

District Councillor Report March 2025

On the 27th of February the MSDC meeting was held as planned. On March the 4th there were two workshops organized in Stowmarket. The first one was on LGR (Local Government Reform) and the second one was on Devolution.

The MSDC mainly dealt with various financial aspects, some of which go well into the future when District Councils won't exist. In the short term a budgetary surplus for 25/26 of 2,4 million is expected. District Council tax will not be changed this year. The Government has scrapped the Rural Services Delivery Grant. After 26/27 a deficit is expected to emerge.

A Capital spending programme was agreed, including a High street regeneration in Stowmarket, an increase in Locality Award to £ 10 000 per ward and £ 540 000 for the Stradbroke Leisure Centre.

Housing Revenue Account, HRA, was approved. The overall situation is difficult as Cllr Winch concluded in his excellent presentation of this difficult topic. The forecast covers 30 years but deficits are about to occur. Parts of the housing stock are in poor condition and will require a lot upgrading. Service charges will go up and 'rent tolerance' will be in force.

The Government is demanding increased housing quotas further calls for sites to be expected. Neighbourhood Plans will be affected by this. A Joint Local Development Scheme to be developed and adopted by 2029. This is important as not doing it would mean that plans would simply be imposed upon us.

The workshop about LGR highlighted the sharply increased workload on part of future elected Councillors for the Unitaries. These elected people will deal with both the present matters of District Councils combined with what the County Councils do as well. It is hard to fathom how anyone having a civilian employment or running a business could possibly find the time.

One major issue discussed was the size of the forthcoming Unitaries. The Government has signalled areas of 500 000 people although, at least on paper, this is not written in stone. (how could it!). The majority of the Suffolk County Council want one Unitary for the entirety of Suffolk (760 000) people. Anyway, it gives some leeway for District Councils wanting smaller Unitaries. In Suffolk there is an option to create an East and a West Suffolk Unitary, thus getting two Unitaries. West Suffolk would, roughly comprise 375 000 people and East Suffolk 385 000.

A third option would involve Ipswich becoming its own Unitary, thus creating three in all. Redrawing of boundaries would be necessary and the population numbers smaller. There are examples in the country already where the Unitaries are less than 500 000.

The number of Councillors per Unitary was also discussed, unwieldy versus too many electors per Councillor. Option two would yield about 4000 people per Councillor if we plan for 70 for each area.

As far as we can tell about planned elections a Mayor for Suffolk and Norfolk will be elected in May 2026. As well it is proposed that County Council elections would happen also in May next year. Those elected expecting to serve a period of two years. Elections for the Unitary Councils are expected to happen in May 2027, initially forming a 'shadow Unitary' preparing to go live in April 2028. Thus we'd have County Councillors carrying out the final gasps of CCs between May 2026 and April 2028. There would be no further District Council elections as they would only cover one year, 2027-2028, for the duration of the 'shadow period' of the Unitary. During

discussions we felt that whilst everyone, Officers and District Councillors alike, will continue to do their best the period will be flawed by these upheavals and efficiency compromised, at least to some degree.

In addition to the above there are concerns about how the reserves built up in Mid Suffolk will be spent. Other District Councils are in a far less advantageous position. The costs incurred by the change of systems are substantial too, the Government does not envisage stepping in.

At this stage there are certainly lots of uncertainties and questions. For instance, would cash strapped Unitaries divest the responsibilities for local libraries and leisure facilities to Parish Councils?

My own view is, firstly, that one single Unitary for Suffolk would be far too vast, both in terms of geography and in terms of population numbers (760 000). The Government states that local engagement should be promoted, local interests and identities be addressed so forth. An area stretching as far as between Newmarket and Lowestoft would not supply any of that. Secondly, the local knowledge of those in charge would become far too diluted, decisions being made with insufficient insight into local circumstances. Thirdly, the real and indeed the perceived distance for local people to actually get in touch with both Officers and Councillors would frequently be insurmountable. The most energetic may score success, others may give up. Even now it isn't always that easy.

About Devolution the outlines are already defined. There is to be one Mayor for both Suffolk and Norfolk. The very geography doesn't really allow for anything else given the predetermined size. The Mayor will be running what is initially called County Council Authority and Mayor which will be renamed once the Unitaries are up and running. The Mayor is expected to be a link between Government and Local Areas. For instance, the Mayor will represent the area at the Council of Nations and Regions and at the Mayoral Council. The idea being to achieve a better possibility for the needs of Suffolk and Norfolk to be heard. Financing may include a 30 year investment fund, Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy, 'local growth' and Mayoral precept on council tax is to be expected.

An impressive effort has been put into defining the various tasks to be allocated to the Mayor and his/her office, 6 full pages. 'Strategic' is a word often used. The variety is wide, for instance 'Statutory role' in governing, managing, planning and developing the rail network' and ' Priority for support to deliver multimodal ticketing'. A number of between 300 to 400 hundred people will have to be housed somewhere.

Re NSIP things are still not clear, a consultee role seems most likely.

A period of Public Consultation is going on until the 13th of April.
www.gov.uk/government/consultations/Norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution/Norfolk-and-suffolk-devolution-consultation

The hoped for outcome of all this is increased efficiency and financial savings. The cost of planning and implementing these new structures have not been made anywhere near clear. There is much more to say on this but the patience on part of the readers could get exhausted.

Anders Linder

District Councillor

