

News release

Monday 7 December 2009 For immediate use

Boundary Committee publishes advice on unitary local government in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk

The independent Boundary Committee for England has published its advice on unitary local government in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk.

The advice, in response to a request from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in February 2008, looks at whether there could be any alternative proposals for unitary local government in the three counties that could have the capacity to meet five criteria set out by the Government.

- In Devon, the Committee has put forward a single unitary council for the current Devon county area.
- In Norfolk, the Committee has put forward a single unitary council for the whole of Norfolk.
- In Suffolk, the Committee has made two proposals: a unitary county of Suffolk (the Committee's preferred alternative proposal for Suffolk); and a two-unitary pattern comprising an Ipswich & Felixstowe authority and a Rural Suffolk authority.

These are proposals that are alternative to the original bids for unitary status made by Exeter City Council, Norwich City Council and Ipswich City Council, originally made in 2007. The Committee has recommended today that all of these original bids are not implemented.

Max Caller, Chair of the Boundary Committee for England, said: "Our role in this process has been to provide independent advice to the Government, not to decide what will happen. We are setting out today those patterns of unitary local government that, in our view and based on the extensive evidence we've seen and heard, have the capacity to best meet the criteria that the Secretary of State has set."

“The sheer scale of evidence we’ve seen and heard from local people and groups in the county reinforces the view that local government is as diverse as the people it serves. We heard strong views from those who want to keep the current system, and we make no criticism of the people working hard to deliver services that people rely on. It’s also clear that there is no decisive consensus either way.”

“But in deciding our advice we were ultimately persuaded by the broad cross section of people and groups who told us that there were patterns of unitary local government that are able to deliver more affordable services with clear strategic leadership and can empower local towns and villages to get more out of the services they use.”

“The process has taken a long time to get right, but we wouldn’t have continued working if we didn’t think that our advice could provide opportunities for real changes that can improve people’s lives by making the services they use more effective and efficient. It is now up to the Secretary of State to take a decision on whether to implement the alternative proposals that we are making to him.”

Next steps

Now that the Committee has provided its advice, it is up to the Secretary of State to take a decision on whether:

- to implement the original (i.e. Norwich City Council/Exeter City Council/Ipswich Borough Council) proposal, with or without modification
- to implement the Committee’s alternative proposal (as published today), with or without modification
- take no action

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has stated that anyone who wishes to make representations on any unitary proposal that he is considering, or on any matters connected with it, can do so by 19 January 2010.

All such representations should be made in writing and sent to the following email or postal addresses:

DevonStructures@communities.gsi.gov.uk

NorfolkStructures@communities.gsi.gov.uk

SuffolkStructures@communities.gsi.gov.uk

Unitary Structures Team
Zone 3/J1

Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

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For further information on the Boundary Committee's advice or for interview bids contact:

Gareth Nicholson on 020 7271 0638
email: press@boundarycommittee.org.uk
outside office hours: 07789 920414

Notes to editors:

1. The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of the Electoral Commission, an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. The Committee's main role is to conduct electoral reviews of local authorities in England with the aim of ensuring the number of electors represented by each councillor is approximately the same. Other duties include reviewing local authority boundaries and advising the Government on local authority bids for unitary status.
2. A structural review is used to establish whether one or more single, all-purpose councils, known as unitary authorities, should be established in an area instead of the existing two-tier system.
3. The Boundary Committee published its original draft proposals on 7 July 2008 and consulted on them until 26 September 2008. Further draft proposals were published on 19 March 2009 and were subject to public consultation until 14 May 2009.
4. In October 2006 the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government issued an invitation to two-tier principal local authorities (district and county councils) in England to submit proposals for a change to unitary or single-tier status. The invitation set out five criteria by which the Secretary of State indicated any proposals received would be judged. It stated that any change to unitary local government should:
 - be affordable;
 - be supported by a broad cross-section of partners and stakeholders;
 - provide strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership;
 - deliver genuine opportunities for neighbourhood flexibility and empowerment; and
 - deliver value-for-money and equity in public services