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# Opinion

## Planning dial starts to shift towards local communities

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**I**s it too late to wish readers of this column a happy New Year? I hope not. So happy 2023 to you and everyone campaigning for a Suffolk that respects and enhances our thousands upon thousands of heritage buildings and wonderful landscapes.

Sharp-eyed readers of my recent monthly writings might have detected a growing sense of optimism shining through the usually bleak clouds of a planning system that too often ignores the evidenced views of local people. It's true.

Despite projects such as East Anglia GREEN, the Scottish Power Renewables energy hub at Friston, Sizewell C and Sumnica's solar factory proposals which are casting an ever-darker shadow across our cherished county, I feel that the planning system is showing some small signs that communities might realistically expect to have some more meaningful influence.

Recently proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework – which sets the broad planning guidance within which individual decisions must be evaluated – has been shifting the dial towards local communities.

Firstly, there has been an acceptance that bad design, or certainly design that was out of context with neighbouring buildings, could be grounds for refusing a planning application. Secondly, under recent proposals within the government's



Debenham's High Street runs alongside a ford of the River Deben

Leveling Up legislation, planning permission for onshore windfarms would be dependent on a project being able to demonstrate local support and satisfactorily address any impacts identified by the local community. But what is "local support" and how can this be demonstrated? Evidencing this means going beyond the often cursory "consultations" that build cynicism and justifiable resentment. To have any value at all, it is vital that discussions with local people, councils and community groups are based on equality (developers not trying to overpower opinion), build trust (which takes time) and seek to explore a range of solutions over time.

I'm pleased to say that the Suffolk Preservation Society has been at the forefront in developing an approach that seeks to do all three. Based on an initial concept from CPRE, the Countryside Charity and funded by MCS Charitable Foundation, we worked

throughout the autumn last year with Debenham Parish Council and a number of community groups including the local Green Team, landowners and individuals in the village on a Community Energy Visioning project.

The context very much reflected not only the current climate emergency but also energy security. The ambition of the project was to explore options for a Debenham renewable strategy that would command broad community support and understanding.

The choice of Debenham was no accident. The fact that it had a Neighbourhood Plan that had contributed to seeing off a massive housing development meant that this was a community with a proven track record of working together to take some control over its future.

There was broad agreement that the community should become much more self-sufficient in terms of its energy generation in the future than it is at present. There

was also a palpable desire to have more of a say in the location of any proposed renewables and that the community as a whole should benefit – including financially – should any of these ever be approved.

At the heart of the CEV project were three facilitated workshops that sought, through open discussions, both in smaller groups and in plenary sessions, to identify three key issues.

The first ("Your views, your place") encouraged participants to do something that the planning system has strenuously marginalised or outright ignored: discuss their emotional reactions, positive or negative, to different parts of the village and the surrounding countryside.

These were then plotted on a largescale map of the village. The second ("Energy needs and options") involved participants inputting different renewable energy (such as turbines or solar arrays) and energy reduction (such as double glazing the whole

village) options into a bespoke programme that recorded how close this would help the village to becoming energy self-sufficient – or better.

The final session ("Solutions – where and how?") drew together the earlier discussions to identify a prospective list both of favoured options (plus their possible costs) and possible sites for future investigations.

Since then, the Society has pulled together a CEV prospectus which includes all this information, plus illustrations to show the impact of some of the most favoured ideas. We now hope that this document will form the basis for the community to continue shaping its community energy ambitions and ensuring that the planning system works for Debenham and not against it. We wish them well with this exciting and important initiative.

**For communities interested in learning more about this project contact [sps@suffolksociety.org](mailto:sps@suffolksociety.org)**