

## **Consultation Response on Proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Norfolk and Suffolk**

### **Consultation response from Babergh District Council on the proposal from Suffolk County Council**

**1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?**

Strongly disagree

**2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?**

Strongly disagree

**3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?**

Strongly disagree

**4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?**

Strongly disagree

**5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?**

Strongly disagree

**6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements, for example, the establishment of a strategic authority?**

Strongly disagree

**7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?**

Strongly disagree

**8. If you would like to, please use the free text box to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-7 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on this proposal.**

#### **Question 1 - Sensible geographies and economic areas**

A one unitary council for Suffolk would represent too large an area and would not be based on sensible geographic or economic areas. Such a council would be too large to drive improvement in services that are required in Suffolk, including Adult Social Services and Children and Young People Services.

The population for Suffolk at 2021 was 760,668. With projected population growth this number

will only grow, leading to a one unitary council covering a significant population. This would be an unmanageable number for one unitary authority, with poorer outcomes for those residents.

Three Councils for Suffolk would enable place-based leadership, leveraging deep local knowledge of communities and assets, continuing to include and work with town and parish councils, retaining and building on strong local relationships that already exist, enabling agile and placed-based responses that are locally relevant and meaningful to reflect the individual needs and priorities of each area (p.45 of Three Councils for Suffolk Case for Change).

#### Question 2 - Delivering outcomes identified

The Case for Change for Three Councils for Suffolk gives evidence of how working together to understand and meet local needs will be achieved. A single unitary would give a centralised structure that overlooks local differences and priorities, it would lead to weaker local partnerships due to broader, less targeted engagement and would be less responsive to emerging local issues or community voices. (Appendix 2 of Three Councils for Suffolk Case for Change).

A one unitary approach risks the continuation of the status quo, a greater degree of remoteness from communities and higher numbers of children relying on one authority for support. For example, the closer community trust and ties of the three unitary approach, alongside the right community support provision, will ensure that the relationship is in place to encourage more kinship care.

In order to successfully deliver improvements in health, education, employment and wellbeing for and with residents, councils need to be deeply rooted in local places, and close enough to their communities to be responsive to specific contexts and needs. A council of over 1 million residents by 2045 does not give confidence that it can ever be deeply rooted in local places or able to respond to its different communities' needs.

#### Question 3 - Efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks

Three Councils for Suffolk provides financial resilience and meets all the wider criteria of LGR. Long term financial sustainability for local government and the wider public sector in Suffolk can only be achieved by investing in effective interventions and preventative services. This is not just about finding the cheapest solution for local government, it's about finding the right solution to improve outcomes for our residents in a more cost-effective way. As has been repeatedly stated by Government, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to change how local government works, to deliver better outcomes for our communities. Three new unitary councils provide the right balance of greater efficiency and capacity to provide public sector reform.

#### Question 4 - High quality and sustainable public services

A single council for Suffolk would be poorly positioned to deliver high quality, sustainable public services. A council supporting over a million residents by 2045 would be distant from residents, too large to respond to local variations in context and need, and less able to mobilise local partners, networks and resources to build effective partnerships. Without proximity to decision-making and local knowledge, service provision risks being bureaucratic and transactional, rather than rooted in place and local communities.

Up to a point, a larger organisation will create economies of scale. However, a single council for the whole of Suffolk would go beyond the 'tipping point', after which it becomes impossible for an organisation to operate effectively, as it exceeds the limits at which staff can know and have credibility in the different places and communities covered. At this point, it becomes necessary to invest again in bolstering local teams and infrastructure; thereby reversing the savings made through economies of scale. While big organisations may be successful in delivering

transactional, place-agnostic services, they are unsuitable for public sector bodies at whose hearts are the places and communities they serve. Thus, a single council for the whole of Suffolk would risk a reduction in the quality and sustainability of its services.

Benchmarking analysis of CQC reports by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) concludes three smaller unitaries are better for:

- Assessing people's needs.
- Community and partnership working.
- Safeguarding.
- Learning and innovation (p62 of Three Councils Case for Change)

Other benchmarking by SCIE against the costs incurred by "nearest neighbour councils" of similar population size to that proposed in the three unitary councils, identified potential further savings from reconfiguring and improving social care services in a three unitary model (p59 and p71 of Three Councils for Suffolk Case for Change).

#### Question 5 - Informed by local views and meets local needs

Whilst Suffolk County Council carried out public engagement this all took place after it had already decided to promote a single county unitary. By contrast the three unitary council option was directly informed and shaped by local views. The District and Borough case for change clearly articulates the findings of the survey that was held from May to late July 2025. The findings of local engagement for Three Councils for Suffolk as shown on p.89 of the Case for Change highlight:

- Concerns about a single unitary council being too large to understand and deliver on local priorities across the county and too large to innovate and improve services.
- There are concerns about the scale of a single unitary and its risk profile.
- There is hesitancy from communities surrounding Ipswich about being within the same council area as the County Town. This appears mostly based on myths about Council Tax increases, that housebuilding will be so extensive that surrounding towns and villages become joined on to Ipswich, community identity, and the County Town taking priority for spending.
- There is a strong sense that councils with a smaller footprint will deliver better outcomes for residents and businesses as relationships will be stronger. Rural communities in particular are concerned about being overlooked.
- There is scepticism about predicted cost savings.
- There is concern that there will be too few councillors to cover the workload and ensure proper representation of community needs.

The district and borough survey findings support that three unitaries better represent the communities and businesses they serve. Local views also expressed concern at the democratic representation of one council, and that it would not be able to properly represent community needs. Three Councils for Suffolk responds to this concern ensuring communities will have a voice that can be heard by their local authority.

#### Question 6 - Support local devolution arrangements

A one unitary model would not provide good representation within the Mayoral Strategic Authority ('MSA'). A three council model would also provide even representation for each county within the MSA and enable richer debate, representation and decision-making.

The case for change for Three Councils for Suffolk identifies success criteria for strong Mayoral authorities and describes how each of these would be met by having a plurality of representation from across Suffolk as opposed to a single representative.

The Three Councils case for change also highlights how a model of three councils would have greater operational resilience and senior officer capacity to prioritise the new projects emerging as a result of Mayoral investment in the county.

#### Question 7 - Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

The Case for Change for Three Councils for Suffolk seeks to empower communities and partners. Enabling stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment is considered to be wider than just engaging with Town and Parish Councils. The role of local government is sometimes stepping back to allow empowered communities to lead. The Case for Change for Three Councils for Suffolk outlines how existing strong foundations already in place across Suffolk would be built on further, for example the Community Help Hubs in East Suffolk where staff work collaboratively with vulnerable residents, or the partnerships with health services to engage with people with lived experiences. Alignment over time with health, police, voluntary sector organisations and engagement with businesses.

The key foundations proposed by Three Councils for Suffolk for neighbourhood governance and empowerment include; working with what exists, inclusive participation by default, widening audiences and partnerships, ensuring the approach is proportionate to the topic, recognition and value to deepen democracy and civic participation and transparency, honest and trust. This is a hugely more responsive approach than a more top-down model.

Three Councils for Suffolk have the local understanding, foundations and mechanisms in place to ensure that the proposals will enable 'bottom up' stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment.

**Question 9.** I confirm that I have not included any information that identifies an individual in the free text box.