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Max Caller CBE
Boundary Committee for England

27/10/08

Dear Mr Caller

Unitary Local Government in Suffolk – Ipswich

As community leaders in Ipswich we are writing to express our concerns about the proposals for community government in Ipswich if a unitary county for the whole of Suffolk is created.

Two of the Secretary of State's five criteria directly address this issue. New unitary government must provide for "strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership" and the "empowerment of citizens and communities." We do not believe that Suffolk County Council's proposals for a unitary county will meet these criteria for Ipswich and we agree with the statement in paragraph 6.50 of the Boundary Committee's report that the "aspirations of Ipswich may not be best met under this model".

Suffolk County Council's submission to the Boundary Committee dated 26 September sets out how their proposals address these concerns by creating a range of neighbourhood arrangements for Ipswich. We do not believe they will provide for strong leadership, accountability or effective empowerment. Their proposals (**set out in bold**) and our concerns about them are:

Introduce a portfolio holder or champion for Ipswich.

This person would presumably be drawn from the new unitary councillors and have a seat on its new Executive. To command credibility that person would have to be drawn from Ipswich unitary councillors, it surely would not be right for the Ipswich champion to come from Bury for example. Other points of concern include:

- Would the portfolio holder have to come from the party that constitutes the new unitary's Administration?
- Would that portfolio holder have responsibility for the strategic development of service delivery in Ipswich and if so, how would they relate to other portfolio holders?

- How would they relate to the Area Assembly and town council set out below?
- Would residents of Ipswich contact their local MP, councillor, the Ipswich Champion, service specific portfolio holders or the Area Assembly for action on issues that concern them?

Establish a Community Board or Area Assembly for Ipswich.

Suffolk County Council's proposal envisages 20 or so community boards across Suffolk ranging in size from 10,000 to 120,000 people. We assume that the proposed Area Assembly for Ipswich will also constitute the Community Board too - although that is unclear. These will bring together key local agencies, take on community initiatives and decide on how locality budgets will be allocated. In Ipswich this Assembly will also have greater devolution than in other areas.

Creating this Assembly will not simplify things for local residents in Ipswich or provide for strong leadership. How will it relate to the Portfolio holder, the Town Council or the local neighbourhood forums? Who takes the strategic view for Ipswich, who do residents contact for action?

The County Council's budget for Community Boards is £2.6m. If this is divided equally across the 20 community boards then the budget for Ipswich's 120,000 population will be only £130,000. If it is given more then clearly resources available to the rest of Suffolk will reduce significantly.

If the Board is genuinely given greater devolution then how will this address the problems identified with the current two tier arrangements which it will in fact replicate but with a democratic deficit?

Build on the Borough Council's existing neighbourhood forums.

There are currently five neighbourhood forums that are broadly coterminous with Safer Neighbourhood Teams and bring together local residents, key organisations and councillors to solve problems in local areas and to allocate locality budgets – very similar to community boards in fact! They are recognised as national good practice and Ipswich is only one of only 18 national empowering authorities in the country. However the forums are currently operating on a shoestring following the withdrawal of financial support by the County Council. There is no suggestion in Suffolk County Council's submission that the necessary extra resources would be found to develop the forums. Nor is there any indication about how the forums would develop alongside the other arrangements. Their relationship with the Area Assembly is particularly confusing and likely to lead to multiplication of activity by stakeholder groups and residents. Would they still have devolved budgets? What would be unacceptable would be to replace them with one community board for Ipswich, which would see the number of opportunities for public engagement reduced from 20 to 3 per year.

Establish a Town Council for Ipswich and maintain a ceremonial mayor.

If Ipswich ceased to have democratically elected governance then a Town Council might well be a desirable option. However, our estimate is that the additional costs to local council tax payers of establishing and maintaining a town council would be in the region of £2m per annum (which has not been costed in the County's submission). It is also difficult to see how any devolution of responsibilities to this Town Council under legislation pertaining to town and parish councils would fit with the proposed devolution of powers to the Area Assembly. Neither is it clear how its role would fit with the Ipswich Champion or neighbourhood forums.

Ipswich is very different from much of the rest of Suffolk with a very diverse population and some "city" challenges including crime, drugs and prostitution on which Ipswich Borough Council has made good progress over the years through a focussed approach and one which understands our communities' needs.

With a population of 700,000 and covering a wide range of communities and environments a unitary Suffolk County Council would inevitably be remote. To overcome this the County Council has proposed a network of community boards and neighbourhood arrangements which in the case of Ipswich will be a recipe for confusion, reduced accountability and unclear, unfocussed leadership.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Cann (Group Leader, Liberal Democrats)

David Ellesmere (Group Leader, Labour)

Liz Harsant (Group Leader, Conservative)