

Case studies

**Suffolk Libraries**

# The Suffolk Libraries story

**Developing a new model  
for library provision**

A case study from the 2019 Public service:  
state of transformation report



## The headlines

- All of Suffolk's 44 libraries have remained open and all libraries are run by paid staff.
- Suffolk opted for an alternative model to closures back in 2011 – an industrial and provident society.
- The model has helped to deliver significant successes and innovations, including longer opening hours in some locations, a diverse range of events and activities, and significant savings.
- The vision for the next few years is that Suffolk Libraries will have an even bigger impact on the local community and therefore show others how important libraries can be.

## The Suffolk context

Many libraries have closed across the country in the last five years and many services are facing future cuts or closures.

Faced with public opposition to possible closures of several libraries, and following a service review, an options appraisal of possible alternative delivery models, and extensive public consultation during 2011, Suffolk County Council decided to 'spin out' its library service. The aim was to give the community a voice in the governance of the service, while ensuring that the county discharged its obligations as the statutory library authority.

By December 2011, the council had decided on an industrial and provident society (now known as a registered society) as the most appropriate form for the new organisation that was available at the time.

The new organisation launched as Suffolk's Libraries Industrial and Provident Society in August 2012 but is now known simply as Suffolk Libraries.

An important early decision by the county was that any externalisation of the service must be reversible and that the council would retain ownership of the infrastructure, including:

- buildings;
- IT infrastructure and devices; and
- mobile library vehicles

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## The commissioner's crucial role

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In practice, as well as briefing specialist cabinet and shadow cabinet members throughout the year on how the county council is discharging its statutory duties and how libraries fit into the council's strategic plans, the commissioner has played a crucial role in:

- leading both the initial contract negotiations, which included the development of the specification for library services and associated key performance indicators, and the continuing annual negotiations around the contract price and specification;
- managing the TUPE process as the outgoing employer, including presenting the plan at a series of meetings to which all staff employed by the service were invited;
- balancing the potential for savings with the equally important need for future sustainability of the service;
- ensuring that where changes to the specification and contract price have been proposed, there is sufficient understanding of the effect on the services;
- determining whether there is a need for consultation if there are material changes to the service delivered;

- acting as a contact point for other council colleagues in property, IT and procurement services, while also acting as a consistent point of contact and advocate for Suffolk Libraries within the county; and
- offering feedback to the library service on its performance against the agreed key performance indicators and suggesting areas of improvement, based not just on KPI data but also on regular library visits.

Both the Suffolk County Council cabinet member responsible for the library service and the commissioner have an observer place on Suffolk Libraries' board.

## Our story now and into the future

From the outset, the new and independent organisation was able to harness the passionate support for libraries among the local community. Each library has a community group (often known as Friends groups), who are official members of the registered society and directly support their library. Representatives from these groups come together at the AGM to vote on key decisions and inform the society's direction of travel.

These groups have supported extensions to opening hours; have raised funds – for instance, to carry out refurbishments; have promoted service innovations; and have helped to increase the number and diversity of events and activities run in the county.

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As Bruce Leeke, Chief Executive Officer of Suffolk Libraries, comments:

'In the early days some customers may have been concerned about how our model would work and that being independent would mean we wouldn't be as accountable or responsive. We have worked very hard with our Friends groups and the wider community to build and maintain trust in Suffolk Libraries and our vision.'

Having established trust and built its reputation both within and outside the county over the past few years, Suffolk Libraries is now looking to the future. There is a new strategy, with a vision that places greater emphasis on increasing the impact in the community, challenging people's perceptions of libraries, and getting them to understand their true value to society.

A key part of the new strategy is a focus on raising more independent income through initiatives such as local and county-wide fundraising drives and partnerships with other local services that can make a financial contribution to shared space and room hire. The ambition is to make Suffolk Libraries stronger as an organisation in the years ahead and less reliant on council funding.

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**'We have developed a resilient, honest and flexible relationship with Suffolk County Council and by giving us a fixed-fee contract for five years they have given us the opportunity to look at ways that we can become even more community-focused and at the same time more self-sufficient.'**

Bruce Leeke, Chief Executive Officer, Suffolk Libraries

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## The role of partners

Suffolk County Council is still legally responsible for the county's library service, but Suffolk Libraries has a long-term contract to deliver it. The current budget from the county is just under £6 million per annum (including the stock budget) – around 30 per cent less than the total library budget in 2011.

The county council set up and supported the new model from the start and Suffolk Libraries continues to have a healthy relationship with the county. This has led to an automatic five-year extension to Suffolk Libraries' contract, with an agreed level of funding now guaranteed until 2022, giving the organisation the stability to take stock and plan for the future with confidence.

'We have developed a resilient, honest and flexible relationship with Suffolk County Council and by giving

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However, Suffolk Libraries also has strong relationships with many other key partners including other local councils, the health service, a range of voluntary sector organisations and Arts Council England. Part of the success of the Suffolk Libraries model has involved fruitful partnership projects, such as working with district councils to co-locate services or information in libraries in return for rental income. This type of initiative has the added benefit of bringing in additional customers and providing cost-effective public access for the district councils.

## What's been the impact of our work?

The main impact of the model is that all libraries have remained open – in some cases offering higher levels of service – while also making significant savings. Long Melford Library, for example, recently amended and increased its opening hours as a result of small changes in staffing arrangements, all at very little cost and after consultation with customers.

Professional staff have been maintained at all the libraries.

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## Financial savings are only part of the story – the value generated for local people and the impact made on their lives is the other side of the coin.

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In 2017, a review of staffing at the larger libraries – the first since the 1990s – resulted in a small number of redundancies. Apart from this, there have been no reductions in staffing since the service was transferred to the new organisation.

Suffolk Libraries has bucked the national trend in relation to lending and attendance, which are both falling in the UK. Lending in 2017/2018 was just over 3.1 million – an increase of 1 per cent on the previous year against a drop of almost 7 per cent in the UK across the same period. Reinforcing this positive momentum, the number of specific events and activities held within Suffolk Libraries has increased from 9,534 to 11,120 to 12,659 over the last three years and attendees at these events have increased from 155,876 to 175,561 to 182,298. Suffolk has also seen a large growth in e-library lending.

The county's continued ownership of the library infrastructure has not stopped Suffolk Libraries from making financial savings in this area. For instance, the society has been able to employ local contractors, including suitably skilled volunteers, to maintain the internal repair and decoration of its buildings. Similarly, the county's ownership of the computers used by both staff and the public has not stopped Suffolk Libraries from procuring more innovatively and savings have been made through the society establishing its own HR, finance and IT systems.

However, financial savings are only part of the story – the value generated for local people and the impact made on their lives is the other side of the coin.

The community model has increased engagement with the 44 community groups representing hundreds of local volunteers, all working to enhance and support their local libraries which are still run by professional and trained staff.

This has resulted in a wide range and diversity of new ideas and activities including:

- an Arts Council-funded programme providing digital arts screenings in some libraries;
- innovations such as lending e-reader devices and iPads, in some cases linked to additional training sessions for older people on how to make the most of this technology;

- live music events in some libraries;
- the continued development and expansion of a unique library-based mental health and wellbeing information service – New Chapters;
- the co-location of district council customer services in some libraries, bringing in additional rental income and footfall; and

- the co-location of a post office in one library, also leading to greater library use

Suffolk Libraries is also a 'National Portfolio Organisation', with funding from the Arts Council to engage with young people. The successful bid focused on literature, storytelling and information, with the aim of using arts activities to address the most important issues for young people in Suffolk, including building digital and information skills and developing wellbeing and resilience strategies.

Suffolk Libraries projects have been shortlisted for the EDGE Libraries Conference awards four times, winning twice, and in 2017 its Chat n Chill sessions at Ipswich Library were shortlisted for the CILIP (the UK's library and information association) Libraries Change Lives award.

'It's been a transformation having Friends groups in Suffolk Libraries and, in our case, apart from raising funds to be able to do all this, we've actually opened the doors for young people and older people in so many ways. They've come to enjoy all sorts of activities from ancestry groups to bike maintenance, to Lego, manga club sewing bees, book sales. And we provided equipment for people to use in the community, in their homes.' Richard Fawcett, chair of the Friends of Thurston Library

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**Savings and income generation have come from new ideas – for instance, from commissioning a bespoke self-service web app and engaging in partnership with local businesses and other organisations to develop ideas to attract new income and visitors.**

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## The key elements of our success

Our success has been based upon:

- support from the community: the ability to engage and build relationships with already established local groups which were formed to campaign against closures;
- a positive approach to communication and engagement: consulting staff on changes and keeping them informed; and
- flexibility and freedom: savings and income generation have come from new ideas – for instance, from commissioning a bespoke self-service web app and engaging in partnership with local businesses and other organisations to develop ideas to attract new income and visitors

'From the start of our life as an independent organisation we have always taken an entrepreneurial approach. This is best illustrated by the development of our own bespoke self-service technology that can run on off-the-shelf tablets and has been designed with simplicity of use and maintenance in mind. This was a project supported by the county council and delivered by us, that effectively saved hundreds of thousands of pounds. We have also now had several conversations with the wider sector about reselling this new technology.' Bruce Leeke, Chief Executive Officer, Suffolk Libraries

## And if we were starting again...

If we were starting again, we would take even greater account of:

- the time and resources required to set up a new organisation – this is a marathon not a sprint and requires an effort well over and above the day job;
- the need to ensure that both staff and key stakeholders are involved and briefed fully and honestly at every stage;
- the reality that negotiating with former council colleagues can be challenging; and
- the fact that working outside the council will involve library leaders in mastering new areas of expertise – from contracting, to understanding cashflow and different types of governance

Building an entrepreneurial organisational culture is a particular challenge for any new organisation spun out of the public sector and the senior team at Suffolk Libraries had to think carefully about how to market and brand the new society, encourage staff to develop new services, and ensure the organisation was fully ready to meet its new contractual obligations.

In practical terms, the organisation has had to address issues such as:

- how to set up its systems to handle any income generated;
- how to exploit to the full the potential of its building assets to generate revenue while taking into account the service's social responsibilities; and
- how to design new supporter and membership schemes that would offer the potential for e.g. gifting

## Our key contacts

For initial enquiries, please contact **James Powell**, Marketing and Communications Manager, Suffolk Libraries [james.powell@suffolklibraries.co.uk](mailto:james.powell@suffolklibraries.co.uk)

### Bruce Leeke

Bruce Leeke joined Suffolk Libraries as Chief Executive in February 2017 and is proud to be part of such a passionate, impactful and resourceful organisation. Bruce started his career in conferences and events working for international media companies Emap and Lexis Nexis amongst others. He moved to the charity sector as Director of Events at the Institute of Fundraising, where he became the organisation's first Chief Operating Officer and later its Chief Executive. After nearly ten years, Bruce moved to St John Ambulance where he was a Regional Director before moving to Suffolk Libraries.

