

Stiffkey Parish Council Public Consultation Response

Norfolk and Suffolk devolution proposal:

Stiffkey Parish Council (North Norfolk) recognises that the principles behind devolution would bring power and funding from central government to our two counties. We are not opposed to this broader idea and would agree that it presents opportunities to address the specific needs and priorities of our communities that are often over-looked by central government and that it has the potential to deliver benefits to our area.

We would disagree with the proposed arrangements for governance. We have concerns that the proposed governance arrangements will not be suitable in their current circumstances. The proposal that only the two County Councils will be constituent members, in our view, removes most of the benefits - and reasons – for a devolution model. This approach will reduce the impact of any devolved responsibility and funding because it simply will not be able to represent truly local needs and priorities in the way our current District Council (NNDC) can. This goes beyond those responsibilities already undertaken by the District Council (planning, housing and so on). The proposal under consideration would result in decisions relating to Norfolk being taken by no more than four people with a direct connection. This seems to be the very opposite of what devolution should achieve.

We have an unformed position as to whether the geographical scope of the proposal will have an economic benefit. There is insufficient detail, clarity and planning for us to form an informed decision. In theory, the proposed geography of the Mayoral Combined Authority should result in economic benefits, however, the needs of rural coastal communities, which often have elderly populations, are vastly different from inland demographically diverse and predominantly urban communities. Who is making the decision (constituent members) and how communities are represented will determine benefits. There is a danger of communities being ‘left behind’ with this model.

Social outcomes, as with economic benefits, again, rely heavily on how decisions are made and by whom. In addition, this is difficult to provide a meaningful response to, given the lack of detail and information on the local government reorganisation that is being undertaken in parallel with this proposal. We are aware that the government wants local government reorganisation to remove District Councils. It is our view that social outcomes of a Mayoral Combined Authority depend very heavily on having a local government model, such as small District Council, to be most effective at reaching its constituents. With the information currently to hand, we do not believe that a Mayoral Combined Authority will improve social outcomes.

With local government reorganisation discussions across Norfolk and Suffolk currently ongoing (and in our view, too quickly) we are not able to give an informed view on whether

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or not local government services will be improved with a Combined Mayor Authority. We strongly believe the need for local – truly representative - government at a local level is required. We are concerned that this devolution model currently simply seems to just recreate a two-tier form of local government, but where the representatives are significantly further removed from their communities. This larger scale and inevitable centralisation suggest that decisions, services and, perhaps most importantly, accountability will be further removed from our communities. This is absolutely not the intent of devolution as it is surely intended to increase local representation, not remove it.

Our natural environment is unique. We are in the Norfolk Coast National Landscape - an area of high Landscape Value, and part of a Special Area of Conservation and internationally recognised coastal and marine environment. It is our view that working across the proposed geography of the Mayoral Combined Authority will likely result in no improvement to our local natural environment. There is scope that a regional approach to the natural environment could contribute towards an improvement to the overall national environment, but this will be heavily dependent on the representation of communities such as ours at the regional level. We believe that to more effectively address the issue of the natural environment, actions and policies should be tailored very specifically to local environmental needs.

We do not agree that the proposed geography will support the interest, needs or identities of local communities. As with previous points, the lack of detail makes a more informed response difficult. We would argue that there is a certain inevitability that the needs and identities of smaller communities will be lost/overridden by broader regional programmes. While the Mayoral Combined Authority could have the opportunity to preserve local needs and identity, the plans for local government reorganisation will remove any gains or benefits.

We should also say that we are of the view that this process is being undertaken on a timescale which is far too short – especially given the lack of information and detail. Equally disconcerting is the absence of any costing or discussion of the financial implications of this process. In addition, using questions structured as a Likert scale as part of the consultation response is inappropriate and its use seems to suggest that detailed narrative answers are of a lesser concern than a ‘snapshot’ approach. Given the significance of this process, this implies little forethought or actual interest in proper representation, which in itself is a poor start to what should be a carefully thought-out devolution strategy.

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