



# Parish *Bulletin*

Local Government Review  
*special*  
**No. 4 - March 2009**



## No change in options as Review turns into farce

The Leader of Suffolk Coastal has slammed the latest draft proposals from the Boundary Committee for England (BCE) for the future shape of local government in Suffolk and has urged residents, businesses and local communities to let the BCE know exactly what they think.

Three months after the Government gave it more time to redraft its proposals, the BCE has published virtually the same version, this time offering two options of one giant Suffolk or two unitary councils - a Rural Suffolk and a North Haven (Ipswich, Kesgrave and Felixstowe) council.

"This has really turned into a farce and a complete waste of time. It is blatantly obvious from all the comments made by Government ministers in recent months that they will not support what the BCE is proposing which is why they were given more time," said Councillor Ray Herring, Leader of Suffolk Coastal.

"It has taken them three months to come up with their big new idea - keep Lowestoft in Suffolk - when it was only the BCE who had ever thought of exporting Lowestoft to Norfolk and even they had changed their minds about it last year.

"This was the BCE's big chance to actually deliver something that could have improved local services and given local people a bigger say in the way their councils are run. But they once again overlooked the logic of having three unitary councils covering Ipswich, East and West Suffolk which we believe is the best option if unitary councils must be introduced and would probably be accepted by the Government," added Cllr Herring.

Last December, the Government reminded the BCE that it had called for the Review because it wanted to know whether there could be alternative proposals for a single tier of local government, and if so on what basis, for Exeter,

Ipswich and Norwich and the whole or part of the surrounding county areas.

In February the Government announced that 'there could be circumstances where the Boundary Committee wished to consult on further proposals ... (and) an extension to July 15 would allow for significant further consultations and substantial time for the Committee both to prepare for consultation, to consider responses, and formulate any advice it submits'.

"We have now had more delay and uncertainty, just for the BCE to announce it will consult on what it had already consulted on. It then took a storm of protest last July to get them to change their original proposals in September and include Lowestoft again.

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## Have your say

**Tell the Boundary Committee exactly what you think of their 'new' proposals**

Responses to the draft proposals can be made by filling in an online form at [www.boundarycommittee.org.uk](http://www.boundarycommittee.org.uk) or writing to: Review Manager (Suffolk Review), The Boundary Committee for England, Trevelyan House, Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2HW or email [reviews@boundarycommittee.org.uk](mailto:reviews@boundarycommittee.org.uk)

## Review becomes farce (continued from front page)

“But having accepted the logic of Lowestoft remaining in Suffolk, they have not addressed the issue of how a town with significant urban issues, many of which it shares with Felixstowe, sits happily in its proposed Rural Suffolk.

“As these latest proposals do not deliver what the Government asked for they appear doomed. So far the BCE has ignored the views of local communities, most councils, and the Government, but I would still urge everyone to try one last time to get them to see sense,” added Cllr Herring.

If existing district and county councils are going to be abolished then Suffolk Coastal insists that a three-way split of Suffolk with Felixstowe, Kesgrave and Lowestoft as part of a new East Suffolk unitary council must be an option looked at seriously.

“I think that most people accept that one giant Suffolk council would be too large and too remote to serve all its communities. While it might mean only one chief executive, that person would need many more middle managers to cope with such a geographically spread out area.

“Local realities cannot be ignored and Felixstowe and Kesgrave should not become part of an enlarged Ipswich. It would be as wrong for our two towns as it was to suggest that Lowestoft should be part of Norfolk. If unitary government is to be introduced, then three unitaries in Suffolk would be the best way forward but only if there has to be change,” added Cllr Herring.

Suffolk Coastal has argued that a larger Ipswich could be created, perhaps including Shotley and Hadleigh, alongside its proposed East Suffolk and West Suffolk councils.

## Town and parish liaison meeting

A reminder that town and parishes have been invited to send up to two representatives to two meetings about the latest proposals from the BCE.

These are on Monday, March 30 at Kesgrave Conference Centre, Twelve Acre Approach, Kesgrave.

The first meeting is at 4.30pm, and the second at 7pm. Please reserve a place by calling Jo Mael on 01394 444326 or emailing [jo.mael@suffolkcoastal.gov.uk](mailto:jo.mael@suffolkcoastal.gov.uk)

## What happens next?

Everyone has until **May 14** to give their comments on the latest proposals to the BCE.

The BCE will consider all the responses and evidence it has received before making its final recommendations to the Government on **July 15**.

The Government, or specifically the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, cannot make a decision until **August 26** - but until **August 12** anyone can make representations to her about the BCE's proposals.

Hazel Blears can -

### Decide to take longer if she wants

**Can implement the original proposals from Ipswich to become a unitary council with or without modification**

**Can implement the latest proposals from the BCE with or without modification**

**Can decide that nothing needs to be changed**

If she wants to implement the original proposals or a modified version of the BCE proposals she may want to **consult again** about them.

**Any new unitary councils could be implemented on April 1, 2010 but the Government admits that this would be difficult but not necessarily impossible, so April 1, 2011 is more likely.**

**There could therefore be shadow elections to any proposed unitary councils in 2010 if they are not going to come into effect until April 2011.**

This special edition of the Parish Bulletin has been produced by Suffolk Coastal's LGR team.

To keep up to date on LGR issues, visit [www.suffolkcoastal.gov.uk/yourcouncil/future](http://www.suffolkcoastal.gov.uk/yourcouncil/future) or email [lgr@suffolkcoastal.gov.uk](mailto:lgr@suffolkcoastal.gov.uk) or call 01394 444435

# Why making Suffolk Three must be considered

The BCE now wants to abolish the County Council and all seven district and borough councils and replace them with either one giant unitary council, or two councils, one covering Ipswich and the communities to Felixstowe, and the other covering the rest of Suffolk.

If existing district and county councils are going to be abolished then Suffolk Coastal insists that a three-way split of Suffolk, with Felixstowe and Kesgrave as part of a new East Suffolk unitary council, must be an option looked at seriously.

The three councils would offer genuine value for money, be locally based with local priorities, would have shared needs, and all be big enough to have a voice nationally yet small enough to give residents a real say in their council.

## Why we believe in the power of Three

We think that there are three distinct parts of our county and that if unitary government is introduced there should be three distinct councils to represent those communities properly and provide the services they want and deserve.

With Lowestoft and Felixstowe, **East Suffolk** would mean that one council would be responsible for managing the future of the coast and estuaries, but there is much more that unites East Suffolk than just its coastline.

More than any other part of the county, **East Suffolk** is home to regional centres of excellence, whether it is Felixstowe and Lowestoft ports, the communications hub of BT/Adastral Park, the 'power corridor' of low carbon energy providers, or the arts and heritage of Snape Maltings and Sutton Hoo. A large part of **East Suffolk** is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, while we have many market towns and picture-book villages and some of the highest quality of life ratings of anywhere in Britain. It is little wonder that we attract so many tourists.

We also have challenges to face, like providing good services for our high number of elderly residents, of finding more affordable homes for local people while having so many second home owners.

One local unitary council, **East Suffolk**, can begin to tackle all these issues, providing local solutions to local needs.



## What's wrong with the BCE's 'new' proposals?

**Ipswich** is an aspiring city and has its own particular needs and challenges. While it may need to be a bit bigger, it would be completely wrong to twin it with Felixstowe, which as a coastal resort with Britain's busiest port has far more in common with Lowestoft and other coastal communities. It would be best for **Ipswich** and the rest of the county if it was allowed to focus on its specific needs and challenges.

Local realities cannot be ignored and Felixstowe and Kesgrave should not become part of an enlarged **Ipswich**. It would be as wrong for our two towns as it was to suggest that Lowestoft should be part of Norfolk.

The whole economy of **West Suffolk** is distinctly different to East Suffolk, with its main focus being on Cambridge. Whether it's housing, tourism, business, technology, environment or growth, the economic drive in that part of the county is mainly from the west, with Stansted to the south also being economically important.

**One giant Suffolk's** residents would be further away than ever from the people making the real decisions about their services and quality of life. Being bigger does not mean better and we think that **one giant Suffolk** would inevitably end up separated from its communities and the people it is meant to serve and listen to. We know that people want value for money from their services, not just the cheapest.

The evidence shows that councils can become too big and too remote. **One giant Suffolk** would be **bureaucratic** with more middle managers and office staff to cover such a massive area, **impersonal** as all calls will go through one central call centre that will try to deal with everything, and **distant** with all the real decisions being made in the corridors of power at Endeavour House.

# Our doubts about the business cases for the BCE's 'new' options

Suffolk Coastal submitted an eight page summary of its concerns about the business cases compiled on behalf of the BCE to justify the options it wanted considered.

Among our main criticisms were:-

- ◆ most of the proposals were not signed off by the programme boards before they were submitted;
- ◆ that councillors and officers from most of the councils were not fully involved;
- ◆ that most of the information submitted by Suffolk County Council was not reviewed by the programme boards.
- ◆ that the figures used are three years out of date. The income forecasts are now unrealistic as they failed to take account of the downturn in the property market, hitting areas like land charges, planning and building control.
- ◆ that the County Council had been made the lead authority on both the one giant Suffolk option as well as the Rural Suffolk option - this was fatally flawed as County concentrated on its preferred option, which may be why 'apparently unviable submissions' were made for the Rural Suffolk option.
- ◆ many of the assumptions used to support the financial cases did not seem reliable;
- ◆ that there is insufficient recognition of rural areas within the proposed structures.

## Our specific concerns about one giant Suffolk

- ◆ that the publicised claims that every household would save £100 appear untrue - only in one council area would there be savings of over £33 and indeed in one council area it would cost an extra £20.
- ◆ that it underestimates how many staff will be needed - for example there would be less senior managers than County currently employs either though they will have to deliver more services.
- ◆ that there is no evidence for how they would make 20% savings on shared services (oddly there would only be 15% savings in a Rural Suffolk);

## Our specific concerns about Rural Suffolk

- ◆ the assumed savings for one giant Suffolk don't reflect those for Rural Suffolk, and there is no explanation for the difference;
- ◆ it probably underestimates the cost of redundancies and recruiting new staff;
- ◆ there really has not been enough in-depth work done on the rural Suffolk option.

## Our specific concerns about North Haven

- ◆ We are not aware of any engagement with any sections of our community, whether they be town or parish councils, community groups or businesses, into the business case for North Haven even though half of it is in our district.
- ◆ There is not enough detail on what will change of how things will be delivered differently.

## What Town and Parishes said

When we carried out our survey of Town and Parishes last year these are the main results of what you told us:

- Most Parish Councils felt that they had insufficient information regarding affordability to make an informed response to the BCE's proposals
- 50% of respondents felt that there was insufficient time to respond to the BCE proposals
- Most Councils (84%) felt they were constrained by only having two options to consider.
- When asked what other options they would have liked to be able to respond on the preferences were
  - maintaining or improving the current structures
  - East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich

## Downturn, what downturn?

The Boundary Committee for England has brushed aside Suffolk Coastal's concerns that the recent economic downturn must have significant implications on the financial figures produced last year.

Suffolk Coastal and Waveney's Chief Executive, Stephen Baker, had written to the BCE asking if they had planned to refresh the base date used to complete the financial workbooks for North Haven, Rural Suffolk and one giant Suffolk.

BCE Director Archie Gall wrote back saying that he acknowledged the concerns but 'it should be understood that this exercise is in no way aimed to produce a budget for the new unitary authority. It is a notional exercise using a standard year and published data as its base.'

## A sobering postscript

As hinted at by the BCE Director's words in the story above on this page, the financial casebooks for proposed new unitaries really are a 'notional exercise.' The experience from other new unitary councils up and down the country is that there is a massive difference between what is proposed and what the new council actually does when it comes to levels of service. There are also many examples of them having to rapidly rewrite their financial assumptions - a trend that will quickly grow with the economic downturn hitting us all.