

Suffolk's Coastal Communities

Headline Report

July 2025



Public Health
& Communities



SQW



Foreword

Suffolk's coastal communities are rich in beauty and heritage - but, in common with coastal communities across Britain, people living within them can also face persistent barriers to wellbeing and opportunity. This research, undertaken by SQW and Social Life, offers a timely and in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, strengths and complexities of our coastal communities.

SQW and Social Life were commissioned by the Public Health and Communities team to undertake research that combines a broad quantitative analysis of all Suffolk coastal communities with a more focused qualitative deep dive into four areas: Aldeburgh, Hollesley, Kessingland and Reydon. This dual approach allows us to understand both the wider patterns and the specific lived realities that shape community wellbeing and resilience.

While the quantitative report highlights key data trends, the qualitative research brings those numbers to life. It offers depth, context and humanity—real people, real voices, and real experiences. Some of the views shared may include language or perspectives that are challenging to hear—but they are no less important. In fact, they are vital. These are the local voices that are often underrepresented in traditional engagement processes, and it is only by listening to them fully and respectfully that we can begin to understand the true complexity of community life and respond in ways that are meaningful and inclusive.

This work is not just a reflection of the current state of our coastal communities—it is a springboard for action. The findings will inform the work of public sector partners—from district and borough councils to town and parish councils—by providing a clearer picture of local needs and aspirations.

Cllr Steve Wiles

Cabinet Member and Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board Chairman, Suffolk County Council

Stuart Keeble

Director of Public Health, Public Health and Communities, Suffolk County Council

Approach to the study

In order to explore the lived experiences, strengths and complexities of our coastal communities, **SQW** and **Social Life** completed two different programmes of research.

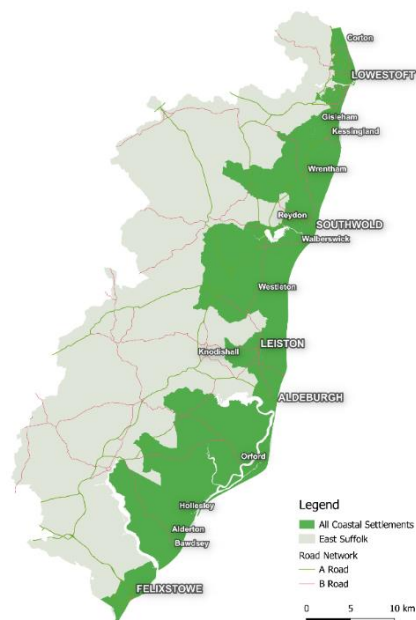
Quantitative research

SQW prepared a thorough **socio-economic baseline** which was shaped by indicators linked to wellbeing. The baseline drew on publicly available datasets. The subsequent analysis considered each of 17 individual coastal settlements. But it also made use of two different aggregate definitions. These were labelled **All Coastal Settlements** and **Smaller Coastal Communities**; the difference between the two was the approach to Lowestoft¹ and Felixstowe. Whilst both towns are clearly coastal, they account for over 70% of the population of Suffolk's coastal settlements – and therefore their exclusion from the second definition allowed a lens on 15 smaller coastal towns and villages. Felixstowe and (especially) Lowestoft are already well researched and for this reason, the primary focus was **Smaller Coastal Communities**.

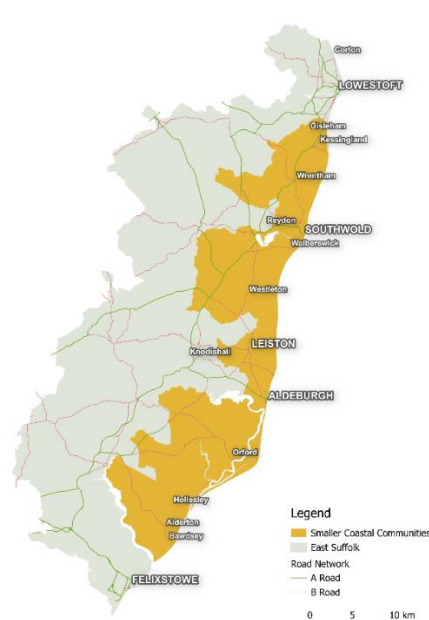
⇒ *The detailed findings from the data analysis are set out in **Evidence Report 1** (which includes a technical account of how data were aggregated using different boundaries).*

Figure 1-1: Defining Suffolk's coastal communities

All Coastal Settlements



Smaller Coastal Communities



Source: SQW. Note that coastal settlements are mapped on best fit LSOA boundaries. A full explanation of the approach to mapping is provided in Evidence Report 1

¹ The geographical definitions for Lowestoft do not match the built-up area of Lowestoft, as the parish, LSOA and MSOA definitions have been best-matched onto the geographical boundary that is defined within the Suffolk Annual Public Health Report 2022. The built-up area of Lowestoft had a population of approximately 71,327 in 2021 (based on ONS 2021 Population Estimates).

Qualitative Research

In parallel, **Social Life** conducted **in-depth qualitative research** which set out to explore the health, wellbeing, resilience and aspirations of Suffolk's coastal communities. This focused on four settlements (all of which are located within the area defined as **Smaller Coastal Communities**): Aldeburgh, Kessingland, Reydon and Hollesley. These were chosen in discussion with Suffolk County Council to reflect the range of circumstances across smaller coastal towns and villages. Social Life's work relied on: online scoping and stakeholder interviews; intensive fieldwork (which was mostly conducted in autumn 2024) in each place through a total of 152 street interviews; and two or three discussion groups in each settlement which targeted residents who had not otherwise been engaged.

⇒ *The methodology and findings from the qualitative research completed by Social Life are written up in detail and presented in **Evidence Report 2**.*

Figure 1-2: Key definitions used in this report



Coastal... is defined as areas that are heavily influenced by, and characterised by, their proximity to Suffolk's coastline (as set out in Suffolk's Annual Public Health Report 2022²)



Community... is defined on a spatial basis to enable research, mapping and analysis. *Throughout this report, a 'coastal community' is synonymous with a 'coastal settlement'.*

Our definitions of '**Suffolk's coastal communities**' are provided above.



Wellbeing... refers to '*how we are doing*' (individually and collectively), and '*how sustainable that is for the future*'. It draws on the work of the *What Works Centre for Wellbeing*³



Resilience... refers to the capacity of a community to cope with shocks of different forms and over different timescales – whether economic (e.g. the loss of a major employer), health-related (e.g. the pandemic) or environmental (e.g. coastal erosion, flooding or drought).

² Core20PLUS5 in Suffolk: Suffolk Annual Public Health Report, Suffolk County Council, 2022

³ What is Wellbeing?, What Works Centre for Wellbeing website, <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/aboutwellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/>

The two Evidence Reports combined provide a perspective on ‘how Suffolk’s coastal communities are doing’ in relation to a range of wellbeing, health and socio-economic indicators. These indicators were selected based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Domains of National Wellbeing and for which data is available at a granular scale, so that analysis can be conducted at a community level.

Figure 1-3: Framework for measuring wellbeing in Suffolk’s coastal communities



Source: SQW, 2025

Headlines from the qualitative research in four coastal communities



Headlines from the qualitative research in four coastal communities

The qualitative research was completed by Social Life. It set out to explore the health, wellbeing, resilience and aspirations of Suffolk's coastal communities.

Social Life found that the four villages – Aldeburgh, Hollesley, Kessingland and Reydon – have more similarities than differences. Where there are contrasting perceptions, these are related to a number of factors: geographic location; extent of geographical isolation; size of visitor economy and second-home ownership; planned and actual new housing development and other large-scale infrastructure; and proximity to large towns.

How people feel about their area

- Across all the coastal communities, **eight out of ten people interviewed were positive about their area**. These positive feelings were evident across responses to multiple questions. Nearly a third said they have “no dislikes”.
- When asked to give three words to describe their community, **people most frequently used words describing the outdoors and natural beauty**. People also spoke positively about the local community and its friendliness.
- **One in ten people used words that reflected tensions between second-home owners and visitors and local, permanent communities**. These tensions were prevalent across responses, a number of people described a lack of affordable activities, shops and services serving the full-time community.
- A small number used words that describe the **more challenging aspects of rural living: remoteness and lack of public transport** can compound a sense of isolation and make access to shops and services expensive. A small number of people expressed anxiety about their community changing; an equal number noted a lack of age and ethnic diversity.
- The most **disliked feature** across all four communities was the **lack of activities, amenities and services**. This includes specific concerns about a lack of activities for young people. Traffic and roads were often mentioned. This includes problems caused by agricultural vehicles and construction traffic, poor footpaths, issues with parking and road closures.

Feelings about the community

- Around **a third of people felt that they can have influence over what happens in the area**. This was associated with being involved in a community group or engaging with the parish council. Half of those who felt they did not have influence said they were not interested, had no time or did not know how to get involved. One in five had negative views of the parish council.

Feelings about COVID-19 and the rising cost-of-living

- **Around half of the people interviewed feel that there is no lasting ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.** One in five people reported positive experiences of the pandemic. This included spending time at home and an appreciation of the countryside and natural environment.
- Ongoing negative impacts of the pandemic included **social isolation** - across age groups, but particularly among older people - and impacts on physical and mental health. The ongoing impact on children and young people's wellbeing and social development was mentioned by some parents and grandparents; these effects were described as severe.
- Local business owners described the **challenges of survival under lockdown restrictions**, when tourism and footfall reduced.
- **Half of those interviewed were concerned about costs rising overall**, and specifically mentioned housing, petrol, and utilities or energy bills. One in five described acute impacts. A similar proportion identified problems paying for food or highlighted the need for food support in the community. There were descriptions of how localised issues - including work, housing costs and available shops - intensifies the crisis

Hopes and fears for the future

- **Over half of people surveyed said they hope that their community stays the same.** This included the area retaining its quiet character and staying a good place for children and families.
- Almost **one third wanted improvements to amenities** including health care, childcare and activities for young people, shops and affordable housing. A similar proportion wanted to keep and build the community by engaging with social activities. A smaller proportion hoped there would be no increase in tourism and that their area would not become overdeveloped. One in ten want to see improved transport and reduced traffic.
- Concerns about **housing, livelihood and affordability** alongside worry over the **impacts of new development and blight** were the most frequently mentioned fears for the future. Housing concerns were the largest area of worry, particularly the ability to stay in the area, about young people having to leave the place where they grew up due to high house prices or about pressures on existing infrastructure and supports.
- **A quarter of people said they were concerned about the impacts of climate change**, including rising sea levels, flooding and coastal erosion.

Support and facilities

- Almost **seven in ten people surveyed felt there are things missing in their coastal community.**
- **Limited access to healthcare and a lack of public transport** were the most frequently mentioned as well as a need for childcare, parental support or activities for young people.
- Around a **quarter of people felt nothing was missing** and that the services are sufficient.

Key themes and findings for each settlement are set out below.

Aldeburgh

- Aldeburgh's success as a holiday town and cultural centre brings money to the local economy and means the town is lively most of the year round. However, it is also blamed for inflating house prices beyond the reach of local people and turning the high street into somewhere that caters for wealthy visitors rather than locals. Increasing house prices make it difficult for younger people to stay in the town when they leave home.
- Residents describe a strong sense of community, in that people know each other and come together to socialise. However, there are fears that the growing visitor population is eroding this. The rural location and being right by the sea are associated with good quality of life, providing places to walk, find peace and enjoy nature. The coastal location restricts new development.
- When asked to describe Aldeburgh in three words, most people used words describing the coast and Aldeburgh's natural beauty, such as "picturesque", "beautiful" and "bucolic".
- Development of Sizewell C and Energy Coast infrastructure are seen as bringing positives and negatives. Sizewell is a key employer, offering high wages for the area. However, there are concerns that construction will cause traffic congestion on already overloaded roads. There are fears that other Energy Coast infrastructure will compromise the natural landscape, which is loved by local people and considered a draw for the visitor economy.

Hollesley

- Hollesley is the most geographically isolated of the places we visited. It is the largest village on the Deben Peninsular and there is poor public transport and limited road access. This shapes the character of the village and how people feel about living there, many describing it as peaceful and remote. People love the beauty of the heathland setting, the nearby forest and the vast shingle beach at Shingle Street, which is considered part of the village.
- There is a sense that the community is welcoming, supportive and friendly, and there are strong social networks. The church, village hall and pub, the café at the prison and Suffolk Punch Trust are popular social hubs. There are complaints about traffic and roads, exacerbated by slow-moving agricultural vehicles and regular surface flooding cutting off routes into the village and occasionally preventing children from getting to school. For some people the rising cost of living is a concern but others are less affected by this.
- When asked to describe Hollesley in three words, most people used words describing the countryside, coast and natural beauty, such as “quiet”, “scenic” and “friendly”.
- There are concerns about visitor numbers rising, particularly given the increased popularity of Shingle Steet. There are relatively few second homes. Residents say that they do not want this to change and they do not want to see the type of tourist development that has affected other villages. However, most people who have moved to the village to become permanent residents report that they have been made to feel welcome.

Kessingland

- People in Kessingland value its close, supportive community and its rural location by the sea. It attracts holidaymakers to static caravan parks and a few Airbnb properties. The village is an affordable option for people wishing to retire to the coast and therefore has an older demographic.
- Geographically it is a town of two halves: Kessingland Beach, which is popular with dog walkers, and the upper part of the town where key social infrastructure such as the primary school, sports centre, library, parish council and high street are located. There is also a large traveller community on its outskirts.
- When asked to describe Kessingland in three words, most people used words describing the countryside, coast and natural beauty, such as “idyllic”, “peaceful” and “seaside”.
- There are several places and groups offering spaces and activities to support wellbeing and socialising, including some popular pubs and a sports centre offering a busy programme. There is pressure on healthcare, with many complaints about the difficulty of getting a GP appointment, lack of dentist, and difficulty getting to local hospitals if you don’t drive.
- New development is a cause of concern, as is access to health care and poor provision of public transport.

Reydon

- Reydon abuts the popular seaside town of Southwold; being set slightly inland it does not experience the same number of visitors and second-home ownership, but residents still have access to the amenities of the larger town. Some holiday home ownership has begun to spill over into Reydon, putting pressure on housing.
- People value proximity to the countryside and are keen to protect the village from electricity cabling coming ashore here. They enjoy being able to reach the sea quickly.
- When asked to describe Reydon in three words, most people offered words describing the sense of community and friendliness, such as “friendly”, “safe” and “community-spirited”.
- Residents consider it a safe, friendly place, with a strong community, and a good place to raise a family – although more support for families is needed. The village hall and the sports centre both offer regular community events and activities.
- There is poor public transport and concerns about road congestion and flooding. The village has been expanding over the past few decades, with more development planned. There are worries that this will change the character of the village and put pressure on roads and healthcare.

Findings in relation to wellbeing and resilience

From the qualitative research, Social Life was able to draw out some important findings in relation to wellbeing – and specifically, what supports it and what undermines it.

<i>Wellbeing is supported by...</i>	<i>Wellbeing can be undermined by...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the existence of strong community networks and strong local relationships relatively strong social infrastructure, particularly facilities and activities run by parishes and voluntary and community sector groups, together with informal social supports from cafes, pubs and shops access to sea, beach, nature and landscape, giving good potential for exercise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increased social isolation across age groups in the aftermath of COVID-19 the consequences of COVID-19 on children's development, affecting families as well as children some weaknesses in social infrastructure provided by statutory bodies, access to healthcare was identified as weak, public transport is now weaker than in previous years the impact of the cost of living on people who are financially vulnerable the impact of limited affordable housing options for people without secure housing options or the resources to secure this anxieties caused by change, particularly housing growth or new infrastructure a sense of loss of identity and rising costs caused by large second-home ownership and tourism.

Resilience is strongly related to wellbeing. Many of the factors that become protective factors or risk factors mirror those that either support or undermine wellbeing. **Protective factors** and **risks** are not evenly distributed and relate to personal circumstances - particularly income, health and housing situation – as well as geographical location and wider societal issues.

<i>Protective factors for resilience are...</i>	<i>Risks for resilience are...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the existence of strong community networks and strong local relationships relatively strong social infrastructure, particularly facilities and activities run by parishes and voluntary and community sector groups, together with informal social supports from cafes, pubs and shops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> increased social isolation across age groups in the aftermath of COVID-19 the consequences of COVID-19 on children's development, affecting families as well as children some weaknesses in social infrastructure provided by statutory bodies, access to healthcare was

<i>Protective factors for resilience are...</i>	<i>Risks for resilience are...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to sea, beach, nature and landscape, giving good potential for exercise • relative affluence and access to resources among much of the population • housing security and stability for much of the population • good mental health among the majority of the population. 	<p>identified as weak, public transport is now weaker than in previous years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • financial vulnerability and precarity among a sizeable minority • increasing house prices in some areas and housing precarity, quality and access among a sizeable minority • access to work for those who are not in stable jobs or work that can be done from home • seasonal employment limiting winter earnings • a sense of loss of identity and rising costs caused by large second-home ownership and tourism.

Socio-economic profile of Suffolk's coastal communities








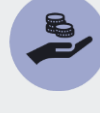

Headlines from the socio-economic profile

The socio-economic profile (Evidence Paper 1) provides an insight into the current health, wellbeing and wider socio-economic characteristics of Suffolk's coastal communities.

Profile of Suffolk's coastal communities in aggregate

Based on the two different aggregate definitions of Suffolk's coastal communities, the following observations can be made from an analysis of available data:

Domain	Profile of Suffolk's coastal communities in aggregate
Contextual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The population of All Coastal Settlements (i.e. the definition which includes Lowestoft and Felixstowe) is much larger than Smaller Coastal Communities - 106,071 as compared to 32,123. On outcome-related metrics, All Coastal Settlements are typically at or below the national level. Conversely for Smaller Coastal Communities, outcomes in terms of health are better than the national level, crime levels are lower, income is higher and there is less deprivation relative to the national levels. The visitor economy and retail sectors are the most prominent sectors in terms of employment, accounting for a third of employment across Smaller Coastal Communities. The most specialised sectors (in terms of employment) are utilities (linked to the Sizewell nuclear power stations and wider activities in the energy sector), accommodation and food services (linked to the visitor economy) and construction. Employment and business growth in both All Coastal Settlements and Smaller Coastal Communities has lagged behind the levels experienced in Suffolk and nationally, although there are relatively low levels of unemployment benefit claimants (except in Lowestoft), suggesting that the labour market is tight.
Our relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The demographic of Smaller Coastal Communities is older than that of All Coastal Settlements, and it is also ageing. Conversely, number of working-age (16-64) and younger (15 years and under) populations have declined in the last decade; this is different from the picture nationally. Migration data shows there has been increasing levels of net in-migration from beyond the typical 'catchment' area, with growing numbers from the South East and London moving into the area in recent years.
Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a noticeable difference across the health indicators. Life expectancy in the Smaller Coastal Communities is similar to Suffolk and better than the national average. Rates of avoidable deaths are 23% lower than the national rate. The picture across All Coastal Communities is substantially different. Life expectancy is 1.6-1.8 years below the Suffolk level, and there are 11%








Domain	Profile of Suffolk's coastal communities in aggregate
	<p>more avoidable deaths⁴ than the national rate. This points to the particular characteristics of Lowestoft and Felixstowe.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across both definitions, there is a higher proportion of the population classified as disabled than across Suffolk and nationally, partly reflecting the ageing demographic of the area.
<p>Where we live</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The attractiveness of the area as a place to live is reflected in recent house price increases, particularly across Smaller Coastal Communities. As of March 2023, the average house price in this area is £375,352, having risen 21% since the start of the pandemic, and now being 29% higher than the average house price nationally. Crime is generally low across Smaller Coastal Communities, with the rate of crime (per person) being 39% below the national rate.
<p>What we do</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflecting the ageing demographic, there is a high proportion of the population which is currently economically inactive (largely due to retirement). There is also a higher number of one-person households.
<p>Personal Finance</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total incomes are 19% higher in Smaller Coastal Communities than is the case nationally. But when housing costs are taken into consideration, this figure drops substantially, with the average net annual income after housing costs being similar to the national level. Of concern is the proportion of households which are identified as fuel poor; this is largely due to the poor energy efficiency of the housing stock locally, but also reflects areas of low incomes and deprivation seen in All Coastal Communities.
<p>Education & Skills</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualification levels across Smaller Coastal Communities and All Coastal Communities mirror those nationally.

Source: SQW

Variations between individual coastal settlements

Within this overall picture, there is considerable variation at a settlement level. The table below highlights some of the differences between individual settlements – although at this scale, there are some challenges in terms of data robustness.

⁴ Avoidable deaths are defined as either preventable or treatable for those aged under 75 years, in line with the international avoidable mortality definition

Domain	Variations between individual coastal settlements
Contextual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the population and business indicators, most of Suffolk's coastal settlements are seeing rates of population and business growth which are lower than the national average. They also have an increasingly ageing population. There is a more mixed picture in relation to employment, with around half of the communities showing employment growth above the national growth rate (although it should be noted that caveats should be considered when examining employment data at a local level).
Our relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mix of different household types across coastal settlements is similar to that seen nationally (although noting that Suffolk's coastal communities in aggregate have a higher proportion of one-person households, reflecting the older demographic of the area). Aldeburgh, Southwold and Reydon and Leiston have the highest proportion of one-person households.
Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across many of the health indicators, Suffolk's coastal settlements perform above average, with life expectancy being higher and the number of deaths from preventable causes being lower than the national level. Reflecting the ageing demographic of many coastal settlements, there is a higher proportion of the population reporting 'very bad or bad' health in most of Suffolk's coastal settlements compared to nationally.
Where we live 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are high levels of home ownership across many coastal settlements. Many settlements have seen strong house price growth in recent years (in particular in Southwold and Aldeburgh). Crime is generally low across Suffolk's coastal settlements, with all but two (Lowestoft and Kessingland) having a crime rate (per 1,000 population) below the national level.
What we do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ageing nature of the population across Suffolk's coastal communities, means that economic activity rates (for all of those aged over 16) are below the national level, with a high proportion in retirement. Of those currently of working-age, unemployment levels are generally lower than the national level (with the exception of Lowestoft), suggesting that there are reasonable employment prospects locally (and this reflects relatively strong growth in the number of jobs in recent years).
Personal Finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financially, all coastal settlements have average net incomes (after housing costs) above the national level, with the exception of Lowestoft. However, data suggests that they also have relatively high levels of fuel poverty, reflecting poor energy efficiency of homes and lower incomes after housing costs are considered.
Education & Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualification levels across coastal settlements is mixed, Some have a much better profile than nationally (e.g. Orford, Aldeburgh and Walberswick), whereas others are much worse (e.g. Lowestoft and Kessingland), with a high proportion of people with no qualifications.

SQW



SQW is a leading provider of research, analysis and advice on sustainable economic and social development for public, private and voluntary sector organisations across the UK and internationally.

Core services include appraisal, economic impact assessment, and evaluation; demand assessment, feasibility and business planning; economic, social and environmental research and analysis; organisation and partnership development; policy development, strategy, and action planning.

www.sqw.co.uk

Social Life was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally.

www.social-life.co