

SUFFOLK FUTURES SEMINAR SALC 5 NOVEMBER 2007

“The future is another country – it’s different there!”

That PCs have survived so far providing a small number of local services, representing and communicating the interests of the community to others on limited resources is testament to their strength. However, recent legislative, and social, economic and environmental changes will mean that Parish Councils of the future may look very different and have tough decisions to make in what will largely be uncharted territory.

A greater role for communities

- Safer Neighbourhood Teams
- “Communities are at the heart of the planning system”¹
- A new power to promote “well being” in the community
- The ability to have devolved or delegated to it the management of services provided by the County or District Councils (subject to QPS)
- The ability to determine how budgets for some services can be spent locally without being responsible for service delivery
- Strengthened powers to make representations and pursue complaints
- The ability to take on certain environmental enforcement procedures and appoint Community Wardens
- The duty to participate in community renewal programmes where they are established

- Suffolk Pathfinder - Allow people and local community interest groups to get involved in local government so that more decision-making takes place at a very local level. A radical structure in Suffolk - based on devolving some council responsibilities downwards to district and borough, town and parish councils and local communities and devolving some responsibilities up to county level. (On hold pending the boundary committee on unitary status.)

¹ Statement by Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Monday 21 May 2007.

- The power to have a community resilience strategy (emergency plan)
- Parish Plans, Village Design Statements, development of supplementary planning guidance and Quality Parish Status

In some cases the changes expressly identify Parish Councils in other instances it is implicit or the principal authority has determined that the PC is best placed to take on the new role.

Local communities will increasingly be the place where service delivery is shaped, albeit in circumstances where financial and broad policy decisions are taken elsewhere. The principle authorities have the "duty" to devolve or delegate management and/or delivery of services to PCs where they believe they are capable of taking on that responsibility.

Parish Councils are increasingly seen by the higher authorities and other service providers as partners in service delivery; being able to add value to squeezed budgets.

Where services have been cut, particularly where they have been provided by the voluntary sector, PCs have assumed some responsibility for providing or funding that service.

The budgets of PCs are not capped. How far a precept can be raised without attracting the attention of auditors, the Government or the ire of local ratepayers remains to be seen.

The recent past has seen a decrease in political participation. The new possibilities have not resulted in legions of new participants presenting themselves to be Councillors. Whether or not the increased responsibilities will be a barrier or a passport to participation is difficult to judge.

It is all going to look very different

In the short, medium and long term major changes will happen. Many of these changes can be categorised as "threats" but there are also "opportunities." Local communities that are prepared to maximise their own strengths and start working on weaknesses are the ones that are going to be best placed to minimise threats and take advantage of any opportunities.

- 2012 - The B1456 will officially have reached capacity and the A12/A14/A137 and the public transport network will have received no significant new investment

- 2021 – A 10% increase in the general population; about 400 people locally² (For Ipswich and the Ipswich fringe the increase may be as high as 19%)
- 2021 - The number of people over the age of 65 will have increased by 30% - about 225 people in Shotley
- 2021 – People will be living four years longer but have one year of ill health
- Climate Change – coastal defences and footpaths, changes in agricultural practices, increased animal and human health vulnerability, population movement
- Employment – Haven Gateway Suffolk is predicted to see an additional 7500 jobs created by 2021. Shotley is not a growth point.
- Suffolk is a low waged, low qualifications workforce but the employment growth are high waged, high qualified jobs (University of Suffolk, telecommunications, logistics, etc). Unless Suffolk up-skills then inward commuting and/or inward migration will increase putting further pressure on transport and the housing market
- Bathside Bay – Increase in coastal erosion and higher risk of accident. “An assessment of the impact of particulate matter emitted by ocean-going ships has estimated that these emissions are responsible for approximately 60,000 cardiopulmonary and lung cancer deaths (worldwide) annually and that this could rise by 40% by 2012 if the expected growth in ship traffic occurs”³
- HMS Ganges and Marina Developments – The population increase from the developments could be as high as 1200 people; each unit of accommodation will generate seven vehicle movements a day. The impact on community services will be enormous and there are currently no mitigation or compensation measures available to lessen the impact.
- Without any growth in the local housing market the 265 young people in the Parish who “transit to adulthood” by 2011 will need to be housed elsewhere. Without local jobs they will have to commute or move away.
- Decisions that affect communities are increasingly being taken by bodies removed from direct democratic control and accountability e.g. Haven Gateway, Local Strategic Partnerships

² Berners Ward unless stated otherwise

³ [Environment Science Technology - 05/11/2007](#)

- Local Government reorganisation

Facing the future

It is important to note that no new powers, responsibilities or duties will be imposed on PCs. However, the responsibility of acting in the best interest of our community will mean that the process of assessing opportunities in itself will be onerous and require resources that are currently not available to us or are in short supply. It also has to be the case with regard to the structural challenges ahead that the communities that have prepared the ground will be the ones that are best place to maximise the opportunities and minimise the threats. Expectations of what PCs can deliver will be raised.

ACRE are raising the concept of "21st Century Village;" communities that can demonstrate their competence to balance Social, Economic and Environmental issues in a sustainable, creative way and compete successfully for the resources they need. In Shotley I think we are a "mid to late 20th Century" community: we are further ahead than most, but with some way to go.

Parish Councils generally concern themselves with the here and now. Forward planning is usually limited to determining the budget for the year ahead or setting sums aside for the replacement of assets. We will need to think further ahead, have sharply defined priorities and be focused on how they will be achieved.

Any changes will need to be proportionate: to our size, the resources available to us and the political mandate given to us by the community.

Networking will be increasingly important: vertically to the higher tiers of local government, the PCTs and to the other organisations that make the decisions that shape our communities. Horizontally; within our own communities, with other Parish Councils and with those that deliver or consume local services. We know from our experience of the Peninsula Parishes Alliance that working together on anything other than an informal basis is challenging. However, on some issues we cannot afford to work in isolation.

Parishes will need staff with a professional approach and technical as well as "soft" qualifications. Managing and developing this people resource will be a challenge. Parish Councillors will also need to be open to acquiring and developing new skills. Encouraging and developing new talent that reflects the diversity of the local community will also be important: a community where every contribution is valued and welcomed.

Graham Steel
January 2008