

P L M R

COMMUNICATIONS
WITH IMPACT



2019 PREDICTIONS:
EAST OF ENGLAND

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1. POLITICAL CHANGES APLENTY

2019 is a bumper year for local elections in the Eastern region with all local authorities having full or partial council elections. Excitingly this year will also see the new local authorities of East and West Suffolk holding their first elections. East Suffolk has been formed by the merger of Waveney and Suffolk Coastal, with West Suffolk comprising St. Edmundsbury and Forest Heath; as both authorities have seen an overall reduction in the number of council wards there have been, and will continue to be backroom horse trading to determine who gets to run in each ward.

2018 saw the strange and rapid death of UKIP England and it is not unexpected that the same will occur this year. Following the referendum of 2016 UKIP has seen its East coast strongholds crumble into the sea. Consistent with the national picture the vote has been split between Conservative and Labour. Last year's local elections also saw the splintering of existing UKIP groups into more locally focused movements, we saw this most dramatically in Thurrock where the entire UKIP group reformed as the Thurrock Independents to limited success.

In terms of areas to watch, Colchester could see the end of the rainbow (coalition) and the return to single party rule if the Conservatives are able to edge ahead of Labour, Lib-Dems and the Independents on the council. Uttlesford will see its first local election since 2015 when the ruling Conservative group lost 26% of its seats to the anti-development Residents for Uttlesford (R4U), the big shock of last year was the Blue to Yellow transition of South Cambs; we could see a similar shift in Uttlesford. Conservatives in Thurrock in 2018 did not have the night they were hoping for and failed to take overall control of the council, 2019 could be their year to do so. Norwich, once the eastern bastion of the Green movement has seen its Green Party group whittled away to a rump, 2019 looks set to be the year that Labour turn the whole city red.

2. CONTINUED BREXIT CHAOS

Chequers. No-deal. Canada Plus. Norway Plus Plus. Second Referendum. Jobs First Deal. General Election. All add up to one thing for businesses and employers in the east of England; uncertainty. From delays in investments to sluggish spending this Christmas it is clear that the country as a whole is "holding its breath" before the 29th March. The east of England is no exception.

All sectors across the region look set to be hit in some way by the effects of exiting the EU, but for simplicity I am going to focus on agriculture. Farming in Norfolk and Suffolk is a locally and nationally vital industry with 75% of land in the region dedicated to farming. One only needs to travel across Norfolk and Suffolk to see how agriculture has shaped the lives and landscape of the eastern counties. But the sector does face challenges being dependent on EU migrants, reliant on EU funding or subsidies and consequently is apprehensive about the future.

The biggest and most immediate challenge the East's farming industry will be from a lack of labour. Intensive arable farming requires large seasonal workforces, in recent years these have consistently come from the EU indeed nationally just 1% of seasonal agricultural labour is British. Though the indications are that EU citizens residing in the UK will be granted the right to stay it is clear that the tide of labour has slowed and there is no reason to believe that this is going to change. In May of last year Andy Allen owner of Portwood Asparagus, supplier to the Duke of Sussex's wedding, suggested

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that they could face going bust because no one is “going to pick the bloody stuff”. As has been pointed out by commentators, not least the New Anglia LEP, agri-tech and new technology are mitigating this impact but these advances are a long term solution requiring massive capital investment. Aside from Labour the impact of trade barriers or tariffs will be felt hard by Norfolk and Suffolk farmers, though the vast majority of produce is sold to UK markets, replacement machinery and other elements of the supply chain tend to be sourced from inside the EU. Farmers face a period of adjustment where they may need to narrow their pool of suppliers, using more expensive British made goods.

For farmers in the east of England 2019 looks set to be a year of adjustment, a year which is likely to see contractions in profits, the closing of less well performing businesses, and potentially, as some have predicted, the agglomeration of smaller farms into larger ones. Farmers in the UK have spent decades diversifying and investing in efficiency, it looks unlikely that this will slow down.

3. THE RETURN OF REGIONAL DEVOLUTION

In 2016 Norfolk councils rejected plans which would see the county move towards a combined authority with Suffolk. The dreams of George Osborne and King Rædwald ended in Kings Lynn in November 2016. The deal would have seen the creation of a combined authority with a directly elected mayor and significant say in how additional funding would be spent. The rejection of the deal by Norfolk, despite wholesale acceptance by Suffolk, meant that it could not go ahead. And so the dream died.

However, late last year questions started to be raised again about the prospect of a new deal. Led by the East of England’s APPG and backed by local businesses, councils and LEPs MPs have demanded greater autonomy of action for the east in how funding is spent. In October leader of Norfolk County Council Cllr Andrew Proctor met with Cambridgeshire Mayor James Palmer to discuss reviving the deal. This comes as earlier in 2018 Mayor Palmer refused to rule out merging his authority to include Norfolk and Suffolk.

The fact is that Mayor Palmer is doing rather well and greedy eyes are looking across the Fens from Norfolk and wondering if they could be doing the same. Naturally this is not going to happen overnight, discussions for the merging of two small Suffolk local authorities took nearly a decade. However, if the Overton window moves and with schemes such as the Norwich-Cambridge Tech Corridor and the East-West rail link in pipeline 2019 could be the year that momentum moves towards creating a new or a larger combined authority.

4. NORWICH CITY PREMIER LEAGUE DREAMS COME TRUE

Speaks for itself.