Community

State of Children in Suffolk

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Contents

Key points

1. Communities are often regarded as geographical, where a group of people live in the same place. However, communities can also be centred around a specific social, leisure, economic or health activity, need, or interest, and where groups of people share the same characteristics, attitudes, or interests.
2. For children and young people, the first experience of community is usually the family unit into which they are born and raised, and the locality in which they grow up. Nursery and school also offer a sense of community, as do after school clubs and membership of a sports team or other common interest groups.
3. Resilient communities have an important role in action on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs have been found to have lifelong impacts on health and behaviour and they are relevant to all sectors and involve all of us in society.

The importance of community

Communities are often regarded as geographical, where a group of people live in the same place. However, communities can also be centred around a specific social, leisure, economic or health activity, need, or interest, and where groups of people share the same characteristics, attitudes, or interests. Communities are social structures where personal values, cultural values, business goals, attitudes or a world view are shared by members to provide a sense of connection and belonging.

For children and young people, the first experience of community is usually the family unit into which they are born and raised, and the locality in which they grow up. Nursery and school also offer a sense of community, as do after school clubs and membership of a sports team or other common interest groups. Increasingly online forums, messaging groups such as WhatsApp, and social media platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram also offer children and young people a sense of belonging, a sense of safety around knowing their place within a defined social structure.

Community - a sense of it and belonging to it - is a vital construct and experience for all children and young people. It enables them to develop the skills and experience needed to function within society, as well providing a safe and supportive environment in which to grow and develop. As quoted in a 2019 NHS Blog post by Professor Stephen Powis and Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy, "it takes a village to raise a child" (accessed December 2024), implying that for a child to grow and develop in a safe and healthy environment, "an entire community of people must interact" with them. Healthy communities provide children and young people with self-confidence and self-esteem, and ultimately sets "the foundation for a well-functioning and healthy adulthood" (Office for National Statistics, Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018, 2018).

Healthy communities are those in which children and young people can develop a sense of belonging, form healthy relationships and social networks, feel safe and cared for, and build resilience. Resilience has been defined as "a combination of assets, capabilities and positive adaptation that enables people and communities to cope with adversity" (Local Government Association, Ziglio, E. et al., Resilience as a major asset to improve population health and wellbeing, accessed December 2024).

Shared identity communities, such as LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning and ace) or minority ethnic groups, offer peer support and a sense of belonging to a specific group or culture.

Unhealthy communities are those that do not provide children and young people with a safe environment in which to grow and develop successfully and may leave them feeling lonely and disconnected from the world around them. Examples might include a disorganised and unpredictable home environment, or a social media group that promotes unhealthy or even destructive behaviours and attitudes. This chapter focuses primarily on healthy communities; please see the State of Children in Suffolk Feeling Safe chapter for further information on some unhealthy communities that children and young people may be involved in.

Types of community

Communities in which children and young people can be/are a part of include:

- Family – immediate and wider family relations
- Physical locality or location – such as a neighbourhood or village/town
- Education based – nursery, school, college, university
- Leisure/team based – such as a sports team, or dance/theatre group, youth centre
- Shared communities that offer peer support, such as:
  - LGBTQ+ community
  - Groups based on ethnicity or national identity
  - Faith-based communities
  - Children in care and care leaver communities
  - Groups for children and young people with disabilities, long-term health conditions
  - Mental health support groups
- Online - social media, online forum, messaging groups

Family

> *Family has a 'protective effect'. These core protective elements of family are love, strong and enduring relationships, the ability to depend on one another for emotional and practical support and shared experiences.*
> Children's Commissioner for England, blog post, 1 September 2022

The family unit into which children are born is the first community type structure most individuals experience. In these early years of development, this community teaches children and young people about structure and boundaries, as well as developing relationships with the immediate and wider family members. A healthy family community provides the foundation on which individuals move through their lives, taking the learning and development into wider society and relationships.

The quality of family relationships is one of the three most significant aspects of life contributing to a child's overall sense of wellbeing (Office for National Statistics, Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018, 2018). In 2023, 86.0% of children in England had

"high" or "very high happiness with family relationships" (Office for National Statistics, [Children's wellbeing measures](#), 2024).

Family life in the UK is continually changing. Around 1 in 4 children under 15 no longer lives with both biological parents, "around a third of families with children have been a single parent at some point" ([Family portrait](#), University of Sheffield, 2018), cohabitation is increasing, and children are now leaving their parental homes far later (Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. [Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study](#), 2021).

Not all children and young people grow up in a healthy family community. Children are at risk of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which have lifelong impacts on health and behaviour. More detail is given in the [State of Children in Suffolk](#) who might need additional support.

A healthy family community around the child may provide support and safety in challenging situations. The first 1,001 days of a child's life are crucial in 'setting the scene' for their behaviour, decision-making and reactions in adult life (HM Government, [The best start for life](#), 2021). Those that experience an unhealthy family community in their formative years may face many further challenges into adulthood.

Support includes [Home Start in Suffolk](#), the county's largest family support charity. It provides informal support to families under stress in their own homes, offering emotional support if parents/carers need someone to talk to, but also practical support such as helping to get the family to the shops. The scheme aims to ensure that 'every child in Suffolk is given the best start in life because of the love, support, and guidance they received from their parents, guardians or the people performing the role of their parents.

Deprivation

Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in shaping outcomes for Suffolk's children. In 2022/23, 15.5% of children aged 0-15 were living in relative low-income families (Suffolk Observatory, [Deprivation report for Suffolk](#), accessed December 2024), with significant variation across the county. Ipswich had over 20% of children in this category. The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) further highlights disparities, with Ipswich having 11.8% of its Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the 10% most deprived nationally. Other areas of the county also experience significant childhood poverty, such as Harbour & Normanston ward in Lowestoft where over 1 in 3 (37.7%) children are living in poverty (compared to less than 1 in 5/17.1% across England).

Lone parents

> *There is no evidence of a negative impact of living in a single parent household on children's wellbeing, with regard to self-reported life satisfaction, quality of peer relationships, or positivity about family life.*
> *([Family portrait](#), University of Sheffield, 2018)*

However, life can be harder for lone parents: 49% of children in single parent households were in relative poverty after housing costs, compared to 25% of children in a household with a couple ([Support for single parent families](#), House of Commons Library, 2023).

There were estimated to be around 19,500 lone parent households with dependent children in Suffolk in 2023, which is approximately 1 in 5 (21.3%) of all households with dependent children (Table 1), however this estimate is potentially unreliable due to sample sizes. The England percentage is 23.5%. In 2021, the equivalent Census figure for Suffolk was 24.1% (Office for National Statistics, Households with dependent children, Census 2021).

Table 1: Lone parent households with dependent children*, Suffolk and England, Census 2021 figures and estimates from the Annual Population Survey 2023

Area	Count, Census 2021	% of all households, Census 2021	Estimated count, APS 2023**	Estimated % of all households with dependent children APS 2023**	Dependent children* with a lone parent (count, APS 2023)**
Babergh	3,320	8.3%	3,400	30.1%	3,900
East Suffolk	9,667	8.7%	5,600	19.7%	10,400
Ipswich	7,042	11.8%	!	!	!
Mid Suffolk	3,417	7.7%	!	!	!
West Suffolk	6,810	8.6%	6,300	32.5%	9,600
Suffolk	**30,256**	**9.1%**	**19,500**	**21.3%**	**28,200**
East	268,439	10.2%	138,700	18.0%	251,800
England	2,594,901	11.1	1,624,300	23.5%	2,781,000

*"Dependent children" are those living in families who are either aged under 16 years, or aged 16 to 18 years and who are in full-time education, excluding children aged 16 to 18 years who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household.

**This estimate is potentially unreliable due to sample sizes – for all geographies.

! Figure is unavailable as the group sample size is disclosive (0-2) or the estimate is less than 500.

Sources: 2021 Census TS003, 2023 Annual Population Survey households with dependent children and type

Inequalities: cost of living

The cost of participating is prohibitive for some families. With the cost of living increasing, the pressure on families - particularly those on low incomes - to be able to afford even basic necessities is squeezed, leaving limited financial resources for their children to attend, for example, some leisure activities that would benefit their physical and mental wellbeing.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of students were either 'worried' or 'very worried' about the rising cost of living on their lives, and the lives of their families, with another 41% "a little worried" (Healthwatch Suffolk My health, our future report (2024, Phase 7))

More information is given in the Suffolk cost of living dashboard & report.

Neighbourhood

After their family unit, the geographic location or neighbourhood in which a child grows up offers a potential sense of community. There is variation in the sense of community within geographic localities; some villages for example have a clear identity and cohesion, whilst other areas have a limited sense of community, perhaps being little more than a collection of

households and business sharing the same geographic space but with little connection or cohesion between them.

The perception of where they live can impact upon a child's participation in local activities in addition to their ability and confidence to play outside and make friends with other local children (Office for National Statistics, [Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018](link), 2018). In 2023, 41.1% of children in England "felt welcome at natural outdoor spaces near them" (Office for National Statistics, [Children's wellbeing measures](link), 2024).

The Suffolk [Youth Focus Programme](link) (provided by Community Action Suffolk and funded by Suffolk County Council and the Collaborative Communities Board) - recognises the crucial role people within local communities – shopkeepers, youth workers, sports coaches, neighbours – have in supporting local young people to develop a sense of belonging as well as encouraging them to aspire, thrive and grow: *'...the value of positive interaction with trusted adults cannot be under-estimated. Positive relationships and community connections raise self-esteem, build confidence and resilience.'*

Inequalities in communities

> *It's not that the residents of these neighbourhoods lack the skills, commitment or rich heritage to turn things around themselves. These are often neighbourhoods with a strong sense of belonging and identity; locals are often painfully aware of the untapped potential that exists. The real deficit lies in the support that these areas have access to.*
> *Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Focusing on doubly-disadvantaged neighbourhoods](link), 2024*

Services and assets
Inequality of access and cost of living pressures increase health inequalities, as those in more deprived areas face greater challenges and fewer opportunities to improve their physical and mental wellbeing compared to those living in less deprived areas. Where "deprivation has combined with a depletion of social infrastructure - the hollowing out of community places and spaces, civic and associated activity, as well as physical and digital connectedness with the world beyond", neighbourhoods may not only feel 'left behind' but also ill-equipped to catch up (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [Focusing on doubly-disadvantaged neighbourhoods](link), 2024).

Natural environment
A child growing up in one of the most deprived communities is more likely to live in an area with less access to green space ([Inequalities in access to green space](link), Health Foundation, 2024).

Education

The school a child attends also forms another community. The class(es) of which they are part form their peer groups, as does the establishment of chosen friendship groups. Research shows that relationships with friends are an important contributor to a child's wellbeing (Office for National Statistics, [Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018](link), 2018). In 2023, 67.2% of children in England had "high" or "very high happiness with the school they go to" (Office for National Statistics, [Children's wellbeing measures](link), 2024).

Within the school environment a child may additionally be part of different clubs or teams with a shared interest or characteristic, such as a sports team, or theatre/dance/singing group. In the case of sport or related teams, competitions with teams from other schools can build a sense of community and belonging as the child acts as a representative of their school community.

School is often where children start to form their first friendship groups. Being surrounded by others through choice, where there are shared interests and where bonds of trust and care can form provides an identity and sense of belonging to the group members.

Sport and other activities

Sport and leisure facilities not only contribute to the physical and mental wellbeing of the residents of Suffolk, but also act as community assets to bring together individuals with shared interests or circumstances, thereby improving community links and cohesion, and building social capital. Assets of community value (like parks and green spaces, or sports buildings) can be recorded by district or borough councils for "the wellbeing or social good of the local community" (for example, Mid Suffolk District Council, Community Rights, 2024).

Ipswich Town Foundation (of Ipswich Town Football Club - ITFC) offers a range of open access activities for children and young people as well as football development for boys and girls. Open access activities include frame football (for children aged 4-16 who use walking aids), and refugee football (for refugees and asylum seekers over the age of 16).

Libraries provide and host a variety of community based activities, alongside the provision of books, online lending schemes, access to the internet and mobile library services. There are 45 static libraries, offering activities across all age groups aiming to provide opportunities for social connection and communication via a shared hobby or activity. These include reading and literacy groups, craft or game based groups, and sing along groups targeted at children or at teenagers and young adults (Suffolk libraries events).

Communities - examples

Individuals with shared characteristics, beliefs, values, and/or circumstances can also form distinct communities. Children and young people may identify or feel a sense of belonging with people that share, for example, the same ethnic group, the same faith, or who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. The circumstances that some children and young people face may create a shared experience that fosters a sense of community or belonging, peer support, and belonging.

National and local services and organisations support children and young people in these communities. Suffolk InfoLink is an online directory of local (and some national) community and voluntary organisations, clubs, societies, and services that can support.

Data on some of these groups is also contained in other sections of the State of Children in Suffolk:

- Ethnicity - population and families

- Children and young people with a disability - children and young people who may need extra support
- Those experiencing mental ill health - mental health
- Children in care or care leavers - children and young people who may need extra support

Gypsy, Roma and Travellers

The umbrella term Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) describes a diverse minority group who come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. GRT are known to experience poorer health and educational outcomes, to face racial discrimination and to be victims of hate crime (House of Commons, Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, 2019).

Data from January 2024 shows there were 346 Traveller caravans in Suffolk (Official statistics, Traveller caravan count). Nearly a third of these (111 caravans) were based in Mid Suffolk. There were also 17 caravans belonging to Travelling Showpeople, all in Mid Suffolk. Only one traveller site was listed, Romany Lane in East Suffolk with 24 pitches.

In 2024, 753 pupils in Suffolk were recorded as having "Gypsy/Roma" or "Traveller of Irish heritage" ethnicity (Table 2).

Table 2: Children and young people with Gypsy/Roma and Traveller ethnicity, 2023/24

School	White - Gypsy/Roma	White - Traveller of Irish heritage	Total GRT	Total pupil population
State-funded primary	511	22	**533**	56,649
State-funded secondary	199	6	**205**	45,849
State-funded special school	15	0	15	1,621
Total pupils	725	28	753	104,243

Include state-funded nursery, primary, secondary, alternative provision (AP) schools and special schools, and non-maintained special schools. Does not include independent schools
Source: DfE, Pupil characteristics - number of pupils by ethnicity and language, 2024.

According to the 2021 Census, there were 375 "Gypsy or Irish Traveller" people aged 24 or under, and 411 Roma (Office for National Statistics, Census 2021: RM032 - Ethnic group by sex by age).

For more information – see the Gypsy Roma Traveller needs assessment (Suffolk Public Health, 2023).

Sexual identity

According to 2021 Census responses, 4,512 people in Suffolk aged 16 to 24 have a sexual orientation "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Other (LGB+)" (Office for National Statistics, Census 2021: RM122 - Sexual orientation by age and sex).

13% of respondents (n=1,763) to the latest Healthwatch Suffolk My health, our future report (2024, Phase 7) were from students who identified as LGBTQ+. 36% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling close to others "all of the time" or "often", compared to over half (52%) of heterosexual students. Feeling close to others "has previously shown to have a significant influence on overall wellbeing" (Healthwatch Suffolk My health, our future report (2024, Phase 7)).

Gender identity

According to 2021 Census responses, 514 people in Suffolk aged 16 to 24 identified as trans or another gender identity (Table 3).

Table 3: Gender identity, Suffolk residents aged 16-24, Census 2021

Gender identity	Aged 16 to 24	All ages (total)
Gender identity the same as sex registered at birth	64,302	593,580
Gender identity different from sex registered at birth but no specific identity given	167	1,017
Trans woman	97	443
Trans man	168	475
All other gender identities	249	498
Not answered	3,661	34,347
Total	68,644	630,360

(Office for National Statistics, Census 2021: RM035 - Gender identity by age).

Students who preferred to describe their gender another way were the least likely to experience a sense of closeness to others (30%) (Healthwatch Suffolk My health, our future report (2024, Phase 7)).

Care leavers

A national online survey of care leavers by Ofsted ("Ready or not", Ofsted, 2022) found that many did not have a sense of community after leaving care, reporting that they felt 'alone' or 'isolated'. Around two thirds of respondents said they had no say in where they lived when they left care, and some felt unsafe because they were living on their own, or in an area regarded as high in criminal activity. Many did not know where to find support for their mental and emotional wellbeing. As a result of this survey, three recommendations were identified: care leavers to be told about available support; help for care leavers to stay in touch with key people; and working with care leavers to ensure they have the skills they need before the leave care (such as how to manage money, how to shop, how to cook).

The Suffolk Leaving Care Service provides a welcome pack to young people joining the service which gives advice to start independent living and shares knowledge from other young people who have leaving care experience, for example The Skinflints Cookbook.

Online communities

There is some evidence that social media can have a beneficial impact on friendships. However, there are potentially negative consequences of excessive social media use, such as cyberbullying, and the fear of missing out. In this way, online forums, chat rooms, and message groups have the potential to be both healthy and unhealthy communities for children and young people (Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2024, Ofcom).

Healthwatch Suffolk's 2019/20 My health, our future report noted that a third (34%) of young people aged 11-19 years used social media for between two to three hours each day, although nearly half (48%) of all young people aged 15 used social media for more than four hours a day.

Children (aged 8-17) are more likely to be "passive" than "active" users of social media: 44% "like" and follow accounts, 27% read things they see on these sites or apps, while 28% are active users who share, comment, post or like posts (Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2024, Ofcom).

Younger children (aged 5 to 7) are using online services more, which may increase risks:

- Over half send messages or make voice/video calls (65%),
- Half watch livestreaming apps or sites (50%),
- Around 2 in 5 game online (41%) or use social media apps or sites (from 30% to 38%).

Almost one in eight (12%) respondents to the Healthwatch survey reported being bullied online within the last two months. For further information about bullying and cyberbullying, see 'Feeling Safe' in the State of Children in Suffolk.

An association between the time spent by children and young people looking at a screen - screen time – and the parent-children relationship was identified in the same report. Those children and young people who reported higher levels of screen time were not only less likely to say that their parents were important for support with their mental health, but also less likely to approach them for support.

Unhealthy communities

Not all communities are beneficial to children and young people's wellbeing, even though they may provide a sense of identity and belonging. If a child has grown up in an unhealthy family environment, a sense of belonging may be achieved by contact and involvement with groups/communities that take advantage of the vulnerability of such individuals.

The pressure to feel connected or belong to an identified group or community in order to have a perceived identity can lead to children and young people joining groups that may not have the best interests of individuals in mind. This can lead to bullying (whether online or in person) or in more serious cases, long term and harmful consequences that follow the individual into adulthood.

Children may be exploited by criminals who may groom or manipulate them online or in the community, for example for "County Lines" (Suffolk Safeguarding Partnership, Gangs, Criminal Exploitation & County Lines). Belonging to communities like these is detrimental to healthy development and future opportunities. 'Feeling Safe' in the State of Children in Suffolk has further information.