

Stiffkey Parish Council Public Consultation Response

Norfolk Local Government Reorganisation:

Stiffkey Parish Council (North Norfolk) proactively supports any proposal that could bring about changes for our community that will address specific needs and priorities often overlooked.

We see advantages and disadvantages in all three models presented depending on local priorities. As a Parish Council that represents a rural coastal community, we are keen that any model adopted recognises the unique needs of our community.

Appropriate geography and economic area

All models proposed present geographic and economic challenges. The diversity of the County and its population density make fitting into any new model challenging. All models to a greater or lesser extent increase the travel distance to access services and make more real the possibility that communities will be left behind by economic decisions which are not compatible or applicable to local needs. With elderly, disadvantaged and isolated communities, online services are not in any way equivalent to local physical access. Current plans mean it is inevitable that the needs and identities of smaller communities will be lost or overridden by broader macro-scale approaches.

Ability to deliver Outcomes Proposed

In the short term we are not of the view that any of the models presented will be in a position to deliver the outcomes they describe. This is exacerbated by the decision to postpone the Mayoral elections until after this process. In our view, the outcomes of any new model need the Mayor (and MCCA) in place or, at a minimum, funding arrangements confirmed in order to assess the actual viability and potential benefits or pitfalls.

Appropriate size for efficiency, to improve capacity and withstand financial shocks

We are of the view that efficiency and capacity as well as sound financial and fiscal management is not dependent on the size of a council, but on the calibre of its staff and elected officials. Analysis of the current financial management at the District Councils and Norfolk County Council is testament to this.

High quality, sustainable public services

The potential for high quality, sustainable public services, in our view, should be a priority for any model, regardless. In theory, the finances of this would suggest that a single council would be best placed to provide this. However, this fails to take into account the various needs across the broader population and runs the risks of not providing services for those less well represented – such as the elderly, and rural populations. In practice, it is our view that services are unlikely to drastically change – or improve – from current levels, not least because the centralisation of this reorganisation model does not lend itself to local, diverse public services.

Social outcomes, as with economic benefits, rely heavily on how decisions are made and by whom. Proposals need to effectively show how this will be achieved and the size of the proposed councils need to be diverse enough to adequately represent the needs of different

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populations so that the current granularity is not lost as the number of elected officials is drastically reduced.

Local views and will meet local needs

None of the proposals have taken into account local views and needs. The decision to reorganise was made by central government, as was the imposed timeframe and structural guidelines (such as population coverage sizes for councils). This meant that no proposal was ever going to be properly informed by, or representative of, local views.

From a democratic perspective, it is disappointing that only one proposal chose to engage with local communities (the Three Council option). There has been no effort from either the One Council or Two Council proposals to properly inform or engage with local communities.

It is clear that large amounts of time and resources have been put into the process but the short time frame and lack of transparency at central government level has meant that proposals have not been required to inform or engage local communities at a level that perhaps would have been prudent or democratic.

Supporting devolution arrangements

The timeframe for this process and the subsequent short notice and postponement of the Mayoral elections and establishment of a strategic authority has been woefully inadequate. Given the fundamental shifts in Representation, Service Provision and Accountability, a more considered, gradual and informed process would have seemed appropriate. It is our view that the establishment of the strategic authority (and its leadership) should take place before any local government reorganisation.

Community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

Our biggest concern for the entire local government reorganisation proposal is the loss in community engagement, local voice and identity and overall accountability. Representation is cut with all proposals, and the democratic deficit is significant. The loss of elected officials – between 50% - 60% depending on the proposal, is of real concern. This does not provide engagement, empowerment or accountability for local communities and in our view is a enormously retrograde step.

Legislative proposals to create new bodies for “effective governance” imply a heavy-handed, top-down approach driven from the centre. They also raise a real risk of establishing organisations that are unwieldy, unaccountable, and detached from local views. Where such bodies may not be directly elected, this approach is inappropriate and undermines the principles of effective and democratic governance.

We remain concerned that the speed and proposed method of implementation do not support the interests, needs, or identities of local communities. We continue to believe that strong local government must be genuinely representative of the people it serves.

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None of the proposed models adequately meet all local needs, and there is little that is innovative or meaningfully different between them. Instead, existing communities would remain unchanged but with reduced representation, and with elected representatives significantly more distant from the communities they are meant to serve.

As with the public consultation on devolution, we are disappointed that the primary mechanism for engagement and feedback with central government is a questionnaire based on a Likert scale. For a process with such profound implications for local communities, this approach appears inadequate and inappropriate. It once again suggests that detailed, narrative responses are considered of lesser value than a superficial “snapshot” of opinion. Given the significance of the changes proposed, this raises concerns about the level of forethought involved and calls into question the Government’s commitment to meaningful engagement and proper representation.

January 2026