

It's essential we get it right!



... shaping the future of local government in Suffolk

It's essential we get it right! North Haven option remains the way forward

The Boundary Committee's proposal for North Haven and Rural Suffolk unitary councils is the best solution for local government in Suffolk. It is essential that together we grasp this unique opportunity to get it right for the future of our county. A reminder of the case for change is set out below.

Authority and Suffolk PCT, while supporting other options for Suffolk, have indicated that they could work with a unitary pattern based on North Haven.

The business case

The existing North Haven business case amply demonstrates that the new North Haven council would provide:

- **Strategic leadership that is strong, effective and accountable**

North Haven would have a population of around 211,000, making it one of the largest unitaries in the East of England Region and as large as many London boroughs.

The new council would be large enough to have real influence both regionally and nationally but small enough to understand and address the diverse needs of the area and its communities - economic growth, housing, developing the ports, improving skills, raising educational attainment, an ageing population and transport in rural areas.

The alternative pattern of a giant county-wide unitary council would be remote and unable to best meet the aspirations of the various communities across Suffolk.

THE CASE FOR NORTH HAVEN

Broad cross-section of support

Despite being a new council, it is clear that North Haven attracts a growing level of support from all areas of the community and from stakeholders.

Six of the seven districts in Suffolk advocate a unitary solution focused on Ipswich and its surrounding area. A number of parish councils, voluntary groups and neighbouring districts in Essex have signalled their support. There is also recognition from big and small businesses that unitary government in the area will best help develop the local economy. A number of other organisations, such as Suffolk Police

Strategic leadership will be provided by an effective leader and cabinet model and accountability ensured by robust and open scrutiny arrangements. Active engagement of communities and community groups will be achieved through the development of a new Community Strategy, the creation of a new Local

“**Strategic leadership that is strong, effective and accountable**”

Strategic Partnership led by a Public Services Board, the proposed neighbourhood arrangements and excellent consultation practices.

From an economic development perspective, North Haven would bring together major existing employers such as BT Adayar Park and Felixstowe Port, the established financial service centres, maritime companies and government agencies in Ipswich, the burgeoning regeneration around the Ipswich Waterfront, the future potential of Snoasis and the leisure, arts and entertainment facilities of Ipswich and Felixstowe.

One North Haven council can far better harness this potential in the best interests of the area and the region. At a time of economic downturn this argument carries even greater weight.

On educational attainment and skills development, North Haven can maximise the opportunity presented by the development of the university, Suffolk New College, the SWISS sixth form centre, the schools merger in Felixstowe and the Building Schools for the Future programme.

■ Empowered citizens and communities

A key role for councillors would be to act as community leaders. There would be one councillor for every 3,000 voters making for a close relationship with residents.

The new council would build on Ipswich's nationally recognised approach to community engagement, with neighbourhood forums reaching out to all communities and involving key partners and stakeholders. Neighbourhood areas will be devised after consultation to reflect the different communities within North Haven.

The work of existing town and parish councils and community groups will be integrated to ensure residents and communities have a strong voice in the new council. This will provide an opportunity to realise

the potential of the recent White Paper "Communities in Control".

There will be a menu of delegated powers which towns and parishes could choose from and a North Haven delivery structure that understands local needs and supports local service delivery and local capacity building.

■ Value for money services

The single-tier status and size of North Haven will provide significant economies of scale and enable it to offer value for money services by:

Maximising the benefits of integration between current county and district services;

Adopting a mixed economy approach to delivery of services, i.e. there will be no preference for in-house, third sector or private sector solutions;

Optimising the arrangements for partnership working with other public sector and third sector organisations;

Tailoring and targeting services to meet diverse local needs;

An ongoing Efficiency and Business Transformation programme; and

Progressively moving towards a commissioning model with a strong intelligent client capability.

■ Affordability

£35 million of net savings will be delivered in North Haven alone over the first four years through, for example, flatter management structures, better integration of services and rationalisation of property assets. The investment necessary to set up a new council will be "paid back" within 13 months. There will be annual on-going savings of £15 million.

The Boundary Committee's own financial advisors consider that the North Haven business case is likely to be achieved and is low risk.

The case for a Rural Suffolk

A Rural Suffolk Unitary Council would be able to focus on the distinctive needs of rural areas, market towns and villages in the rest of the county providing stronger leadership and improved services. With a population of 490,000 it will be able to deliver value for money services.

The inclusion of Lowestoft significantly strengthens the viability of Rural Suffolk. It would encompass Suffolk's second largest urban centre, around 20 market and larger towns and a countryside with areas of outstanding natural beauty, a world-renowned coastline and a tremendous tourism offer. The new council would be able to focus on the distinctive needs of this area including:

- Linking market towns with their hinterlands;
- Improving rural transport and stopping the loss of rural services;
- Supporting the diversification of the rural economy; and
- Meeting the needs of its ageing population.

In terms of economic development, independent experts SQW consider 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."

Why a single unitary Suffolk would be wrong

With a population of 700,000 and serving a wide range of communities and environments, this unitary would be remote and would lack focus. In attempting to balance the competing demands and priorities across the county it is unlikely to be able to deliver effective community leadership.

In order to overcome this remoteness, it is proposed to create a number of Community Boards. It is unclear how these would operate or how they would be designed to reflect particular local needs from urban

Ipswich to coastal Southwold. There are concerns that the boards will simply introduce another layer of government between the unitary and town and parish councils. That's certainly the experience elsewhere.

In many ways, this pattern would perpetuate the failings of the current system which has contributed to many of the challenges Suffolk now faces – low skills and educational achievement, low investment in modern integrated transport networks, low aspiration, inequality and a failure to address the economic and transport needs of Lowestoft and the urban issues faced by Ipswich.

While there will be savings, these would be offset by the inefficiencies of a large and unfocused organisation and the need for area based and coordination delivery structures.

A majority of responses to the Boundary Committee consultation were in favour of other solutions for Suffolk.

To get the facts go to www.unitarynews.com

CONCLUSION

- **A single unitary Suffolk council would be just more of the same – a lack of democracy, a smaller voice for communities and less accountability.**
- **North Haven would be a new council with an opportunity to reshape and deliver better services in one of the fastest growing areas of the country.**
- **When partnered by a strong Rural Suffolk unitary that includes Lowestoft, the many and varied needs of the county would be well served for many years to come.**
- **Creating two unitaries would be affordable, delivering nearly £70 million of net savings across Suffolk over the next four years and annual savings of £30 million thereafter.**