

Emerging need in Suffolk & the role of Community Business

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In today's ever changing world, it is not surprising that Suffolk faces challenges aligned to the rest of the nation. However, due to our geographical make up, the challenges we face are perhaps more complex than some areas nationally. Suffolk is a large, rural county and has more than double the national average of people living in a rural area. Alongside this, we also have vast urban areas and coastal communities each with their own needs and service demands. Suffolk is a fantastic place to live and work and our challenges inspire some incredible individuals and groups in our communities, but there will always be work to do to ensure Suffolk thrives and continues to be the haven it is for those that reside here.

Community business has an essential role to play in ensuring our communities are resilient, inclusive and cohesive. By their nature, community businesses focus on their particular community and are led by the needs of residents. Rural residents are generally older; we have an ageing population with high life expectancy (79 for men and 83 for women); the Office for National Statistics predicts population growth by 10% over the next 20 years (mainly over 65's) and according to Public Health, Suffolk is facing an unprecedented figure of 1 in 3 of our population being over 65. We will be one of the first counties nationally to deal with the challenges this will create. There will be increased demand on Social Care services, affordable housing and of course health services – particularly as there is likely to be an increase in those living with multiple health conditions aligned with longer life expectancy. The role of 'in community' support is and will continue to be critical for prevention and alleviating pressure on public services.

Whilst deprivation levels are relatively low in Suffolk (in the top third of least deprivation nationally), there are pockets of poverty often hidden in the Indices of Deprivation with rising 'relative' deprivation compared to other parts of the country. It is not unusual to see some of our most affluent communities, immediately neighbouring some of our most deprived. According to Public Health, 4 of our 7 districts are in the 20% worst nationally for Social Mobility. The term 'Social Mobility' refers to the ability of an individual or family, to move to a different social status and therefore overcome disadvantage, inter-generational expectations and values often have a large part to play in this.

The good news is that there is increased interest to provide more prevention services and activities. Prevention is cheaper than intervention but more challenging to evidence the need and the impact. At Community Action Suffolk, we are committed to working with local communities to identify assets and needs, developing a targeted, preventative place-based approach that considers the long term and empowers local people to lead and develop their local communities.

With reduced public sector funding we have already seen an increased demand for person centred services to be delivered by VCSE organisations (including community businesses) and an increase in the complexity for the vulnerabilities of individuals they support. However, increased demand is not currently being met by increased supply. There is significant increase in demand for volunteers as communities are asked to do more themselves and while Suffolk has many excellent volunteers

contributing numerous hours for the benefit of others, volunteers alone can not solve all community challenges. Effective community businesses are sustainable, can provide employment and when surplus is generated, they re-invest it in to the communities they serve thereby contributing additional value to their delivery.

Case Study – HOUR Community, Framlingham

Formed in 2016, HOUR Community operates in and around Framlingham, a rural town based in the Suffolk Coastal district. Perhaps the biggest challenge Framlingham faces is its older population (higher than not just the national average, but the Suffolk average too), coupled with its rural location.

Their mission is to provide completely inclusive community solutions to community issues. They do this by providing a range of services, determined by local residents as beneficial to reducing social isolation, loneliness and disadvantage, in addition to some very practical solutions to impractical problems, for example, Community Transport. Public transport is extremely limited in many of Suffolk's rural areas and Framlingham feels this challenge acutely. Whether it is vital medical appointments at the hospital (the nearest one is 35 miles away) or doctor's surgery, or doing a weekly shop at a supermarket, for many Framlingham residents this can be a virtual impossibility. The community transport operated by HOUR Community is a lifeline for many. It also provides the financial sustainability required to operate their other vital services including Befriending (tackling social isolation), the Worry Tree Café (supporting mental health), the Forget me Not club (dementia friendly lunch club), Help at Home (carrying out 'odd jobs' for those unable to), and Cycling without Age (the latest addition to transport in Framlingham by way of Trishaws!).

HOUR Community could not survive without the fantastic volunteers that continuously commit their time (even if it is just an HOUR), but also without trading to ensure future sustainability and further contribution to the community it serves.

“They provided me with much more than just a volunteer; they gave me a shining light when the world was dark. And for that, I’ll always be grateful.” – Beneficiary of HOUR Community

The Art of the Possible

While the picture of Suffolk described above could be seen as a challenging prospect, our experience of working with the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector for over 20 years has always highlighted the social commitment Suffolk communities and their residents to help others and ensure everyone enjoys the quality of life they deserve. The recent rise of community businesses whether responding to individual needs, or saving community assets (shops, pubs, community buildings etc.) for the benefit of local citizens, reiterates this commitment. However, where we face challenges, needs are presented, and where there is local need, there are possibilities for a business led by local people for local people.

Community care, community energy, community transport, local service/activities provision, community-run assets, childcare, care farms, and housing provision are just a few of the ways community businesses can make a difference to their local area in Suffolk.