

REPORT TO CABINET

Open/Exempt		Would any decisions proposed :			
Any especially affected Wards	Mandatory/	Be entirely within Cabinet's powers to decide		YES/NO	
	Discretionary /	Need to be recommendations to Council		YES/NO	
	Operational	Is it a Key Decision		YES/NO	
Lead Member: Cllr Alistair Beales – Leader of the Council E-mail: cllr.alistair.beales@west-norfolk.gov.uk			Other Cabinet Members consulted: Cabinet		
Lead Officer: Kate Blakemore E-mail: kate.blakemore@west-norfolk.gov.uk			Other Members consulted		
			Other Officers consulted: Michelle Drewery – Section 151 Officer Alexa Baker – Monitoring Officer Honor Howell – Corporate Governance Manager		
Financial Implications YES/NO	Policy/ Personnel Implications YES/NO	Statutory Implications YES/NO	Equal Impact Assessment YES/NO If YES: Pre- screening/ Full Assessment	Risk Management Implications YES/NO	Environmental Considerations YES/NO
If not for publication, the paragraph(s) of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Local Government Act considered to justify that is (are) paragraph(s)					

Date of meeting: 19 March 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Summary

The English Devolution White paper was published on the 16 December 2024, outlining the governments ambition to roll out devolution across England and to move any two-tier local authorities into unitary models through the process of Local Government Reform (LGR).

Subsequently Norfolk and Suffolk were accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) writing to all Norfolk Leaders on 5 February 2025, inviting them to develop proposal for LGR in Norfolk. The letter (**Appendix A**) set out the criteria and what was expected to be included in the Interim Plan for LGR in their area with the interim plan needing to be submitted by 21 March 2025.

In response to this letter the Norfolk District Leaders and Chief Executives agreed to jointly appoint external consultants, working alongside an Officer Working Group, to conduct a high-level options appraisal for LGR in Norfolk against the criteria set by the Government, and to use the data collected to evaluate unitary options, whilst also considering the unique identity of Norfolk.

As a result of this work an Interim Plan for Local Government Reorganisation in Norfolk (**Appendix B**) has been developed. Cabinet are being asked to consider this report in line with the following recommendations:

Cabinet Recommendations to Full Council:

- 1) To note the content of the Interim Plan for Local Government Reorganisation in Norfolk report (Appendix B), alongside the report's conclusion that the three unitary model option scored best overall against the government criteria and is therefore the preferred option for Norfolk.
- 2) To endorse the **three unitary model for LGR as this Council's preferred option for submission to MHCLG.**
- 3) To delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader to finalise and submit the Interim Plan to MHCLG on 21st March 2025 based on the endorsement of recommendation 2 above.
- 4) That following the submission of the Interim Plan and subject to the feedback received from MHCLG, the council, continue to work with the Norfolk Districts to conduct resident and stakeholder engagement on the LGR proposals for Norfolk to inform the full business case.
- 5) To delegate authority to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, for the development of the full business case for LGR in Norfolk to be returned to full Council for approval prior to submission.

Reason for Decision

To respond to the Governments request that the council work with other local authorities in Norfolk to submit proposals for Local Government Reform in Norfolk by 21 March 2025.

1. Background

- 1.1 The English Devolution White paper was published on the 16 December 2024, outlining the governments ambition to roll out devolution across England and to move any two-tier local authorities into unitary models through the process of Local Government Reform (LGR).
- 1.2 The government confirmed in their White Paper that they will facilitate a programme of LGR for the 21 remaining two-tier areas across England, creating larger unitary authorities. The expectation that has been set is that all affected areas develop locally led proposals for reorganisation, with existing councils working together to identify the best option for their area. These plans should complement devolution, rather than delay it, whilst avoiding scenarios where competing proposals are developed within a given geography.
- 1.3 Post publication of the white paper, Norfolk and Suffolk were accepted onto the Devolution Priority Programme with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) writing to all Norfolk Leaders on 5 February 2025, inviting them to develop proposal for LGR in Norfolk.

1.4 As Norfolk is on the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) the indicative timelines for LGR are as follows:

- 21 March 2025 – the Interim Plan contained within this report is to be submitted to MHCLG
- 26 September 2025 – final proposals need to be submitted in the form of a full business case for the preferred solutions(s)
- January to April 2026 – during this period the government will decide on the proposal(s) and confirm what this means for Norfolk
- May to August 2026 – LGR legislation is prepared and laid before Parliament
- May 2027 – Elections to the Shadow Unitary Authority
- May to December 2027 – any transitional legislation is prepared and laid before Parliament
- April 2028 – new Unitary(s) vested in Norfolk

1.5 A Norfolk-wide project group has been convened consisting of officers from all District, City and Borough Council's within Norfolk, tasked with developing proposals for reorganisation. This includes working with externally appointed consultants, Deloitte, that were commissioned to conduct research, gather feedback and to undertake an options appraisal against unitary proposals for Norfolk.

2. Current Position

2.1 The letter received from MHCLG on 5 February 2025 (**see Appendix A**) sets out the criteria that needs to be considered for the full submission. The letter also sets out what needs to be considered and included in the Interim Plan. The criteria outlined in the letter is as follows:

- A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.
- Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks
- Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public service to citizens.
- Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.
- New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.
- New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.
- In formulating the proposal, consideration also needed to be given to any potential boundary changes as well as engagement and consultation.

2.3 The Interim Plan submitted to government should set out the progress to date on developing proposals in line with the criteria and guidance outlined within the letter. The government recognises that the challenging timescales set will reduce the level of detail that is possible at this stage, but the expectation is that an Interim Plan is submitted

jointly by all councils in one area. It is also recognised that the Interim Plan may describe more than one potential proposal for the area, if there is more than one option under consideration.

2.4 The Interim Plan at **Appendix B** covers the requirements within the letter which should:

- Identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful
- Identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency savings opportunities
- Include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities
- Include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance
- Include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions
- Include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals
- Set out indicative costs of preparing and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area
- Set out any voluntary arrangement that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forwards and to help balance the decisions needed how to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area

3. Proposed Action

3.1 The attached Interim Plan for Local Government Reorganisation in Norfolk is being considered by all District, City and Borough Councils in Norfolk at Full Council meetings this week. Each Council is being requested to confirm its preferred model for LGR in Norfolk so that this decision can form part of the Norfolk District Councils submission to Government.

3.2 The Interim Plan produced by Deloitte concludes that the three unitary model option scored best overall against the government criteria, and is therefore model that Cabinet, and subsequently full Council, subject to Cabinet's recommendations, are being asked to support.

4. Options Considered

- 4.1 There is an option to not proceed with a submission of an Interim plan in March. However, if the council does not submit an Interim Plan, it will not have the opportunity to influence the potential outcome or preferred solution for LGR. This is the biggest change in local government for 50 years and it is vital that the council represents its residents and businesses and achieves the best outcome possible. If the council does not participate in the submission, then LGR will progress regardless of the council's concerns or position. The Government has clearly stated it will impose LGR if necessary.

5. Policy Implications

- 5.1 There are no Policy implications at this stage.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1 The implementation of LGR in Norfolk will require significant resource and have financial implications for each Council. The Government requested details of projected costs to be included in the submission to assess against possible burdens funding but have not provided any detail on this. West Norfolk have indicated that the cost of resources will equate to 2 FTE and have provided financial data in this respect.

7. Legal Implications

- 7.1 Government have issued the invitation for proposals for a single tier of local government, under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. This invitation is issued to all principal authorities in Norfolk (i.e. the districts, city, borough and county council). Though there is no legal requirement to respond to the invitation, it would not be in the best interests of this council to not respond at all. The Interim Plan does not predetermine any formal decision the council may take in the future on a full business case on any preferred solution.

8. Personnel Implications

- 8.1 There is a need to allocate staff resource to the project and this is being considered within the Senior Management Restructure with backfilling arrangements being put into place.

9. Environmental Considerations

- 9.1 There are no environmental considerations at this stage.

10. Statutory Considerations

- 10.1 There are no statutory considerations at this stage.

11. Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

11.1 Pre-screening EIA form attached. Full assessment not required at this stage.

12. Risk Management Implications

12.1 As highlighted, there is no legal requirement to submit a proposal to Government. However, the risk of not doing so would leave the council without an opportunity to influence the preferred solution and LGR will simply continue with not ability to contribute to the final outcome.

13. Declarations of Interest / Dispensations Granted

13.1 None.

14. Background Papers

[Devolution White Paper](#)



Stage 1 - Pre-Screening Equality Impact Assessment

Name of policy/service/function	Local Government Reorganisation Interim Plan				
Is this a new or existing policy/ service/function? <i>(tick as appropriate)</i>	New	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Existing	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Brief summary/description of the main aims of the policy/service/function being screened. Please state if this policy/service is rigidly constrained by statutory obligations, and identify relevant legislation.	<p>Government has request that councils in two-tier areas submit interim plans for local government reorganisation.</p> <p>Norfolk district councils have commissioned Consultants to evaluation options and to recommend the option which meets the Government criteria.</p>				
Who has been consulted as part of the development of the policy/service/function? – new only <i>(identify stakeholders consulted with)</i>	<p>Norfolk District Leaders</p> <p>Norfolk District Chief Executives.</p>				
Question	Answer				
<p>1. Is there any reason to believe that the policy/service/function could have a specific impact on people from one or more of the following groups, for example, because they have particular needs, experiences, issues or priorities or in terms of ability to access the service?</p> <p>Please tick the relevant box for each group.</p> <p>NB. Equality neutral means no negative impact on any group.</p> <p><i>If potential adverse impacts are identified, then a full Equality Impact Assessment (Stage 2) will be required.</i></p>		Positive	Negative	Neutral	Unsure
	Age			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Disability			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Sex			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Gender Re-assignment			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Marriage/civil partnership			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Pregnancy & maternity			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Race			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Religion or belief			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Sexual orientation			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Other (eg low income, caring responsibilities)			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		

Question	Answer	Comments
<p>2. Is the proposed policy/service likely to affect relations between certain equality communities or to damage relations between the equality communities and the Council, for example because it is seen as favouring a particular community or denying opportunities to another?</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>	
<p>3. Could this policy/service be perceived as impacting on communities differently?</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>	
<p>4. Is the policy/service specifically designed to tackle evidence of disadvantage or potential discrimination?</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>	
<p>5. Are any impacts identified above minor and if so, can these be eliminated or reduced by minor actions? If yes, please agree actions with a member of the Corporate Equalities Working Group and list agreed actions in the comments section</p>	<p>Yes / No</p>	<p>Actions:</p> <hr/> <p>Actions agreed by EWG member:</p>
<p>If 'yes' to questions 2 - 4 a full impact assessment will be required unless comments are provided to explain why this is not felt necessary:</p> <p>Decision agreed by EWG member:</p>		
<p>Assessment completed by: Name</p>	<p>Honor Howell</p>	
<p>Job title</p>	<p>Corporate Governance Manager</p>	
<p>Date completed</p>	<p>10.03.25</p>	

Complete EIA Pre-screening Form to be shared with Corporate Policy (corporate.policy@west-norfolk.gov.uk)