

Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum

**Minutes of the Meeting held via Zoom on Tuesday, 22nd October, 2024,
at 2 pm**

Present:

Linda Hoggarth	Disability Forum for Suffolk (Chair)
Paul Kelly	Resident (Vice Chair)
Sue Able	Leading Lives
Sue Bale	Woodbridge Town Council
Simon Barnett	Integrated Transport & Enhanced Partnership Manager, Suffolk County Council
Nigel Crisp	Staff Manager – Ipswich Depot, First Bus
Deborah Darby	Melton Parish Council
Bryan Frost	Resident / Trimley St Mary Parish Council
Margaret Morris	Felixstowe Town Council (Secretary)
Joss Mullett	Communities Officer – Framlingham, Wickham Market & Surrounding Villages, East Suffolk Council
Steve Race	Manager, Disability Advice Service East Suffolk
Graham Walker	Chair, Disability Advice Service – East Suffolk

Guest:

Tim Willis	Deputy Electoral Services Manager, East Suffolk Council
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Apologies:

Helen Cumbers	Suffolk SENDIASS
Simon Daws	Resident / Suffolk Guide Dog Forum
Patricia Ferreira-Whittaker	Communities Officer – Beccles, Bungay & Halesworth, East Suffolk Council
Trevor Garrod	East Suffolk Travellers Association (ESTA)
Steve Hodgkiss	Suffolk Sight / Disability Forum for Suffolk
Oliver Horsman	National Disability & Carers Card
Sylvia Izzard	Resident
Linda Layton	Resident
Jenny Riddell-Carpenter	MP

1. Welcome & Introductions

Linda welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

2. Apologies

The above apologies were received and noted.

3. Accessible Voting

3.1 Tim Willis, Deputy Electoral Services Manager, East Suffolk Council was welcomed to the meeting and invited to explain the assistance given to disabled people to enable them to vote in general and local elections.

3.2 Tim said that he had been in post for eight years and was based at the Council's offices, Riverside, Lowestoft. Using slides, he explained that the aim was that all voters should be able to register and cast their votes without barriers.

3.3 The Election Act of 2022 brought in changes to assist voters with disabilities at Polling Stations. Voters can now choose anyone who is over 18 to accompany them to the polling station to help them vote.

3.4 Each polling station has a Presiding Officer who can also help people to complete their ballot paper. The Presiding Officer is bound by the Requirements for Secrecy and the vote will remain secret.

3.5 People with disabilities can also request reasonable adjustments to help them to vote. There is a note on each person's poll card giving the telephone number and email of the Returning Officer who can be contacted to make that request. The Returning Officer will respond.

3.6 There are 193 polling stations in East Suffolk. They are all assessed in advance for accessibility and that includes level access and a wheelchair accessible polling booth. Where possible, polling stations will have car parks close by to assist people with mobility difficulties.

3.7 There are a number of ways to assist voters with disabilities. These include large print ballot papers, magnifying glasses, tactile voting device, pencil grips, and seating. It is also possible to use text to speech apps, torches or magnifiers that people may have on their phones. However prior to using these, voters should inform the Presiding Officer of their intention.

3.8 It is also possible to request a postal vote and the papers can be provided in large print with the exception of the ballot paper. Voters can also have a permanent proxy vote.

3.9 Members then asked the following questions:

- What do you have to do to obtain a permanent proxy vote?

Response: Tim would provide a copy of the application form.

- Does the Council receive feedback on the steps taken?

Response: The Council acts to improve services such as ensuring there are doorbells at polling stations to assist people so that they no longer have to knock to attract attention. The officers inspecting polling stations include that in their visits. Staff wear pink lanyards so they can be more easily identified by voters.

- Can a person vote outside the polling station if they cannot gain access?

Response: This would be on a case by case basis. As a one-off a person could sit in their car to vote but it is not ideal and it would be better if this was discussed in advance with the Returning Officer.

- Voters with visual impairments still face considerable barriers to overcome if they wish to vote independently and confidentially, such as polling stations that are not equipped to deal with issues of visual impairment 'on the day'. One real problem is the awareness of staff and the training they have.

Response: All polling station staff have training, a mix of face to face and online training. It is essential to feedback the issues voters with visual impairments have in order to provide the service they need.

- One issue raised repeatedly is the handling of enquiries from visually impaired voters who have registered for postal votes. They feel fobbed off with statements such as they could get someone to help them at the polling station when their enquiry is about a postal vote.

- Can visually impaired people with a postal vote have their ballot paper in large print? Obtaining the other information in large print is not easy to achieve.

Response: No this cannot be done at present in order to maintain confidentiality. Any elector who has a specific request for a reasonable adjustment should telephone 01502 523251 and the Council will support those requests where possible.

- As most voters who are blind do not use braille, could their polling cards be sent to them by e-mail?

Response: Tim would look into the possibility of this.

Post Meeting Note: The provision of an e-mail polling card could be supported should it be requested by telephoning 01502 523251.

- Does the Council envisage a time when people will vote electronically?

Response: This may become possible in time but the Government would have to introduce this nationwide.

- When inspectors visit polling stations, do they consider whether the routes to and from the polling stations are accessible and also the possibility of assistance with transport?

Response: Polling stations are chosen in buildings that are used by local communities and preferably with car parks. However that may be difficult in some rural areas. It was noted that Community Transport could be used to provide transport to enable people to vote in person.

3.10 Tim was thanked for his presentation and for responding to members' questions and concerns. Tim would provide a copy of his slides and also the application form for a permanent proxy vote which will be circulated with the minutes.

4. National Disability & Carers Card Scheme

4.1 Unfortunately, Oliver Horsman, Partnerships Director, Disability ID was unwell and unable to join the meeting. This item will therefore be deferred to a future meeting.

5. Review of Terms of Reference & Election of Officers

5.1 Review of Terms of Reference: The Terms of Reference had been reviewed by the Planning Group and also the Waveney Disability Forum resulting in changes to Clauses 3.3 and 3.4. Members agreed these changes and the reviewed Terms of Reference will be dated and circulated to members.

5.2 Election of Officers: Joss took the chair for this item:

5.2.1 Officers were proposed as follows:

Chair	-	Linda Hoggarth, proposed by Steve Race and seconded by Paul Kelly
Vice Chair	-	Simon Daws, proposed by Linda Hoggarth and seconded by Bryan Frost
Secretary	-	Paul Kelly, proposed by Simon Daws and seconded by Margaret Morris

5.2.2 The above proposed and seconded officers were unanimously elected to serve for the next two years.

5.3 Members unanimously thanked Margaret for her sterling service as Secretary since the Forum was established. She has been instrumental in ensuring that the day to day work of the Forum has

been carried out. Members hoped that Margaret would continue to attend and support the work of the Forum going forward.

6. Minutes of the Meeting held on 16th July, 2024

6.1 The Minutes of the Meeting of the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum, held on 16th July, 2024, were agreed subject to clarification of Item 9.2 Bus Services where it was made clear that Simon Barnett had provided the update.

6.2 The slides presented by Chloe Robison-Smith, Environment Strategy Project Manager, Suffolk County Council, on electrical vehicle charging, would be circulated to members.

7. Matters Arising

7.1 Item 6.3 Beach Wheelchair: There had been some progress reported in the provision of a new beach wheelchair in Felixstowe but there was no definite news of this being in place as yet.

7.2 Item 9.1 Seating in Stores: The issue of the lack of seating in major department stores has been raised with Marks & Spencer who had thanked the Forum for bringing this to their attention. They would communicate the difficulties to the Manager of their Norwich store. Bryan would check whether any progress had been made when he next visited Norwich.

8. Issues, Concerns and News from Members

8.1 Changes to Waste Collections: Simon D had expressed his concerns regarding the upcoming changes to waste collections, noting that the increase in the number of bins would create difficulties for visually impaired people. It was agreed to ask Strategic Waste Management, East Suffolk Council to explain the changes and to address the concerns regarding the increase in bins and the lack of tactile signing on the bins.

Action: Planning Group

8.2 Suffolk Public Health: As part of the Annual Public Health Report for Suffolk this year, Public Health and Communities, in collaboration with the Integrated Care Academy are holding 3 healthy ageing challenge labs across Suffolk to discuss, innovate and collaborate on solutions to the complex challenge of healthy ageing. The challenge lab nearest to members is to be held on Thursday, 21st

November, 2024, at the University of Suffolk in Ipswich. Members interested can email the Secretary for further information.

8.3 BT Landlines: Further information had been received about the change over from BT Landlines as follows:

“The company will continue to maintain its strict policies to protect telecare users and vulnerable customers where they are made aware of their status and will continue to provide resilient solutions to customers who are dependent on their landline. These include:

- Providing free battery back-up units to customers with additional needs, such as those with health pendants, or who are over 70 or without mobile coverage. Battery back-up units enable calls in the event of a power outage and later this year, we will launch an advanced battery back-up unit outlasting most power cuts, with a battery life that far exceeds the minimum Ofcom requirements.
- Offering customers a hybrid phone with a battery back-up of eight hours and enabling calls over the mobile network in the event of a power outage.
- Continued investment in our leading 4G network, which is on course to pass 90% of the UK’s geographic landmass by the mid-2020s, building additional resilience into our core network and providing reliable connectivity to rural communities through the Shared Rural Network programme.
- Engineering appointments for all customers who identify as vulnerable and have additional needs, with the ability to nominate a family member, friend or carer to help them through the switch, who will receive all the information about switching on the customers behalf. Vulnerable customers will automatically receive the equipment they need and they won’t be switched until they have spoken to an advisor and booked an appointment.
- In home support for telecare users, known as ‘Prove IP Telecare’, due to launch in spring next year where an Openreach engineer will support a customer through the switch from an analogue to digital landline and will make sure that the telecare device is working before leaving the property. If the telecare device isn’t working, then the engineer will switch the customer back to an analogue landline.

BT Consumer will not move any of its customers who are known to be vulnerable or with additional needs until spring 2025 at the earliest, once the necessary data sharing agreements with Local Authorities or Telecare companies are in place and in-home support for telecare users is available.”

8.4 Access requirements in Planning Applications: Sue B raised concerns about the lack of access for people with disabilities in a particular planning application for a local community building. Members noted that, if this was a new build, then the building must be accessible and meet current building regulations. If this was a refurbishment, then access might be affected by cost and practicability. The Forum is a formal consultee for such planning applications but had not seen one that met this description.

8.5 Bus Services:

8.5.1 There were varying opinions about audio announcements on buses. For some people these were not loud enough and for some they were too loud. It was noted that this could be affected by where the passengers were seated. Members queried what feedback First Bus had received.

8.5.2 A concern was raised about the poor bus service to The Grove in Felixstowe. This would be followed up with First Bus.

Action: Nigel Crisp

8.6 Disability Advice Service – East Suffolk: Graham reported that the website has been revamped and the address is now <https://www.daseastsuffolk.org/>. He gave an overview of services provided and said that to promote awareness he was looking for case studies to help publicise the service in local magazines. Training to help employers employ more disabled people was also being developed. He offered to provide a more detailed update at a future meeting. This was noted by the Planning Group.

8.7 A12 Major Road Network Improvements: Deborah drew attention to Suffolk County Council's Consultation on the A12 Major Road Network Improvements and asked if the Forum had responded to this. It was noted that the Forum had not seen the consultation document but would respond and make comments before the cut-off date of the 29th October.

Action: Planning Group

9. Update from Healthwatch Suffolk

Sally Watson, Community & Engagement Manager, Healthwatch Suffolk has explained that no update was available due to pressure of work.

10. Information Round / Any Other Business

10.1 Ipswich Disabled Advice Bureau: Graham reported that the Ipswich Disabled Advice Bureau had closed. This has had an impact on the work of the Disabled Advice Service – East Suffolk in attempting to fulfil the void in disability advice services in Ipswich. Provided funding could be obtained, discussions were ongoing regarding outreach services.

11. Future Meetings

11.1 Topics for Future Meetings: The Planning Group would follow up the following suggestions:

- Waste Collection in East Suffolk – Waste Collection Team, East Suffolk Council – Joss would follow up this suggestion.
- Benefits of the National Disability and Carers Card – Oliver Horsman (outstanding)
- Jobcentre Plus (outstanding)

11.2 Meetings in 2025: The following dates have been set by the Planning Group:

Tuesday, 21st January, 2025, 2pm – 4pm

Tuesday, 15th April, 2025, 2pm – 4pm

Tuesday, 15th July, 2025, 2pm – 4pm

Tuesday, 21st October, 2025, 2pm – 4pm

11.3 Format of Meetings: Members remain content with the arrangements for on line meetings via Zoom as this made it easier for them to take part and avoided travel difficulties. However, it was thought that perhaps one of the four meetings should be face-to-face to enable members to see each other in person, possibly in Felixstowe or Woodbridge.

12. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, 21st January, 2025, from 2pm to 4pm, via Zoom. The link for the meeting will be sent out in due course.