

Comment on the Boundary Committee's draft proposals for local government in Suffolk by Ipswich Borough Council.

26 September 2008

Overview

1. Ipswich Borough Council's Executive Committee resolved on 9 September to support the Boundary Committee's proposal for a North Haven Unitary Council and to oppose the alternative pattern of a Suffolk wide unitary Council which would be remote and unable to best meet the aspirations of Ipswich.

Community views

2. Over the last three months, representatives from Ipswich Borough Council have met with hundreds of individuals, businesses, community organisations and parish and town councils to discuss local government review. There has been a spectrum of views expressed generally in favour of the Boundary Committee's proposals.
3. Perhaps inevitably given the short timescale and with such a new concept as North Haven, Ipswich Borough Council has had to work hard with the help of Babergh District Council in particular to explain the benefits of the new Council and how it might work. It is clear that there is growing support for this exciting new concept from all areas of the community and Ipswich Borough Council has used those views to test its assumptions about how the new council would work and to inform the business case for North Haven which has been submitted to the Boundary Committee.
4. Six of the seven districts in Suffolk support a unitary pattern of Government focused on Ipswich and its surrounding area. The North Haven proposal also has the support of large neighbouring districts in Essex including Colchester and Tendring. A number of parish councils have also proffered their support, e.g. Pinewood, Chelmondiston, Holbrook and Shotley. There is also growing support from big and small businesses such as Onslow Suffolk Ltd, legal firms, community groups including the Ipswich Society, Genesis (Orwell Mencap), Suffolk New College (the largest FE establishment in Suffolk) and individuals as represented on your website. A number of other organisations whilst supporting other options for Suffolk have indicated that they could work with a unitary pattern based on North Haven e.g. Suffolk Police Authority and Suffolk PCT.

The case for North Haven

5. The North Haven business case (submitted separately) demonstrates that the new North Haven Council would provide:

Strategic leadership that is strong, effective and accountable.

6. The area proposed for North Haven is very contained; nearly 86% of North Haven's working residents work in the North Haven area for example. This means that there is a strong focus on addressing the needs of the area and to improve quality of life. This backs the initial views of the Boundary Committee that the new Council will be able to focus on the very different needs of this area, for example - economic growth, developing the ports,

improving skills and education. The strategic leadership provided by a cabinet/ leader model in Ipswich has delivered some of the most exciting economic regeneration projects in the Eastern region and will form a sound base for the work of the new council.

7. Accountability will be ensured by enhanced scrutiny arrangements, the attention of a very strong press and media base, which is largely coterminous with North Haven, and very vocal and active community groups across the area. This is very strong competition for economic development across the country and North Haven would help the area compete with the Thames Gateway, M11 Corridor, Greater Cambridge etc. The North Haven Unitary would strengthen the impact of Regional Cities East. As a key driver within the Haven Gateway “engine of growth”, North Haven will be well placed to represent the area at regional and national level.
8. It is essential that the educational and skills performance is improved and there is now a massive opportunity with the development of the University, Suffolk New College, the SWISS 6th Form Centre and BSF finance for Schools, all of which are in the North Haven area.

Empowered citizens and communities

9. There will be one Councillor for every 3000 voters which provides good opportunity for interrelationship with residents. The new Council will benefit from Ipswich’s nationally recognised approach to community engagement with neighbourhood forums reaching out to all communities.
10. North Haven will build on the work of existing Town and Parish Councils and community groups to ensure citizens and communities have a strong voice in the new Council. The new Council will provide an opportunity to realise the potential of the recent White Paper “Communities in Control”.

Value for money services and an affordable solution for local government review

11. North Haven estimates £35m of net savings will be delivered over the first four years through flatter management, smarter delivery of services, rationalisation of property asset, technology etc. The investment necessary to set up a new council will be “paid back” within 13 months. There will be annual on-going savings of £15m.

The case for a Rural Unitary Suffolk

12. It is disappointing that a strong business case for the Boundary Committee’s proposal of a Rural Suffolk Unitary Council has not been articulated robustly. Ipswich Borough Council has participated on the Board overseeing that business case and believes that the new Council would be able to focus on the needs of distinctive rural areas and market towns. The County Council were asked to lead on the Business Case for a Rural Unitary Suffolk but acknowledge that the County’s preferred position is to support the other pattern of a Suffolk Unitary Council.
13. This has been reflected in the level of savings that have been built into the business case. Rural Suffolk makes 74% of the costs and only 24% of the savings which does not make sense.

14. Rural Suffolk needs a voice to demand better services for the villages and small towns across the rest of Suffolk. Having a Council focussed on this objective will lead to stronger leadership and improved services.
15. Despite the lack of leadership there is considerable merit in a Rural Suffolk unitary. The independent SQW Report states that “the rest of Suffolk is sufficiently large in terms of population, households and employment to be viable economically. In particular it has a working population of around 200,000.”

Boundaries between North Haven and Rural Unitary Suffolk

16. Feedback from the discussions we have held indicate some differing views on the exact boundaries of the two new unitaries which we would ask you to reflect on. Firstly, communities to the west of Ipswich / Babergh District Council have asked for consideration of an extension of the North Haven boundaries to include Hadleigh and other local Parishes. Secondly, at a number of the Parish meetings it has been raised that Westerfield and Tuddenham should be considered as part of the North Haven.

The case for the alternative pattern - a unitary Suffolk

17. Suffolk County Council has conducted a very strong campaign in favour of this option arguing that current political leadership has not been able to meet the needs and aspirations of Suffolk’s communities. Investment in Lowestoft has not delivered, transport communications are poor, educational attainment low and the economy of Ipswich limited. Suffolk County Council’s solution to this problem is for more of the same, to entrust all local government services to a remote and distant body forced to balance competing community needs and requirements and lobby on behalf of the very different communities of Hadleigh, Eye, Felixstowe, Newmarket, Lowestoft and Ipswich. Compromise on that scale makes effective community leadership difficult and reduces an organisation’s ability to focus clearly and resolutely on anywhere. A council of over 700,000 with 120 councillors will be unaccountable and remote.
18. In order to overcome this remoteness the County Council is proposing the introduction of 22 community boards. How these will work is unclear and public feedback suggests the case is far from made. There are concerns that Boards will in effect introduce another layer of Government between the unitary and parish and town councils especially as it is proposed that membership should include PCT, Police etc. It is also unclear how these new community boards will relate to existing Safer Neighbourhood Teams and School Clusters which are very different and will continue. The proposal is for the community boards to spend £2.6m per year – i.e. £130,000 each on average, yet size will vary from 11,000 to 120,000 population. It is unclear how the funding is to be split? For example, will Ipswich get a fifth of the funding reflecting its population, or a 22th?
19. It is also illuminating that the County Council appears to be proposing a town council for Ipswich which seems to recognise that Ipswich would not get much of an identity when a single Suffolk Council is formed. Some key questions about their approach to Ipswich include:
 - (i) A Town Council for Ipswich– how much will this cost, who will be elected to it? And how?

- (ii) A portfolio holder for Ipswich (will there be others for Lowestoft and Bury?). Will they be Ipswich councillors or from Newmarket for example? Will there not be confusion with their proposals for a ceremonial mayor to build civic pride and identity?
- (iii) A community board – how does this relate to all of the above?

20. We have serious concerns about how planning would work within a whole Suffolk unitary. There are four main reasons for this:
- (a) The challenges that councillors face in handling their development control related casework at a ward level are often intense and would be far more so with a proposal that would result in far more people per councillor;
 - (b) The fact that 8 planning committees are proposed that would inevitably require over 100 councillors being either on one of them or an official substitute for one of them;
 - (c) The challenges of organising and staffing those Committees (approximately 2 a week) would inevitably take up substantial senior officer time - for instance Ipswich Borough Council always has either a third or fourth tier officer present at each and every planning committee (which last half a day each time); and
 - (d) The preparation of Local Development Frameworks will always be controversial and of considerable interest to local communities. As an example Ipswich Borough Council has recently undertaken its preferred options consultation and organised 6 drop-in sessions and 6 neighbourhood forum based public meetings. These were all attended by senior staff (mainly a Director and the relevant Head of Service) and in total the 6 meetings had in excess of 1000 attendees. This authority struggles to see how any unitary Suffolk model would be able to engage and / or resource to this level.
21. The North Haven planning proposals have been produced following discussions between professional planners from all the authorities on the North Haven Steering Group and have been discussed in detail by the North Haven Board. The proposals build on the excellent track record on delivering planning services that already exists within the North Haven area. Whilst there will always be challenges in planning we believe the North Haven model would work well and would be able to successfully address the issues that the single unitary proposal does not.

Conclusion

22. The single Unitary Council is just more of the same!
23. The North Haven will be a new Council with an opportunity to reshape and deliver better services in one of the fastest growing areas of the Country.
