

March 2026 Parish Report East Suffolk Council GLI Group – Councillor Update

£1.5m Thriving Places Fund Announced to Support East Suffolk's Smallest Communities

East Suffolk Council recently announced a new £1.5m programme that's set to revitalise the district's towns, village and rural communities.

Announced at the Town Councils' Conference held at High Lodge at Hinton, Saxmundham, the Thriving Places fund is planned to deliver projects that will strengthen the long-term resilience and sustainability of the district's smallest communities.

Launching in April 2026, the fund that will run for two years will be open to town and parish councils, CICs and social enterprises, charities and not for profit organisations and community groups to upgrade facilities, aims to help improve public spaces and make a difference to the lives of local people.

Leader of East Suffolk Council, GLI Cllr Caroline Topping said: "Our smaller communities are important to the fabric of East Suffolk, and we want to support them to be local centres of trade and ecommerce. A place for people to gather and places which build community understanding and cohesion, with that in mind, we are pleased to announce our Thriving Places Fund.

"Specifically targeted at smaller towns and communities in East Suffolk, this funding aims to revitalise and enhance local centres to encourage local enterprise, improve community participation, strengthen the local visitor and cultural economy, enable local carbon sustainable investment.

"We recognise the challenges our rural communities face – such as declining infrastructure, reduced access to services and the impact of social isolation, and to address the historical lack of place-based investment in these smaller communities, we are prioritising this funding support to meet each communities' specific needs. The Thriving Places Fund aims to address these challenges and empower each locality to develop projects that will have a lasting and positive impact on the lives of local people."

Communities can apply for grants of up to £50,000 to support local projects which aim to reduce inequalities in the area, help people to adapt to changes, help to protect important local assets like buildings or spaces, improve access to services, skills, wellbeing activities and local facilities and support long-term local growth.

Capital grants of between £10,00 and £50,000 will be available for purchasing or improving physical assets, while revenue grants between £5,000 and £25,000 can be utilised to cover project-specific activities and operational costs. Up to 60% of project costs will be covered by the new grants and up to 80% for successful applications from community and not-for-profit organisations. Each year communities can apply within four funding rounds, with the final decision made by a grant panel consisting of senior East Suffolk councillors and officers.

The fund is open to all areas of the district apart from the town council areas of Felixstowe and Lowestoft due to the significant Council and external funding both towns continue to benefit from such as the £20m in Pride of Place funding that's being awarded from central Government.

Further details on the funding will be available in April.

Youth Councillors visit heart of British democracy

The day started with a tour of Westminster Hall and the House of Commons, with Youth Councillors given many opportunities to learn about how the British democratic system works.

Youth Councillors were then able to ask Jess Asato MP questions, before holding a debate in the Boothroyd Committee Room, which fostered lots of discussion on a wide range of topics. Some of the issues raised throughout the day included social media and AI, violence against women and girls, community cohesion as well as the setbacks they face as young people living in a rural community.

The day was received positively by all Youth Councillors, with many feeling inspired to continue championing young people's voices both locally and nationally.

GLI Cllr Katie Graham, who attended the tour alongside the Youth Council, said:

"We should all feel proud of the Youth Councillors, who really showed their passion for representing young people in East Suffolk during their visit.

"I found the whole experience very uplifting, sitting in the halls of one of the world's most historic, and architecturally impressive democratic spaces, listening to our youth councillors engage so confidently and insightfully with the issues of their time."

Jess Asato, Member of Parliament for Lowestoft, said:

"It was fantastic to welcome East Suffolk Youth Council to Parliament and to see their curiosity first-hand. They certainly didn't hold back when we sat down in the committee room, I was properly grilled with some thoughtful and challenging questions.

"I particularly enjoyed hearing their mixed views on the role of social media in young people's lives. Seeing such engaged and passionate young people discussing the issues that matter to them is incredibly encouraging, and I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them ended up sitting on the green benches themselves one day."

The Youth Council was set up in 2024 to ensure the voices and concerns of younger residents are heard. It is an apolitical council, with its own rules of procedure designed to promote open discussion.

Youth from every secondary educational community in East Suffolk, including the homeschooled, are represented on the Youth Council.

Bringing Homes Back to Life in East Suffolk

So far in the financial year 2025/6 the Council has helped to bring 20 long term

empty properties back into use, with 25 returned to use for the previous year. In the district there are currently 652 long term empty properties, with the number of properties standing empty for ten or more years currently standing at 106.

Each year the Council reviews the number of empty properties and works closely with their owners to bring them back into use – either by providing financial support to get them ready for the housing market or giving them guidance on how they can sell or rent out their home.

Housing Renovation Grants of up to £15,000 can help owners to carry out improvement works to get the property ready for letting out to tenants. This funding can help cover costs such as electrical rewiring, installing first time central heating, or remedying significant damp or structural issues. To keep the grant, property owners must live in the home for 20 years or if they are renting it out, it must be charged at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates for 15 years, with council-referred tenants taken for the first two years.

Owners of properties in areas surrounding Sizewell could benefit from two grants to help them to provide accommodation to those working at Sizewell C. Grants of up to £7,000 per bedspace are available and can cover costs including structural works, electrical wiring, heating installation, windows and doors, plumbing, installing kitchen and bathroom facilities and additional parking. The grant will also support the creation of Homes of Multiple Occupancy (HMO) to licensable standards. Minor Works Grants can provide up to £3,000 per bedspace for people wishing to repurpose an unused bedroom within an existing home into accommodation for a Sizewell C worker. Additional Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) funding of up to £2,500 is also available where a property holds a valid EPC certificate of a rating D-G.

The Council provides support to empty homeowners if they are looking to sell by seeking valuations from local estate agents and working with local auctioneers who can offer reduced rates. Landlords can also be referred to East Suffolk Lettings which can help with renting properties and managing tenancies on the condition that rent is charged at LHA levels or within 10%, with a financial incentive offered as part of the sign-up process.

GLI Cllr David Beavan, East Suffolk's cabinet member for Housing said: "Empty homes are wasted resources that burden both taxpayers and local communities. In the midst of a housing crisis, it is unsustainable to allow vacancy rates to rise when these buildings could be repurposed to provide the much-needed homes our communities desperately need.

"While we are penalising owners of empty properties through long-term empty Council Tax premiums of up to 300% due to the impact they cause, we want to encourage owners to get in touch with our Private Sector Housing team so that we can support them. It's positive to see 20 homes brought back to life with the help of our team and we hope that by raising awareness of the problem, we can encourage more property owners to come forward."

Children Encouraged to Get into Gardening on World Book Day

Free Field to Fork activity booklets were distributed to primary school children in East Suffolk to help encourage a love of both reading and gardening.

1,750 children across the district received the booklets, which are designed to engage and inspire children to learn about gardening.

The booklets have been produced in collaboration with the Royal Horticultural Society, and include free nature activities, games and recipes.

Children will also be provided with a growing kit, which will include a variety of seeds, planters and accompanying gardening resources. These kits will complement the booklets, transforming each child's knowledge about gardening into practical skills.

GLI Cllr Sarah Whitelock, cabinet member for Communities, Culture, Leisure and Tourism, said:

"I am pleased to see our Field to Fork scheme once again supporting families with the cost of living, encouraging them to grow their own vegetables and giving them the tools to do so.

"These booklets also support the National Year of Reading, which is encouraging people across the UK to read about things that inspire them. In East Suffolk, these booklets will hopefully influence the next generation of gardeners and inspire more children to learn more about horticulture."

Sarah Galvin, RHS Head of National Community Programmes, said:

"We are delighted to have teamed up with East Suffolk Council to create these booklets as part of the Field to Fork scheme. Gardening with young people is a powerful way to spark curiosity about the natural world.

"From learning where our food comes from to improving health and wellbeing and caring for the environment, these hands-on experiences can ignite a passion, helping to kickstart the next generation's lifelong journey with gardening."

The Field to Fork booklet highlights the Council's support for the National Literacy Trust's National Year of Reading, for which East Suffolk Council is a pledge partner. Throughout 2026, the Council will be supporting other initiatives that encourage residents to get into reading.

Ease the Squeeze on Cost of Living

Are you, or someone you know, worried about the increasing cost of living? We understand the pressures faced by many people today and we are working closely with key partners to ensure support is available to help ease the squeeze for households in East Suffolk.

To make it as easy as possible for you to access the services and support available, locally and nationally, we have gathered information about them in one place:

www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/community/squeeze/

For the most up to date information regarding East Suffolk Council, please visit:
www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk

View the Well Minds East Suffolk booklet: tinyurl.com/9xhka624