

## The case for a “greater” Ipswich Unitary Council



## Foreword

Ipswich is England's longest continuously settled town. Initially settled in Anglo Saxon times and, in recognition of its status, granted a charter by King John 825 years ago this year. Ipswich has played a prominent part in England's economy for well over a thousand years and continues to do so today.

It is the largest conurbation in Suffolk with a thriving economy contributing over £4bn GVA each year (from within the Ipswich Borough Council boundary alone); a thriving arts scene, University, Premier League football team and a 60 minute rail connection to London.

But the current local government structures within Suffolk don't work in Ipswich – or its functional economic area's favour. Decision making is fragmented and doesn't consider the area as a whole.

Through its English Devolution White Paper the government is providing Suffolk with the opportunity to correct this and create a unitary council which will deliver all council services to the wider Ipswich conurbation and work closely with a new Mayor for East Anglia to make strategic decisions that support communities and lead to the investment that the Ipswich area deserves.

We believe that the case for a “greater” Ipswich unitary council has never been stronger.



Cllr Neil MacDonald  
Leader (Labour)



Cllr Ian Fisher  
Leader of the  
Opposition  
(Conservative)



Cllr Oliver Holmes  
Leader of the Liberal  
Democrats

## The Ipswich Area

Ipswich performs a regional role in terms of its population, in delivering growth and how it functions as a major employment, shopping and service centre, and hub for transportation.

The Borough is developing dynamically and has strong prospects for growth. This growth is supported at a central, sub-regional and local government level, enabling Ipswich to develop while acknowledging the sense of place established by many historic buildings and its large landscaped parks.

However, the current boundaries of Ipswich Borough were largely set in 1835 and have not kept pace with the development of the county town, the functional economy or aspects like residents' ability to travel to work.

Today there are c270,000 people living within a 15km (roughly 10 mile) radius of the Cornhill at the heart of Ipswich town centre.

Residents within this radius, receive local government services from four District and Borough Councils with just over half of them being covered by Ipswich Borough Council. Despite mechanisms such as the "duty to co-operate" in town planning, this leads to fragmented decision making. Added to this is a County Council which is responsible for highways and infrastructure development.

Key examples of where the current fragmented system has not worked for Ipswich include:

- The development of Wolsey Grange housing estate within Babergh but just feet away from Ipswich Borough Council's Chantry Park. Neither the developers nor the residents of Wolsey Grange make any contribution to the upkeep of the park, indeed the developers refused to do this. This is the most recent example, but developments frequently feature on the borough boundary due to the proximity of the county town. Previous examples include Purdis Heath, Bixley Farm, Pinewood and Thorington Park.
- Dealing with the impact of closures of the Orwell Bridge. When proposals were drawn up for a "northern bypass" consultation was

dominated by residents outside Ipswich who did not want a new road or any associated housing growth. This was given greater priority by decision makers at the County Council than the needs of Ipswich and its economy resulting in plans being scrapped. This leaves Ipswich (and Felixstowe) paying the economic price for fragmented decision making when the bridge increasingly needs repairs due to its age. Suffolk Chamber of Commerce has recently published a report<sup>1</sup> entitled “Broken Down – the economic impact of the A14 in Suffolk” which sets out in detail the economic impact of Orwell Bridge closures. At least £1m is lost for every day of closure.

- The development of a large out of town retail park at Martlesham which competes with Ipswich Town Centre. Many retail parks are restricted to “bulky goods” but the one at Martlesham includes stores such as Next and Boots driving traffic away from town centres – indeed Ipswich does not have a Next within its boundary because of its out of town provision at Martlesham. Martlesham retail parks were consented by Suffolk Coastal District Council despite objections from neighbouring Ipswich Borough Council which feared the impact on Ipswich Town Centre.

Our proposal is for all council services, for a wider area than the current Ipswich Borough, to be provided by a single unitary council with the rest of Suffolk split into two further unitary councils – one for the East and one for the West. This would provide the appropriate balance between the three areas allowing each to focus on their own characteristics and opportunities. For example, the Western unitary would focus on its relationship with the Cambridgeshire sub-region, Newmarket’s national role in Horse Racing, manufacturing and the A11 / A14 Growth Corridor while the Eastern unitary would focus on Sizewell, the coastal tourism industry and the Energy Coast.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.suffolkchamber.co.uk/media/vkbfihig/a14-report-broken-down-the-economic-impact-of-the-a14-in-suffolk.pdf>

## Determining a boundary

Determining the boundary of an Ipswich centred unitary council will be a job for the Boundary Commission in due course, but it would seem sensible for it to consider those towns and villages which surround Ipswich and fall within a reasonable radius from Ipswich town centre, while taking into account natural settlement boundaries and community identities.

The Boundary Commission carried out work in 2008 on potential boundaries for an Ipswich and Felixstowe unitary council. This council would have included the whole of Ipswich Borough, parts of the then Suffolk Coastal Council (now part of East Suffolk), and parts of both Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils. Notably this included the Felixstowe and Shotley peninsulas.

In its report, the Boundary Commission noted that there should be “a unitary authority, on expanded boundaries, providing a more holistic and sustainable approach to planning and managing social, economic and environmental growth”. It goes on to say that it acknowledges the “economic importance of Ipswich to the surrounding area, in particular the nearby port town of Felixstowe...these two towns are united in a sub region which is of regional and national importance, providing a strategic gateway for trade and tourism between the UK and Europe”.

Elsewhere in its report the Boundary Commission states that “there is considerable commuting between the two towns” and “Felixstowe plays an important coastal leisure destination for the people of Ipswich”. The Boundary Commission considered the area between the River Orwell and the A12 to be necessary for inclusion in the unitary council boundary to provide for effective service delivery.

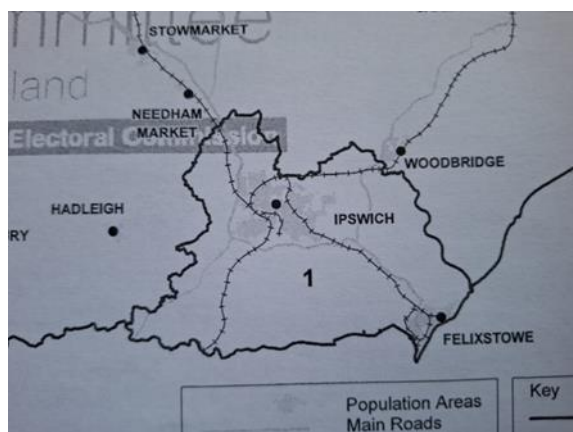


Figure 1 - 2008 Boundary Commission proposal for a unitary Ipswich and Felixstowe Council

## Principles for a unitary greater Ipswich council.

Whichever towns and villages are included within the boundary of a unitary council for “greater” Ipswich they will need to retain their unique identity and character. Ipswich Borough Council foresees a unitary council which is serving multiple communities and expects the new council to be clear that that is the case.

In no way does being part of a greater Ipswich unitary council area mean that other towns and villages – some of which have equally significant heritage and identities – would become absorbed by the county town; or that Council Tax will all be spent in one area. Similarly addresses won’t change – each place will continue to exist in its own right.

The benefits of the potential greater Ipswich unitary council footprint are:

- Recognition of the unique identity and character of each town and village as well as their roles in the economy of the Ipswich functional economic area e.g. logistics, tourism.
- Protects community identities by valuing town and parish councils and using their boundaries as building blocks
- Brings together Ipswich and Felixstowe as two of the largest ports in the country representing a logistics hub for the UK with a strong focus on UK’s global role
- Brings urban economic heart of Suffolk together into a strong Ipswich functional economic area which benefits the whole of Suffolk
- A small enough area to be truly local but large enough to be financially sustainable
- Harmonised service provision e.g. two weekly black bin collection, access to HEARS<sup>2</sup>, the low cost summer I-card giving children and young people access to dozens of school holiday activities
- Localised service provision e.g. community based teams focused on supporting the elderly and families; pot hole repairs
- Streamlining of resident interactions with their council bringing clearer accountability, efficiencies, integrated services and better outcomes

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<sup>2</sup> [About Us - HEARS Personal Alarm Service](#)



- Ensures housing development is focused on areas which have best access to services i.e. urban areas rather than impacting on small villages
- Makes infrastructure planning with the East Anglia Mayor easier as needs are within one council area
- Ensures representation on the Mayoral Strategic Authority for the Ipswich functional economic area
- Enables focus on prevention and public sector reform suitable for the greater Ipswich area e.g. homelessness, adult care,
- Opportunity for efficiencies through focused service delivery to relatively small geographic area focused on local need and understanding
- Would have between 56 and 60 councillors representing the area, engaging with communities and ensuring community voices are heard

Ipswich Borough Council, as the proposers of this new “greater” Ipswich council are clear that the public should be consulted on the name of a new council.

## Rationale for smaller unitary councils in Suffolk

The government's letter inviting councils to submit proposals for Local Government Reorganisation is clear that:

- Proposals should be for a sensible economic area with an appropriate tax base
- Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs
- There are certain scenarios where the guiding principle to have a population of 500,000 or more does not make sense, including on devolution grounds
- Proposals must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services
- Proposals should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment
- Proposals should be based on district council boundaries as building blocks but where there is strong justification more complex boundary changes will be considered

The proposal for a greater Ipswich Unitary Council together with unitary councils for the East and the West of Suffolk draws on the criteria around:

- **a sensible economic area with an appropriate tax base.** The main Interim Plan on behalf of the District and Borough Councils in Suffolk sets out the characteristics of Suffolk's economy and demonstrates why splitting the county into three economic areas is sensible. This is particularly the case for greater Ipswich. In addition, work by KPMG has demonstrated that the three unitaries would have an appropriate and similar tax base:

	Ipswich	West	East
Geographic area (sq km)	737.28	1,478.18	1,637.10
Business Rates (£) per unit population	151.28	150.14	149.53
Council tax income (£) per unit population	724.21	720.34	818.49



- **a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs.** The introduction of a greater Ipswich unitary will enable the development of a single Local Plan for the Ipswich functional area ensuring proper strategic planning which takes infrastructure and services into account when planning housing supply. This means that the needs of existing and new residents / communities will be met.
- **a scenario where the guiding principle to have a population of 500,000 or more does not make sense, including on devolution grounds.** This is the case in Suffolk. As set out in the Initial Plan for a multi-unitary solution for Suffolk, prepared by the District and Borough Councils, Suffolk is too economically diverse for a single council serving a population of more than 500,000 people.

To attempt this would stretch such a council too thin. It is recognised that Suffolk will be part of new Devolution arrangements through the introduction of a Mayor for East Anglia and that the Mayor will have responsibility for some functions such as skills and transport which currently sit at county level and do lend themselves to larger geographies.

A unitary council for greater Ipswich, with a starting population of 259,652 and expected to grow through the delivery of current local plans for the area to 320,693 by 2043, will enable the appropriate focus on the Ipswich economic functional area, as well as enabling the unitary councils for the East and West of Suffolk to focus on their unique economic characteristics.

- **prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services.** The three unitaries proposed for Suffolk will be able to tailor their service delivery models (across all functions which will transfer from both the county council and the district and borough councils) to meet the needs of the communities they work with. This will be based on thorough understanding of need and demography, best practice, community engagement and best value. They will work together where appropriate to achieve bigger benefits and outcomes for communities while retaining local character and values. A single unitary council for Suffolk would be too large to do much more than be a commissioning council with a focus on divestment of services

and tendering service provision. Multi-unitaries will be able to work together to share support services where appropriate to ensure that resources are prioritised to front-line functions that impact on quality of life.

- **enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.** Smaller unitary councils are better able to engage with their communities and empower neighbourhoods. An approach to community engagement and empowerment would be developed in partnership with town and parish councils, residents groups and other representative voices to ensure the differing needs of communities are met. In addition, the proposed number of councillors – between 56 and 60 for a Unitary Ipswich authority would ensure good access to elected representatives.
- **based on district council boundaries as building blocks but where there is strong justification more complex boundary changes will be considered.** The Borough of Ipswich sits at the heart of a new unitary greater Ipswich council but its boundary is too small to be viable or to provide the strategic benefit of unitarisation to the economy or communities. As such it will be necessary to create new boundaries for the East, West and Ipswich councils. It is proposed to use parish council boundaries as the building blocks so that local identities are respected and because data which will need to be used to test the model through the detailed business case phase is often only available to this spatial level. While we recognise this is a more complex approach than simply using existing district boundaries, given that Ipswich's boundary has not been fully reviewed since 1835 and plans for unitary councils will need to last in excess of 50 years the investment in a full boundary review will pay dividends in supporting devolution, growth and communities for decades and maybe centuries to come.