

Norfolk County Councillors Report

January 2025

Devolution:

The government, in the white paper issued on 16th December, outlined its proposals for devolution across the country. They propose that each part of England which is not part of an established form of devolution will form Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA) based on aligned geographical areas, devolution will be the “default position” for the whole of England. It is suggested that Norfolk and Suffolk will be such an area and form an MCA based on the current county boundaries. The government has requested submissions from councils interested in becoming “pilot areas” to form MCAs in the first tranche. Norfolk and Suffolk County councils are proposing to make a submission to government requesting consideration for an MCA to be formed containing both counties at the earliest opportunity. The proposal will be discussed at an extraordinary meeting of Norfolk County council on the 9th January although the final decision is for the councils cabinet and not full council. The deadline for submission to the government is the 10th January and requires agreement from both county council leaders after approval from their respective cabinets.

Should the MCA for Suffolk and Norfolk go ahead in the first tranche the mayoral elections will take place in May 2026. The new mayor will be given extensive powers with regards to housing, strategic planning, transport, infrastructure, skills and employment.

Local Government Review:

The government have also indicated that areas within an MCA should contain only unitary authorities. For Norfolk this means that all district, borough and the city and county councils will be abolished and replaced by a number of unitary councils. The suggested population level for each unitary council is proposed at 500,000, there could be 2 unitary councils within Norfolk.

Should the Norfolk/Suffolk MCA be formed in the first tranche (see above) the unitary councils will be formed within the next 2 years. Elections for councillors to the new authorities will probably take place in May 2027 when the term of office of the current district councillors expires. There is a possibility that the county council elections due to be held in May 2025 will be postponed for at least one year, possibly 2. There is a precedent for this, the last government delayed elections to form unitary councils in 2010.

The rationale for forming unitary council and MCAs is that the system is more democratically accountable as decisions are made closer to communities affected.

Currently there are 399 county, district, borough and city councillors. Based on the councillor/population ratio in other rural counties (Cornwall, Somerset) which are unitary authorities each 500,000 population has between 85 and 95 councillors. Within my Launditch division, which covers 80 square miles of Norfolk there are a total of 7 Breckland councillors who carry out valuable detailed work which will in future have to be carried out by the local unitary councillor as well as the current duties of a county councillor.

Please read the Devolution white paper which can be found on the gov.uk website.

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PS. I wish everyone a very happy and prosperous New Year. I am away on holiday between 29th December and the 12th January and will be back in the office early on the 13th.