

# Local Government Reorganisation in Norfolk: Interim Report

## 1. Introduction

As set out in Appendix 1, our position has been developed based upon an objective and independent analysis of the options for Norfolk, using the Government's criteria and independent evidence gathering. We have been able to assemble a comprehensive view – which has benefitted from the dispassionate appraisal by our appointed Strategic Partner. A partner with considerable experience and track-record in the field.

More work is of course required – critically to enable the voice of residents and secure considered feedback from the Government – but we believe we have identified the most viable and effective way forward. Our interim plan, therefore, is based upon our analysis of this evidence assessment and subsequent development of a single preferred way forward.

## 2. A clear way forward: stronger communities, more effective services

Based on the work to date, our foundational vision for the future of public service excellence in Norfolk is via three strong independent, but interlinked, unitary authorities each commanding place leadership over the distinct 'real' geographies which mean something to the way people experience life in Norfolk:

- East of Norfolk – The Country's clean energy capital, one of UK's epicentres for tourism, and containing the internationally renowned Broads National Park and the historic port of Great Yarmouth. Covering what we currently know as Great Yarmouth, Broadland and South Norfolk (with the potential exclusion of areas of 'Urban Norwich'), and majority of North Norfolk.
- Urban Norwich – An economic driving force and powerhouse of Norfolk, home to the region's largest functioning clusters in life sciences (including Norwich Research Park), finance, digital and education. Covering what we currently know the existing 'City' boundaries with some potential redrawing of boundaries to incorporate the City's urban hinterland (NB – the final boundaries for which are still being developed)
- West of Norfolk – The 'Royal' heartland of Norfolk, gateway to the County, and home to the regions manufacturing and agricultural heartlands as well as the Cambridge Norwich tech corridor of growth. Covering what we currently known as Breckland, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, and the North Norfolk County divisions of Fakenham & The Raynhams, Holt and Wells.

The evidence in Appendix 1 sets out the case in more detail, but the substantive foundations for our Norfolk three-unitary model are that it represents:

### **A model which retains and celebrates local distinctiveness and accountability**

We believe one of the most important success factors for new authorities will be the connection they create with the communities they serve. Local authorities need to be

local: with local representation, local accessibility, local accountability and resonance. Our model protects and enhances this for Norfolk residents by:

- Building boundaries aligned to historic and cultural identification with place and championing the unique identities of our three largest urban centres. Creating authorities which will truly mean something to local residents.
- Ensuring, even with the large distances within the region, residents have close access to their democratic centre and identification with a local 'capital'. Keeping democracy as close as possible to local communities.
- Ensuring new authorities are of a size and scale to still be relatable and referenceable locally, with all local representatives able to effectively serve local community need.

### **A model which puts public service delivery on the front foot**

We feel that in embracing LGR, we should do so only where we are most confident it could secure long-term positive benefit. We see that as being significantly more likely under our three-unitary model wherein:

- The size and boundaries of our authorities will keep them close enough to communities to deliver more transformational change through better understanding and management of local demand and by creating more locally designed preventative services by working with the voluntary and community sector. We believe this could have profound implications across services, but particularly in priority areas like housing, health and social care, striking the optimum balance between size and scale whilst being place based, and providing an appropriate scale to support a vibrant Strategic Authority and mayor.
- Our unitary design would see a close alignment to models used by existing core public sector partners including (but not limited to); police operational units, acute hospital geographies, ICB 'place' team boundaries, FE networks and regional care teams. In effect, following the natural service geographies which have developed outside of the constraints of the 1972 Local Government Act.
- Through design we would be able to make the most judicious decision based on over which geographies we could collaborate and share over a wider footprint, with a presumption that certain areas like Children's Services would lend themselves effectively to a cross-boundary trust (as effectively demonstrated elsewhere in county) and others better suited to local configuration. The strength of our model being it provides the foundational footprint to achieve efficiency through scale guaranteed, with the option to aggregate where the benefits can be identified.

### **A model which blends short-term efficiencies, with long-term effectiveness**

Indicative modelling has demonstrated a strong potential for real achievable savings, estimated initially around £7.6m. By design, we would also be able to avoid

diseconomies of scale through organisations getting “too” big and structures and processes becoming too complicated and cumbersome.

Critically, our long-term expectations of the total benefit to the public sector would be substantially greater – particularly through the preventative and localised benefits identified above. We see that long-term structural change in cost of public services has to be through a more radical reimagining of services, and a more holistic approach to whole place investment and long-term prevention. We see this becoming substantially more achievable with authorities which are designed around real place geographies – and of a manageable scale to tackle the issues that present.

### **A model which would underpin successful devolution Norfolk and Suffolk**

There is a celebrated blueprint for devolution in England, through the trailblazing successes of areas like Greater Manchester. Almost without exception these areas work to a blueprint of a core set of 5 – 10 strong unitary authorities, often delivering services to populations of c. 300,000 residents. In alignment with similar proposals in Suffolk, this model represents the nearest alignment possible locally.

Furthermore, a key benefit of designing unitary boundaries around real economic geographies, is the ability for our new authorities to be single minded in supporting local growth ambitions. In alignment to the orchestration possible through the new Strategic Authority, our model would supercharge place’s ability to take a fully holistic approach to local economic need – and look at all the levers (health, housing, jobs, skills) in collaboration when it comes to tackling economic need.

Finally, under our vision for devolution, the current White Paper only scratches the surface of what we think is possible. We believe there is a strong argument for a more radical approach to new public service delivery and accountability – something which is made far easier through unitaries aligned to local place. Truly locality based public services, centred on the communities they serve and removing significant waste and overlap.

### **A model that reflects the sectors recent experiences:**

We have not developed our thinking in isolation. There has been significant recent experience to draw from through the creation of new unitary authorities over the last ten years. From which we have observed: size is certainly not the only thing that matters and has to be proportionate to communities. Savings are, by their nature, ephemeral and should not be the foundations we build upon – we should build upon what’s right and makes the most difference for local people.

### **A model which will command the widest range of support across Norfolk (and Suffolk)**

Finally, and critically, we think if LGR is to be successful it needs to be owned and supported as far and wide as possible across all corners of Norfolk life. Clearly, in the timescales allowed, we have not been able to test our propositions in detail but at this interim stage take significant comfort from the fact that:

- This recommendation is being shared unequivocally via Chambers across Norfolk, and will have the biggest single democratic mandate of any plans being submitted for the Government's March 21<sup>st</sup> deadline
- There is a golden thread in our approach which has been carried across Councils throughout Norfolk and Suffolk, underlining a much broader consensus across boundaries and across the new Strategic Authority boundaries
- Strong initial feedback from local public engagement indicates we are substantively on the right track, with a strong support for local accountability, local relevance, and service delivery

### **3. Weaknesses into strengths: risk mitigation and our vision**

As is highlighted in Appendix A, our approach has been objectively scored as the best way forward for Norfolk. However, no solution is perfect, and there are challenges to overcome and, particularly working on the Government's pre-set criteria, important risks to mitigate. We believe they are eminently solvable, but acknowledge specifically:

#### **Our approach will require collaboration with the LGBCE, and the redrawing of some lines on maps to create new boundaries**

The Government has indicated a preference to work with existing boundaries, unless under exceptional circumstances. We believe it is impossible to deliver the best for Norfolk whilst being constrained to existing boundaries, and a strong exceptional case exists to be bold when it comes to the future of our area.

We would seek to minimise unnecessary disruption but believe fundamentally that if we're delivering the biggest change to service delivery in over 50-years we should not be driven by administrative convenience. We have, collectively, significant experience of collaboration with the LGBCE and are confident that, with support, we can seize the opportunity to align boundaries to communities and service delivery.

#### **Our approach may not yield the largest savings up-front**

As detailed above, we are confident our model is affordable, sustainable, and capable of yielding the likely near-term savings required to support reinvestment of almost £10m immediately. However, on a desktop basis other models could claim more in the short term – particularly through redundancies.

From observing this debate in other areas affected, it is our strong reflection that it is not in the best interests of residents and businesses to see LGR as a race to the bottom in terms of what model sustains the biggest short-term cuts. Indeed, we would further observe that it is weak logic (and fundamentally counter to the role of 'local government') to presume bigger is always better and always cheaper.

As set out above, and in Appendix A, we believe our proposed model represents the best achievable short-term savings, whilst putting authorities on the best long-term

footing to deliver more transformational changes to public spending through genuinely innovative public service reform.

**Our vision for three new Norfolk unitaries will, initially, see Local Government serving populations of under 500,000**

The Government has indicated an initial preference that new unitaries should cover a population of 500,000 unless an alternative case can be made.

The case is strong in Norfolk for a lower population size for each unitary, reflecting distinct identities and economies across the county.

Enabling us to acknowledge and build on those identities is key to unlocking the benefits of Local Government Reform and devolution in Norfolk, enabling:

- each area to unlock growth in the right way for its economy,
- the transformation of public services to serve the particular needs of each community, improving outcomes and delivering better value for money,
- Providing a stronger platform for local voices and democratic representation, and
- Supporting effective devolution with the right balance within the MCA and a clear focus from each unitary on the tools needed to unlock growth

**Some services will need to be aggregated, some will need to be disaggregated**

There is no way of avoiding changes to services under Local Government Reorganisation. It is a reality of the policy. Local Government currently delivers around 140 different essential public services in Norfolk, of which around 100 may be required to be 'aggregated' (or scaled up) and the remainder could either be 'disaggregated' (scaled down) or kept as is.

Under our model, a fundamental detailed design consideration would be the protection of service, and the identification of delivery at the scale which makes most sense for service users. As above, in some instances we anticipate by design there will be a preference to delivering at a geographic scale beyond unitaries – looking at best practice in the sector, a Children's Trust model could be set up for Children's Social Care, for example. Fundamentally, we see no material disaggregation risk in our model but would introduce a more localised commissioning and challenge to the delivery and cost of quality services.

**4. More to do, but a solid foundations to build from**

As set out in the above summary, we have worked with partners to develop what we believe is a compelling and comprehensive foundational vision for the future of services in Norfolk. Meeting, and exceeding, the Governments initial ask.

At this important juncture we have selected our proposals as a clear, and unambiguous, single way forward as we believe the best thing for residents and services users will be to move as quickly as possible to design and development.

As set out in Appendix A, we think there are some critical future steps in terms of public engagement, and detailed coproduction with Government and partners, but will be seeking investment support from the Government to turn our vision into a Full Business Case for the future of Norfolk.

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