



Proposals for the future shape of local government in Suffolk

Response to the Secretary of State
- January 2010



Executive summary

Introduction

Suffolk Coastal District Council is fully committed to working more effectively to deliver key services in an effective manner and has been fully engaged in the review process committing considerable resources in providing supporting information for their analysis.

However, despite all of the evidence that the Boundary Committee for England (BCE) have been supplied we are bitterly disappointed that they have continually failed to recognise the distinct communities and differing ambitions of all parts of Suffolk. It is very obvious, even to the casual observer, that the communities of East Suffolk and West Suffolk have differing concerns, requirements and ambitions to one another and both communities vary considerably from those of the urban oriented Ipswich.

Three Unitary Councils for Suffolk

The only real unitary option for Suffolk is the East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich model as it reflects the differing communities across Suffolk and can therefore deliver specific services in a manner that caters for these localised needs.

These three authorities are large enough to recognise and tackle the regional and national agendas, and of a sufficient size to deliver significant savings and more importantly to be able to engage with, and to be accountable to their local communities and their needs.

It is incredible that the Boundary Committee have failed to recognise the compelling case for the East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich despite calls from people and organisations including the majority of district councils. It is also extremely frustrating that the Boundary Committee have failed to give any reason for not considering this proposal.

It is clear that East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich is the only credible unitary local government solution for Suffolk.

An alternative approach?

We also want to provide an assurance that should unitary government not be implemented in Suffolk, either fully or partially, then arrangements are in place to deliver cost efficient and high quality services in Suffolk.

Suffolk Coastal and Waveney are progressing with a “super district” approach sharing structures and service delivery across the two authorities whilst forging greater links with the County Council and other public and voluntary sector organisations to deliver the Total Place agenda.

This model has been nationally recognised as best practice and is being replicated across Suffolk via recently announced proposals from St. Edmundsbury/ Forest Heath and Babergh / Mid Suffolk.

We want to ensure that, whether unitary authorities are implemented or not, people and communities receive the services they need, in ways that meet their requirements, at the right time, and as cost effectively as possible, thus maintaining the current high levels of satisfaction.

Drivers for change

This review of local government in Suffolk began when Ipswich Borough Council requested unitary status in 2006 in response to the Secretary of State's invite for expressions of interest. As the largest urban area in Suffolk, and an aspiring city, it is understandable why Ipswich wants greater autonomy and control over services in the town. Ipswich Borough Council has made its ambitions for the town very clear in its original proposals, both in its application for unitary status and during this current review.

The obvious model to meet Ipswich's specific requirements is a unitary council based on Ipswich's current urban boundaries. Alternatives such as the proposed Ipswich and Felixstowe or the whole Suffolk unitary councils would mean that Ipswich's original ambitions will be extremely difficult to achieve as it will be competing with the contrasting needs of a mainly rural county, coastal resort towns and market towns and the other major urban centres in Suffolk, Lowestoft and Bury St. Edmunds.

It is vital to understand that Suffolk is an extremely diverse county made up of a mosaic of different places – something that the Boundary Committee have failed to address in their proposals. As well as the major urban centre of Ipswich there are densely populated areas like Lowestoft and Bury St Edmunds, thriving market towns, small villages, coastal resort towns and rural communities. Needs, opportunities and challenges vary greatly across the county. This has been partially recognised by the Boundary Committee, who rather confusingly, proposes dividing a unitary Suffolk into three management areas for the West, East and Ipswich despite proposing new authorities on completely different boundaries.

If there is an acceptance that an urban-focused Ipswich unitary council is required then the most suitable and clearly logical unitary structures for the rest of Suffolk would be our proposed East Suffolk and West Suffolk unitaries.

East Suffolk, Ipswich and West Suffolk authorities would serve the ambitions of our different local communities, offering local accountability and regional influence. All three authorities would offer value for money, be big enough to have a voice nationally, reflect local priorities, and be small enough to genuinely engage with local people.

Three unitary councils for Suffolk

The original Ipswich proposal has already been assessed as viable on all criteria, except affordability, which could potentially be met under the “in aggregate” requirement with East and West Suffolk unitary authorities.

West Suffolk has developed a detailed business case and financial model, submitted as part of the “Modification Proposal” put forward by St Edmundsbury Borough Council, Forest Heath District Council and Waveney Borough Council. We wholeheartedly support Forest Heath District Council and St. Edmundsbury District Council in their ambitions for a West Suffolk unitary council to meet their differing local needs.

Ipswich

As has been set out in its own submissions, an Ipswich authority can focus on its urban agenda:

- It will be able to address the economic challenges of its area including the continued development of service-focused industries, in particular financial services, and increasing the number of new businesses within the area;
- It will be able to focus on improving education attainment, particularly in urban areas, and to support the establishment of the University Campus as a centre for regional higher education;
- It can address the significant pockets of deprivation in the Ipswich area, through a coordinated approach to housing, education, employment opportunities and crime prevention;
- It can concentrate on the regeneration of the centre of Ipswich, developing the location as a regional destination for shopping and cultural activities.

West Suffolk

A West Suffolk council will be in a position to build on its economic relationship with Cambridge, whilst supporting and maintaining its rural identity;

- It will be able to further strengthen its relationship within the Greater Cambridge economic sub-region;
- It will be able to concentrate on supporting its network of market towns and rural hinterlands.

East Suffolk

At the core of the East Suffolk proposal is the reality of a range of communities with shared goals and aims that are markedly different from the rest of Suffolk. The elements that define the communities which constitute East Suffolk also make East Suffolk markedly different from the aspiring city of Ipswich with its urban challenges and perspective, and the Cambridge-orientated west of Suffolk.

The BCE has had concerns about the boundaries for the three unitaries. We feel the best way to resolve this is to consult with local people to understand their views and preferences and create boundaries that reflect local needs and communities of interest. It would be far better to meet this challenge of involving communities in drawing up an acceptable boundary, than avoid this difficulty and adopt the easier but unwanted option of creating a large and unwieldy whole unitary Suffolk or Rural Suffolk.

An Introduction to East Suffolk

People want to live in and visit East Suffolk. There are some of the highest national levels of satisfaction among the area's residents and we plan to maintain and increase those levels. They are attracted to the unspoilt countryside and coastline in East Suffolk, as well as the low levels of crime and the quality of life.

East Suffolk attracts dynamic and innovative individuals and cutting edge businesses into the area. Technology industries cluster in the south, around Martlesham, while energy (particularly renewables) industries are expanding and developing further north along the coast at Sizewell and Lowestoft. Creative and cultural businesses and events are found throughout the area. In addition, traditional industries such as farming remain pivotal to the economy of East Suffolk.

East Suffolk has a maritime and rural heritage which is continually developing and evolving. Lowestoft and Felixstowe are bustling and vibrant resorts looking to the future with key regeneration plans; the seaside towns of Aldeburgh and Southwold are renowned for their traditional charm. Coastal management is a major focus for the area, as is the major expansion of the UK's largest container port at Felixstowe. Moving inland, the area is held together by a network of market towns and villages.

However, despite the highest ratings of satisfaction in Suffolk (which are also some of the highest in the country) regarding quality of life, there are significant challenges facing East Suffolk. A new East Suffolk unitary council will focus on the following priorities:

To support the development of the internationally important port at Felixstowe, associated industries and to address the issues of the existing transport infrastructure

The multi-million pound expansion of the internationally important port at Felixstowe is a critical economic initiative that has not just local, but regional, national and international consequences. Our long-standing involvement and experience of this key development puts an East Suffolk unitary council in the best position to support the expansion of the Port and growth of the associated industries that need to meet the increased success-generated demands of the Port. The programme requires significant engagement with the local authority to deliver the radical improvements needed to the existing transport infrastructure and to implement enhancements to the local education and training provision to meet the skills requirements of existing and emerging industries, thus meeting local business needs.

We will fully support the vitally important regeneration of the coastal towns of Lowestoft and Felixstowe as economic centres and tourist destinations, while addressing the issues of deprivation, health, educational attainment and housing

The two primary towns in East Suffolk face very pressing and comparable challenges. Lowestoft and Felixstowe share an agenda for resort management, regeneration, and social cohesion. They are key employment locations for their local areas with the majority of their workforce living within the towns. Both expect significant business growth and investment over the next fifteen years. Key industries include manufacturing and distribution.

Both towns have wards that face issues of deprivation, and Lowestoft in particular has significant issues with teenage pregnancy, smoking and low exercise levels. There are issues with educational attainment and a need to address low skill levels in both areas. Significant housing growth is expected by 2021. The transport infrastructure for both towns is inadequate and requires urgent attention.

An East Suffolk council will have the capacity to take a coordinated approach to addressing these key challenges using the whole breadth of its services from education through to planning, adult care through to housing, working with key public sector bodies such as the PCT and Police and creating a framework which enables local communities, town and parish councils and businesses to be fully engaged in the delivery of local priorities.

To support the expansion of regional centres of excellence across industries in the East Suffolk area building on the existing technology and emerging low-carbon energy sectors

East Suffolk is a hub for innovative and cutting-edge industries with significant further expansion expected in the future. BT has the largest centre of ICT research in Europe at Martlesham, with supporting technology and knowledge-based businesses on the surrounding innovation park – which is looking to expand further through public / private sector partnership. Orbis Energy in Lowestoft will be a worldwide centre of excellence for offshore renewable energy – wind, wave and tidal technologies – supported with academic expertise to support new and existing small to medium-size businesses. This will form part of the low-carbon energy ‘power corridor’ along with the proposed further development of the nuclear power facility at Sizewell.

An East Suffolk unitary council will build on the existing partnership arrangements to work closely to foster and develop these industries by supporting the local skills base to meet local needs, whilst ensuring the businesses involved play a full and important role in the communities they support.

To ensure that demographic changes in the East Suffolk area, in particular the ageing population, are tackled through the coordinated provision of care services and housing

East Suffolk has a significant ageing population which provides current and future challenges. We will ensure that there is coordinated provision of care services and housing for all, while prioritising our increasing ageing population. An East Suffolk Council will work with our communities and our community organisations to agree and identify the level of support and how it can be provided. We believe that together we can provide the better joined up services that our ageing residents expect and deserve.

On social care generally we recognise the need to address the growing demand for personalised care for adults, something that the existing countywide structure has failed to adequately address. We will work closely with our partners in the health services to deliver improvements. The support has to be there to help people remain in their own communities. The joined-up approach will encompass housing, and will seek to make more effective use of housing so that it will be easier for people to move into larger or smaller homes depending on their evolving needs. We also recognise the challenge of rural areas and the importance of making our services as

accessible as possible to all, to address the accessibility and equity issues faced by many of our more remote rural communities. We will work with all our partners, particularly tapping into our existing excellent network of town and parish councils, to identify and deliver a wide range of services in all parts of our communities.

To provide a strategic approach to the regional and national issue of coastal and estuary management

One of the key things that an East Suffolk unitary council will provide is a single cohesive body that has a strategic approach to the regional and national issue of coastal and estuary protection. Having an East Suffolk unitary council that is made up of representatives from all the local communities that are affected will ensure a consistent and influential voice on this issue. East Suffolk recognises the importance of coast and estuary protection and will strongly argue the case on all possible stages to ensure that it becomes a national priority. This approach will build on the success of the Integrated Coastal Zone Management initiative which has helped deliver partnership solutions and which has seen local coastal issues gain national recognition and support.

The potential environmental and economic impact has already been recognised by those in East Suffolk, and that is why positive steps have already been taken, with partnerships helping deliver nationally recognised, innovative solutions. Long-term planning is now underway through the pioneering Integrated Coastal Zone Management system which is an arrangement led by Suffolk Coastal involving all of the Suffolk and Norfolk authorities involved in coastal management, regional bodies such as the Government Office East and national bodies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency.

To protect and enhance the environment and character of the East Suffolk area making it attractive to residents and visitors alike

The new unitary council will understand the importance of the environment to both the quality of life of East Suffolk and to its economy.

A large proportion of East Suffolk is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and there are numerous Sites of Special Scientific Interest. These sites require a coordinated management approach to ensure our unique areas can maintain their own identity, balancing the need for growth with protection. More than any other part of Suffolk, East Suffolk has the experience of countryside management that delivers a quality experience, and which is such an important key to the economic driver of tourism and the arts.

Whilst making East Suffolk an even more attractive place in which business can invest and grow, we must not lose sight of the importance of tourism to our area, with around nine per cent of all jobs currently linked to this sector in our district alone and an estimated annual income of £400 million. An East Suffolk unitary council will recognise the importance of balancing future growth in our area with preserving the qualities that make it so special to visitors. Whilst there are key areas in Felixstowe and Lowestoft that require regeneration, other parts of the area, such as the coastal resorts of Aldeburgh and Southwold and many market towns, want to retain their historic character and charm. However, it is vital that access to key services is available to all and a joined-up approach to localised service delivery, with full engagement with local communities, is essential.

Meeting the challenge

The East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich structure will deliver outcomes against the criteria set by the Secretary of State:

Provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership

Unitary East Suffolk will have a clear and successful vision without the contradictory distractions of the different needs of the aspiring city of Ipswich or the increasingly Cambridge-focused communities in West Suffolk. East Suffolk is all about providing local solutions to local challenges, about having local control on local issues.

As a unitary we will be in a far better position to encourage the targeted growth of businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, fostering those that meet the currently unmet demands of East Suffolk.

It is vital that access to key services is available to all and a joined-up approach to localised service delivery, engaging with local communities, is essential. The joining up of services across East Suffolk will allow us to offer a one-stop shop approach to those needing advice on issues regarding planning, or economic development, licensing, food or health safety, or trading standards, making it simpler for businesses to grow and prosper.

We will put in place the best democratic process to deliver the goals of our communities and involve our communities in shaping the future of East Suffolk. We would have a Leader and Executive model of government, with meetings held across the East Suffolk area to take our debate and decision-making out to all the communities we serve and want to involve.

We propose to have around 80 councillors, each representing around 3,000 people. This is the right ratio to ensure accessibility and local accountability of councillors, particularly in rural areas, given the scale and complexity of the services that the council will be delivering.

We would encourage an active and vocal scrutiny function which focuses on community outcomes regardless of service provider. Community Calls for Action will ensure that local individuals, groups or communities have an opportunity to question the authority and hold it to account.

We will take an active role in any regional and sub-regional partnerships including Haven Gateway to ensure that the best interests of East Suffolk are protected and the maximum resources and commitment achieved. When and where appropriate we will work with other public sector organisations and councils, whether neighbouring or not, to provide effective and efficient specialised services.

Deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment

To support our democratic model, we are committed to greater empowerment of our communities - for example by creating a Lowestoft Town Council. With nearly 800 town and parish councillors in Suffolk Coastal alone, we know the importance of their role in their local communities and we intend to devolve service delivery decision-making down to our town and parish councils. Because this is not a one size fits all policy statement, we recognise that the degree of devolution is entirely dependent on

how much power the individual town and parish wants to take on, and we will build in the flexibility to take account of local wishes.

We acknowledge and agree that greater community involvement is required in local decision-making and, where appropriate, local service delivery. However, as the Community Board pilots in Suffolk only had limited success, we would look to other models of engagement that better suit local communities. We have developed the Alde and Ore Futures project to address long-term community issues. We are working with Suffolk ACRE and other partners on a community planning project.

Our preference is to develop ‘mini LSP’ groups – with more localised groups consisting of unitary and town and parish councillors able to influence and vote on local service delivery and key decisions. These groups would be accessible to the public and would consider amongst other issues the effective use of locality budgets to deliver real ‘on the ground’ improvements based on local knowledge and need. There would be clear accountability so that residents understand who is responsible for decision-making.

We fully recognise the important role of the town and parish councils in local place-shaping – and this is something that they have been achieving in partnership with the District Councils in this area for many decades. We will continue to strengthen our already strong links to ensure effective local decision-making, design of services and effective use of assets wherever there is local commitment.

The real benefit of the proposed East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich model is that these authorities are based on a sense of place and community – this is something that the Boundary Committee have partially recognised, but have failed to address in its recommendations. It is through having these local community focused authorities that people and communities can truly engage with local decision-making and service design.

Be affordable / deliver value-for-money and equity in public services

It has been the goal of Suffolk Coastal in recent years to deliver better services and even better value, and the Treasury and our performance statistics show that we have achieved that goal. Despite increasing economic challenges, we have consistently maintained below average Council Tax increases while improving services and delivering on priorities that have been reviewed and revised to meet local needs. It is against that background that we address the issue of the affordability of East Suffolk. It will deliver savings, but we are not prepared to sacrifice quality for cheapness – we will strive to provide value for money services and will never let our focus slip away from ensuring greater efficiency, but we will not sacrifice the priorities of our communities or the service quality that they demand.

Our proposal will mean just one council being responsible for coastal management which will not only ensure that it remains a top priority but will be more cost effective. There will be a reduced senior staff headcount, while centralised services, such as ICT, HR, payroll, communications, asset management, finance, internal audit, legal, democratic services, performance and policy, will be improved and streamlined where possible to take account of their role in helping deliver the goals of the new council. Services will be integrated, such as housing and care services, trading standards and environmental health, while there will be closer working between economic development and education services, with greater input from the business community, to ensure that current and future skills needs are met, bridging what is

seen as a clear short-fall according to our business surveys and current examination results of our students under the current system.

We will have in place specialised staff for our key priorities such as economic development and regeneration, coastal and estuary management, improving skills and training to meet employers' needs, and an improved care service for key groups including the elderly. As befits a new council, we will look to operate flexibly making use of existing office space, and taking full advantage of home working, and locality or field working.

We have also raised our concerns regarding the BCE's lack of comparison between the proposed models and the current structure of local government in Suffolk. This is particularly relevant when considering affordability, as much of the savings projected within the proposals would have been achieved under current plans – for example the Total Place programme – that have been underway since the BCE began its review and which it has failed to address in its final recommendations.

This overarching approach will enable the East Suffolk council to deliver the key frontline services that are critical to our residents, businesses and communities supported by a cost effective organisational structure with no impact to the council tax payer.

Supported by a broad cross-section of partners and stakeholders

The East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich proposal is publicly supported by four district councils in Suffolk – Suffolk Coastal, Waveney, St. Edmundsbury and Forest Heath. All four authorities have proposed and supported this model of unitary governance throughout the review and have been firm in their belief that this is the right model to support the diverse communities of Suffolk.

Surveys of local residents, businesses and town and parish councils by all four authorities show that there is strong support for our proposals.

An alternative approach?

We are aware that the three options available to the Secretary of State are:

- Implement the original proposals from Ipswich Borough Council, with or without modification – we have stated that this is our preferred unitary option, with the modification to create East Suffolk and West Suffolk.
- Implement any alternative proposal from the Boundary Committee, with or without modification – we detail in our document “Response to the Boundary Committee for England’s advice on unitary government in Suffolk” why these proposals are not suitable.
- Take no further action – The Boundary Committee itself recognises that there is support for the existing system and that they had received a number of direct representations calling for the retention of the current system – despite the unclear consultation process which did not ask for opinions on current structures.

Whilst we firmly believe that the only workable solution for unitary local government in Suffolk is an East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich structure, we can assure the Secretary of State that plans are in place should he choose not to implement unitary local government in part or across the whole county.

Suffolk Coastal has for many years been committed to a philosophy of delivering high quality services at an affordable cost. We have continually met the annual cost savings identified by the “Gershon” and Comprehensive Spending Reviews, whilst delivering pragmatic Council Tax increases. We have established a robust track record of delivering value for money and strong financial management as can be evidenced through the annual ‘use of resources’ assessments.

While delivering efficiencies equivalent to our annual Council Tax income, we have also seen improved performance across all of the Council’s services, while the ratings for public satisfaction with both the area and council services have remained very high. We have achieved this by having a business-like focus and being innovative in our approach to delivering services.

The Council’s entire operational services and asset management service is delivered through a hugely successful joint arrangement with Norfolk Commercial Services. We have outsourced both our leisure centres and theatre provision to the private sector. These partnership arrangements are not recent ideas to meet the current and future financial pressure that all local authorities are facing, but have been initiated and enhanced over a number of years, emphasising our business-like approach.

Super districts

Suffolk Coastal has been working closely with its neighbouring district councils for many years through a number of innovative partnerships.

Building upon this considerable experience, we have evolved our approach, and during the past eighteen months, we have developed a “preferred partner” arrangement with our coastal neighbour Waveney District Council, to develop shared services to deliver coordinated and cost-effective outcomes for our residents, businesses and visitors alike.

The two authorities have established a Joint Management Board to deliver our ambitious long term vision. We already successfully share a Chief Executive who is setting out the structured work programme for each council, during these challenging times, to deliver the rationalisation and improvements required. In addition we share

a Head of Planning and Head of Audit bringing consistencies of approach across both Councils.

The Board is over-seeing the development of business cases for greater service integration in areas such as ICT, Finance and HR, and plans for other services are being devised. This approach will enable the two authorities to develop and seize efficiencies to the benefit of tax-payers and services.

Partnerships such as the Integrated Coastal Zone Management have already started to deliver real and successful joined up working and are focused on achieving measurable benefits.

Should unitary local government not be introduced this programme of work will be both strengthened and accelerated where appropriate. We are very mindful and alert to the challenges that both councils face and many of these are shared, but are also keen to explore the opportunities and potential benefits that an East Coast partnership could deliver.

Our “super district” approach has been recognised by organisations such as the IDeA and the PPMA as best practice and has been promoted widely as an innovative method for the future of local government. This approach is being replicated across Suffolk with St. Edmundsbury / Forest Heath and Mid-Suffolk / Babergh announcing their intentions to introduce similar models.

We are also working more closely with the County Council to ensure the effective delivery of service across the main two tiers of local government in partnership with our town and parish councils. Total Place projects in Suffolk are identifying opportunities for effective working between agencies for example: addressing the social and economic cost of drugs and alcohol misuse in young people; young people not in training/work (NEETS); agency support to vulnerable (high demand) families. There are additional “deep dives” into partnership working and performance management.

We fully recognise the important role of the town and parish councils in local place-shaping – and this is something that they have been achieving in partnership with the District Councils in this area for many decades. We will continue to strengthen our already strong links to ensure effective local decision-making, design of services and effective use of assets wherever there is local commitment. We have developed the Alde and Ore Futures project to address long-term community issues beyond just the coastal and estuary management issues they face. We have been working with Suffolk ACRE and other partners on a community planning project enabling local communities across our district to draw up their own parish plans to identify and address the issues facing them.

We have in place a strong Local Strategic Partnership and work closely with the Police, Health Sector, Community and Voluntary organisations, and Business Community to drive forward targeted local initiatives for all parts of the community. Even if unitary local government was not to proceed across all or most of Suffolk we would continue to look at enhancing the Local Strategic Partnership to continue being an effective vehicle to deliver joined up services and initiatives.

We strongly believe that the plans for improved partnership working and super districts will give local people greater control over local services whilst also providing clear accountability through the democratic process.