness. It is important therefore that we help to guide the shared endeavours going on within the districts in response to these more complex issues as no single organisation can resolve them by acting alone.

We are clear that the focus of the high-level activities will make a real difference in the priority areas agreed, we will now use the consultation period to seek further clarification and set out more detail as to how these priorities will be achieved.

We have developed a range of “ambitions” to help us get there. Our proposed strategy will:

- Through collaboration, not separation, bring people and services together to achieve things we cannot do alone.
- Support us to get out of the way so we support, not suppress, communities to deliver for themselves.
- Focus on a preventative approach, so we can reduce demand and make better use of the resources we have.
- Harness the assets which communities possess, and which make them work for all
- Prioritise the things we do which we know will make a difference, and step back from things which don't.
- Be more focused and joined up on issues relating to “places” within the districts and be more confident to blur our traditional service boundaries.
- Give confidence to those who are harder to hear, to give them assurance that we are listening
- Be creative, dynamic, supportive and consistent in everything we do.
- Provide tools, resources, skills and experience from across the whole organisation to achieve these aims

4. Responding to change

We are developing our strategy during an unprecedented period of change, in our economy, population and environment and consequently our challenges and opportunities are becoming both more complex and more difficult to predict.

We are expected to help deliver growth in new homes and jobs, to utilise our assets and investments so we can become more financially sustainable as well as targeting our diminishing resources towards the most vulnerable and marginalised member of our communities, so we can offer them the right level of support

We recognise that shrinking public finances place more pressures on us and the other public services to make difficult choices about how we our deliver services, we can't simply go on as we have before. This may even include stopping services if they can't be afforded or transferred to others who may be better placed to deliver them more efficiently or effectively.

There are risks associated with producing a high-level strategy. There might be a perception that we are being too aspirational, people might perceive it as lacking authenticity and not providing the means to do the things which make a real difference to people's lives.

As our communities have direct experience of seeing how we deliver our services, people may lack confidence with our behavioural and leadership changes that we think are necessary. We have therefore developed our strategy with inputs and ideas from a range of partners, and we have been very honest about the things which we know lessen our collective impact with our communities. We are very grateful for the honesty and sincerity of the view expressed and how these contributions have helped to shape the strategy

5. Our changing demographics

We know that the districts are thriving and prosperous places to live and work, they offer a high quality of life and they are safe, healthy and developed. Our 2014 Housing Survey told us residents overwhelmingly feel they "love to live here" (92%) and intend to stay (90%).

However, the population, size and structure of the districts is changing and therefore the emphasis of what we do needs to change as well. We are anticipating a population increase of 16,600 between 2018 and 2036, across the districts.

While the population among all age groups will increase, the growth in numbers of older people is likely to increase disproportionately. One in three people within the districts will be over 65 in the next 20 years. The number of older, frailer people and those with multiple long-term health conditions will also increase over the next few decades adding to pressure on health and social care services.

The number of working age people will also start to decline. Currently 89% of retirement age people in Suffolk are economically inactive. If this trend continues, nearly 1 in 3 of Suffolk's population will be economically inactive people aged 65 and over by 2037 compared to 1 in 5 today.

It is also a time of real challenge for many in our communities. Even our most advantaged, remote rural communities are made up with people living in poverty.

The hardship for those on a low income is compounded by the barriers to accessing key services and the higher additional costs associated with living in the countryside. It costs people between 15 and 25 per cent more than their urban counterparts in order to be able to afford the same, minimum socially acceptable standards of living.

Unemployment within the districts is low, but there are relatively fewer high-quality jobs than elsewhere in England and there is long term trend for low wages in the county. The combination of low pay and limited opportunity for career progression adds to sustained in-work poverty and this represents an obstacle for social mobility. There are also significant numbers of people who are paid less than the recognised living wage.

These hidden needs can increase the real sense of isolation people experience, they find it much more difficult to gain access to support and services. According to Age UK Suffolk there are over 15,000 older people in Suffolk who say that they are always or often lonely – that's 1 in 10 people aged 65 and over. Social isolation, particularly where people have limited access to resources threatens the overall resilience of our communities. We are aware that some people talk about a sense of disconnection from the changes they see happening around them, often as a result of the poverty and inequality they experience in their daily lives. This means we need to work harder to hear the views of those who are right to challenge what we do when the current impact is difficult for them to see and for us to assess. A key aspect of our strategy will be how we empower and better connect all people within our communities and not just focus on those who may be more visible and eloquent in highlighting their needs and aspirations.

6. Health and Wellbeing

Health and Wellbeing matters to everyone. It covers a person's life experience from cradle to grave encompassing both their physical and mental health as well as their personal and social wellbeing. Put simply wellbeing is about 'how we're doing' as individuals and communities.

What affects wellbeing is different for everyone. Many factors contribute to a person's wellbeing including the availability of health and social care services but also issues such as the quality of education someone receives, whether they can earn enough money not to live in poverty, the homes they live in and whether they feel safe in their community. Although Babergh and Mid Suffolk are generally affluent districts there are pockets of deprivation with hidden needs and health inequalities persist between our most and least deprived wards. Whilst in general residents of Babergh and Mid Suffolk have healthier lifestyles than the England average, an estimated one in five adults is obese, nearly a quarter engage in higher risk drinking, one in six smokes and only one in eight adults does the recommended level of physical activity.

Moreover, since the economic crash of 2008/9 the financial pressure on all public sector organisations has been significant. The challenge to support those in need whilst radically reducing spend has provided an increased incentive for collaborative, integrated and transformative change in the way public services are delivered, with a shift to prevention, community support and early help so that people are enabled to live as independently as possible. For our health partners, for example, this means having more of a focus on prevention and self-care.

The Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board is an important system leader in identifying opportunities to help make these shifts and through our membership of this Board, Babergh and Mid Suffolk play an active role. In supporting the work of the Board our aim is to create strong resilient communities so that individuals have less need for costly interventions from public services. For example, we know that taking early action with vulnerable adults and older residents we can prevent or delay the need for long term care. However, when communities and individuals do need services, we want these to be delivered at a local level so that people will receive seamless, coordinated care and integrated services, which are not duplicated or leave gaps. Doing this means that the combined public resources available in our districts are used more effectively.

One of the most important recent developments in Suffolk's health economy is the creation of strategic Alliances in West Suffolk and Ipswich & East Suffolk. Within these Alliances, which between them cover both our districts, providers and commissioners from across acute, primary, community, mental health, social care and community services have committed to work in collaboration to provide a more joined-up offer for the populations they serve.

Through the alliances, the ambition is that care will increasingly be designed and delivered based around place e.g. localities and neighbourhoods, rather than around organisations. The Alliances are also complemented by a shared approach to Strong and Resilient Communities.

In 2017 Suffolk public sector partners developed a set of overarching ambitions for Strong and Resilient Communities:

- Reduce health inequalities within Suffolk through improved mental and physical health and well-being with individuals and families better able to take responsibility for their own health and well-being
- Individuals, families, and communities in Suffolk can do more for themselves and can access early help to maintain or regain their independence
- Resilient, connected and inclusive communities that support those who are vulnerable, in need, or at risk of becoming so
- A strong voluntary and community sector that enables people to make a difference to those in need, attracting additional resources both from within and outside of Suffolk.

These ambitions were further developed into agreed focus areas designed to guide joint community development activity across the county:

- **Personal Responsibility** – Individuals and families are able to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing and live independently for longer without interventions from public services
- **Early Help** – Those who demonstrate early signs of needing help can connect with support which enables them to return to independence
- **Community Action** – Those who are most in need or vulnerable in our communities are supported by the community around them including informal volunteers
- **Strong Voluntary Sector** – Voluntary sector organisations providing support to enable strong communities, working alongside and complementing the work of local public services, supporting good practice and sustainability.

The development of this Communities Strategy provides us with the opportunity to tailor these broad system-level ambitions and focus areas to the specific needs of places and communities across Babergh and Mid Suffolk by establishing a clear set of priorities for local action.

7. Tackling the key issues

The strategy recognises the complex environment in which we work. Equally important is our perceptions of what isn't working as effectively as we'd expect as well as changes many of our communities expect the strategy will deliver. These are summarised below:

8. Communities are already engaged, but their work is not always valued

Many communities are already highly engaged in working collaboratively to plan their futures, whether this is through the neighbourhood planning process, in managing open spaces and play areas, enhancing in their community facilities or protecting local services. At the same time, we are keen to encourage communities to do more for themselves as local autonomy tends to guarantee unequivocal support for a local initiative.

However, some communities believe we don't always recognise and value their enthusiasm and commitment, that our systems, processes and sometimes our behaviours rather than support and guide them, tend to hold them back. People will be less energetic and willing to commit their time to local activity if they feel we take this for granted.

9. Our culture and behaviour can be compromised by structures and convention

Communities are not interested by the way local government is organised. Strict administrative boundaries don't influence where people work or shop, what schools their children attend and how they spend their free time.

Yet geography, processes and structures influence how public services are delivered and funded and how decisions are made. The strategy needs to recognise that some certainty is important for communities, that they expect accountability in the decisions we make and how we spend public money.

But this cannot compromise the organisational flexibility we need to work with others to address key issues, whether this is the challenges of our aging population or how new infrastructure is delivered.

Despite years of trying, we still need to move away from a top down, narrow focus and adopt much more creative, outward looking, collaborative approaches so we can grow a mutual understanding of things that matter.

10. The districts are thriving, but not everyone experiences the benefits

Our districts are undeniably successful. They are thriving economically, they experience low level of crime, people generally experience good health and most people experience a high quality of life.

However, there is much more of an awareness that there exist significant inequalities in health, income and access to services across our communities.

We must work to close the gap for those who are socially excluded, the disadvantaged and marginalised so that they are afforded the same access to opportunity and the benefits of community-based interventions that improve their quality of their lives.

11. Everything we do impacts on our communities, but our interventions need to be more focused

Communities have very high expectations of us, but our resources need to be used where we think they have the most impact.

We are not always as effective as we could be in allocating resources or time to support community issues. While we should continue to advise and fund communities' activities and projects that add value, we need to be careful not to commit resources to local issues where their strategic relevance or longer-term benefits cannot be proven. We will be developing these guiding principles for discussion as we consult further on the strategy.

12. Making it all happen

We need to ensure that our strategy is resourced, embedded, communicated and delivered. In order to achieve this, it will need to be embraced by our Councillors, partners and communities and integrated as a common approach across all Council departments. Our big ideas will help us to focus, to prioritise and set out a common statement of purpose that people can understand and to establish the supporting roles that are vital for the strategy to be successful. This will result in changes at many different levels; for people, local communities and our relationships with other public and voluntary organisations. We acknowledge that our community development focus has become less clear and our response to dealing with new service demands has sometimes been at the expense of some of the basics.

We know the districts are likely to look and feel differently in 20 years' time, it is important that we adapt our approach, and these are summarised below:

13. Collaboration, not separation

Our communities expect our services to be efficient. They want much better lines of communication, for continuous dialogue and engagement but they are also frustrated that decisions taken in one service area can result in negative, unintended consequences elsewhere. They expect us to be more consistent in what we say and do, and they are often quick to tell us when we get things wrong.

Working more closely with partners, our voluntary sector as well as our communities is an important building block of our strategy. We intend to develop a culture of collaboration based on a shared understanding of the issues which are important for our communities. This means pooling resources, sharing ideas and drawing on a wider range of skills and expertise than are available to any of us alone.

Some of the issues which our communities sometimes find difficult, the impact of new housing development, impacts on local infrastructure, concerns about anti-social behaviour or a decline in local services, can't be addressed in isolation yet in many instances' decisions are taken which only address part of the problem.

We acknowledge successful collaboration takes time and effort on all sides, it requires trust and commitment and the recognition that there will be times where partners don't always agree with the outcome and disagreement may undermine this relationship. We remain clear that separation, where there is always a divide between us and our communities is counterproductive, it erodes confidence and leads to a duplication of effort which is wasteful and costly.

It is important that we build on the new public sector culture of collaboration and an integrated approach to service delivery. We will build on the relationships we have in place which we know are strong and we will look to put in place new arrangements where these relationships can be improved.

14. Getting out of the way

People rely on public services in many ways. We provide many different services, some which we are required to provide by law - for instance homelessness, planning, community safety and safeguarding - and others where we have a choice to do so because they make a positive difference to people's lives, for instance how we fund community projects and support wellbeing.

Delivering effective services which our communities expect or require is important to us but there are times we don't always question how we can step aside and let others do what they think is best. There are many examples of communities who have taken on responsibilities from other public bodies, these range from parks and play areas, to the development of new affordable housing, community library services and recycling centres. These services are well run, they work because they are valued, and they are proof that service delivery doesn't always have to follow traditional lines. We don't always know best but we not always willing to question different ways of working. There is a risk that by continuing along this path that we create a sense of expectation that we can't live up to and we disempower those who want to do more and can make a real difference.

We know Communities have a formal set of rights which have been agreed to give more local control, to develop Neighbourhood Plans, register assets within their areas which are under threat of being sold and even to bid to run Council services. But this also needs to be part of our culture, we shouldn't wait for a community to ask. We must embrace at every level within the organisation the recognition that working with local communities helps us to deliver more and the best way for people to feel enthused and energetic is by asking them what they want to do and then help them to achieve it.

We will explore within our strategy how we create a better understanding and the implications for handing more control over to communities.

15. Getting to the real root of the issue, our approach to prevention

We are aware just how important it is to deliver services which prevent or avert difficulties before they become a far more complex, entrenched and ultimately costly problem to solve. Too often in the past, public services have responded to problems by providing a safety net when situations reach crisis point. Whilst this is both necessary and appropriate for genuine crises, in many cases, the crisis response has become the norm, with investment focused on essential services, at the expense of preventative ones.

Our population is getting older and placing greater pressure on the public purse. By enabling and supporting individuals at greatest risk to take care of themselves and their health, this will take pressure off the system and help to reduce social care and healthcare costs. The role of leisure, sport and physical activity in maintaining an individual's mental health, healthy weight and physical health also cannot be overstated. Keeping active has numerous benefits not only for physical health but also mental wellbeing. It also helps to reduce isolation among older people, instil the importance of teamwork in children and ease the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Bringing service users, volunteers and publicly funded services together would help with the better coordination of activity within communities. There is often a duplication of effort, services tend to deal with similar issues without always being aware of the works being invested by others. Promoting and coordinating activity across our communities which are founded on the principles that an integration is better than separation and prevention is much better than cure, will be a key foundation of our strategy.

16. Moving from what is wrong to what is strong

The ability and willingness of people to get involved with things that really matter to them requires confidence and determination. People are far less likely to want to try if they think it will be difficult, help won't be at hand if they need it and others won't appreciate their endeavours if it doesn't work.

There is sometimes an assumption that work undertaken within a community is about addressing something which is lacking or to put right something which doesn't work well. This approach stifles community motivation and makes the community far less inclined to rely upon itself for the answers.

We will work with our communities to appreciate what they do well and what they are capable of and in doing so recognise the importance and value of the positive things that can be developed and the improvements which can be made.

This Asset based approach allows us both to:

- Gather intelligence and information about the community to establish their strengths; the people and the physical assets that exist
- Establish what is important for that community, now and in the future, so we can build more meaningful relationships and greater credibility.

- Support local solutions and help build on the things already happening so they are owned locally and go further.

We already have access to a wide range of existing data, both internally and externally, however our approach to collecting data is not as robust as we would like. Building a strong evidence base is a vital part of how we make service decisions and allocate funding. It also helps us to influence partners and put in place new ways to collaborate.

This new approach will allow us to collect some of the “softer” information within our communities; whether a community is short of community volunteers, whether they find it hard to recruit members to committees or lack the skills that they need to get new ideas off the ground.

It would also allow much better insight into where the community sees itself in the next 10 or 20 years’ time, where they see their key challenges as well as opportunities.

17. Being more precise about our service offering

We need to be much clearer about what we can’t or won’t do. We recognise that this is a difficult choice however it is necessary because we can’t do everything, and we believe there are things which have much greater impact than others. Stepping back is also one of the changes we expect from our staff, because to constantly deliver services without questioning why can deny communities as well as our voluntary partners the opportunities to do things themselves.

Our strategy wants to develop local skills and confidence, to exploit the capacity the community itself possesses, so it is natural that we need to step back. We do though recognise this to be a challenge.

Our foremost focus will be on helping communities to gain the skills they need. We will provide advice and support and we’ll signpost them to others who can help.

We know we have exemplary examples of activities and projects which have worked through community endeavour, so we’ll see how this experience can be shared.

We need some flexibility in our approach, but we also think it is important to explain when we consider a request for our support as not appropriate, where we will not commit staff time and resources to the issue. Using the key principles within the strategy, we will pilot the following tests to decide whether a community request for our assistance should be met.

- **An agreement of common interest:** where there is a commitment with a community to explore greater working opportunities and to engage the whole community in doing so
- **The prevention test:** where evidence that the community could play a more active role in commissioning, delivering or preventing a demand on services
- **Asset Test:** where the assessment of the community “deficits” (any gaps, problems, weaknesses) is developed alongside the community assets (the community priorities, commitments and physical assets).
- **The Community Test:** the priority people place on an activity or project as demonstrated by an engagement exercise with their community.

- **Legacy Test:** the contribution of the activity or project within the community, this could be an increase in volunteering, better use of a community space, an increase in physical activity.

18. A new approach to our places

We know each of our communities are unique places, however the way in which we interact with Town and Parish Councils almost always follows conventional service lines. Discussions about planning, housing or economic development are often separate conversations, each focused on single issues and this means the connections and synergies are often overlooked. This is a timely opportunity to consider whether our approach to place should be different to how we carry out our professional and service functions.

Many of our larger communities, Sudbury, Stowmarket, Needham Market, Hadleigh and Eye provide a different series of challenges and opportunities in terms of strategic planning, investment, community engagement, demand management and capacity for change at all levels of local government. The external political, social and economic environment is complex in these places and some issues, not always those we can control, are having an adverse impact with some of our communities. We need to gain a much clearer understanding of how these places operate, what facilities, homes, business premises and type of environment are most important and also the priorities of our key partners and their capacity for change.

We will therefore support and work with local leaders in these areas to develop Masterplans for their towns, building on the visions have already been developed in Stowmarket and Sudbury.

The development of successful, vibrant towns is essential to the local economy and those who live there. However, they must also be connected to their surrounding network of smaller communities in terms of service access and local identity and these arrangements will reflect the unique circumstances of the area although they all share common foundations.

We will also explore whether we should adopt more formalised placed based working arrangements, based on arrangements like *Lowestoft Rising* in East Suffolk. This partnership model has developed a unique approach to place, which has improved quality of life, enhanced the working culture between different organisations and reduced service demand allowing resources to be allocated more wisely.

19. Listening to the harder to hear from

Whilst our communities may appreciate our willingness to enter into discussions on local issues, we know that some think we don't always get our engagement approach right. We know some tells us we don't listen and act accordingly and that we pay lip service to the views provided. Effective engagement should be about the discussions of ideas and options, which helps to develop relationships and build trust.

We are also aware that some people have louder voices, they represent their views and opinions with fluency and determination and in a way that we find it much easier to understand. But understanding issues from within a community which may affect a particular group or a much smaller number of people, sometimes who have different views to the majority and are equally important.

We are aware that written objections about the scale and size of a particular housing development do not always represent the views of people who want a home on the development for their son or daughter or the infrastructure income to support the local school from closure. These voices are not always as clear, and we don't always find it as easy to create the conditions from them to be heard.

Our strategy will examine different ways to seek the views across the range of people within our communities, so we have a much broader sense of need and we can promote cohesion and foster good relations.

20. Adapting the way, we work

Community inspired and community led outcomes require a change to our culture and behaviour. We must ensure that our people and services who work within our communities work much more closely with leaders and those who influence and inspire change, our District Councillors, Town and Parish Councillors because they are best placed locally to understand local issues.

We will ensure that our staff are far more visible and accessible within our communities and that this locality approach is an authentic aspect of their work. Being closer to our communities will ensure local issues and priorities are understood, and where more detailed information is needed it can be easily directed to the relevant professional officers. Staff working within a place will also be able to coordinate, and, communicate between the parties, to ensure information requirements, decisions and resources are more effectively and efficiently achieved.

These arrangements will not be tokenistic, they reflect comments from many of our communities about how we communicate and how difficult it can be to find the right person to provide them with answers. Delivering a coherent and co-ordinated approach, developing and maintaining relationships and being consistent in our approach will become part of these new arrangements.

21. Sharing our skills and knowledge

We know that local leaders and organisations know their communities much better than we do. They are trusted and respected to represent views and concerns and to provide answers to many different local issues.

They are generalists, not specialists, those elected to office act as both the catalyst and glue for local delivery, they help to identify and build the networks required of key stakeholders, but they rely upon timely professional support and guidance. Balancing local views with professional guidance can often create tensions if these are not communicated correctly. Developing greater understanding of this is an important first stage to cementing stronger relationships.

As an organisation we possess a range of professional skills, both within our support services; finance and audit, governance, human resources, data analysis, and also our front-line services. Many of our staff also live within our communities so they appreciate the need for a collaborative approach and contribution for communities to thrive.

We will be considering how the whole organisation can be much more closely involved when a community requires professional support. We will seek to join *Suffolk ProHelp*, a network of private businesses within Suffolk; law firms, surveyors, architects, accountants and more, offer support to community groups free of charge.

22. At the heart of our strategic framework

This Communities Strategy forms part of an integrated strategic framework of Council strategies which all link back to our overarching Joint Strategic Plan 2016-2020 and national and countywide commitments to inclusive growth, health & wellbeing and community resilience.

This approach ensures that we are making the very best use of available resources and expertise to support Communities that 'work' now and in the future.

The other Strategies that will help deliver the vision set out in this strategy are:

- Suffolk Framework for Inclusive growth
- The Joint Local Plan, Local Development Framework and Statement of Community Involvement
- Town and Parish Plans
- Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Suffolk
- Suffolk Volunteering Strategy
- Babergh and Mid Suffolk Leisure, Sport and Physical Activity Strategy
- Babergh and Mid Suffolk Homes Strategy
- Babergh and Mid Suffolk Economic Strategy
- Babergh and Mid Suffolk Customer Access Strategy

23. Our Voluntary and Community Sector

The Suffolk Voluntary and Community Sector plays a vital role across the districts supporting, delivering services and enabling activities with and for people in our communities. This includes organisations and groups supporting older people, carers, heritage activity, village hall provision, rural deprivation, transport, young people, families, housing and complex needs. The Sector includes over 3,000 registered Charities in Suffolk and an additional 2,000 groups, clubs and organisations supported by a wide range of Volunteer-Led Trustee Boards and Committees.

We recognise and value the invaluable impact the Sector makes in the direct delivering of local services for local people. We do this in small ways through our Grant Making Programme and external funding offer, and more crucially through the many and varied partnerships formed across the districts between ourselves as Councils and the Sector as a whole.

The Sector is a significant partner for us in our communities and we believe this has further potential for development and growth to contribute to the achievement of our Community Strategy. In particular we value it as a source of expertise, as a resource of people and money, for its ability to engage with people, for its economic value, for its volunteering offer, for its ability to provide opportunities for members of our community to develop their skills and contribute to community life.

Our relationships with the Voluntary and Community Sector are vital to the delivery of the Community Strategy. The local Sector make an enormous contribution to our Districts in many different ways: they help communities develop skills to create new opportunities; tackle inequalities between communities, promote leadership within communities so they become more confident to do things for themselves; foster cohesion, so communities feel more united; and improve quality of life our residents.

We need to work with and alongside our Voluntary and Community Sector to ensure we understand the challenges and opportunities facing our communities and provide joined up and focused approaches to making the best and most efficient impacts. Understanding where we work together and where we may step back and not lead.

Volunteering is key to a successful and thriving Voluntary and Community Sector. Investing in creating meaningful and robust volunteering opportunities brings a wide range of benefits to our communities. We will continue to work closely with our partners, including our strategic funders, to:

- Maximise the contribution of volunteering to local priorities
- Explore new initiatives with local partners and businesses.
- Enable young people to volunteer
- Encourage robust trusteeships
- Quality Standards and Training
- Safe community spaces

24. Implementing the Strategy

We recognise that a step change is needed to meet the challenges of the ambitious priorities set out in this Strategy. We have ensured through discussions with our partners that they share our ambitions and to working with us to achieve this. Together we agree that:

- We must collectively make decisions with communities and commit our resources about how services are delivered which are in the best interests of our communities;
- We must ensure at every level of our organisations, that staff will be challenged to consider themselves as part of a public-sector and community family rather than operating within the confines of their individual organisations;
- We will be respectful of our organisational constraints and responsibilities, but we will work together to establish better ways of delivering services which improve outcomes for our communities;
- We will take every opportunity to reduce duplication and make best use of collective resources.

We are committed to transparency and information on how we are performing against the plan will be regularly published online to ensure residents have the information at their fingertips to engage with us and ensure we deliver on our priorities.