



Subject: **English Devolution White Paper**

Meeting: Full Council

Date: 28 January 2025

Officer: Shona Bendix, Town Clerk

NOT CONFIDENTIAL

1. Details

1.1 The [English Devolution White Paper Power and partnership: Foundations for growth](#) was published on 16 December 2024.

1.2 The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) has responded initially welcoming the opportunities they suggest the White Paper creates for greater local empowerment through town and parish (local councils). They intend to push for measures to enhance neighbourhood governance, including greater investment, simplification of the process for establishing local councils, promotion of civility and respect (noting that there is a consultation on strengthening the standards regime – see separate FC paper), allowing hybrid council meetings (where locally agreed), and fairer access to funding and a tailored audit framework.

1.3 Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) has set up a [dedicated information page](#) on their website and has confirmed that Suffolk County Council (SCC) will include local councils in their engagement plan. SCC held an extraordinary meeting of their Full Council on 9 January, followed by their Cabinet. [This is link to the papers and further information. You can watch their debate here.](#) SCC agreed to recommend Suffolk for inclusion in the government's Devolution Priority Programme, which would see the creation of a directly elected Mayor (likely covering Suffolk and Norfolk) and the replacement of existing council structures with a streamlined unitary council being set up. The likelihood that a successful application would result in the (somewhat controversial) cancelling of this year's county council elections and the election in May 2026 of a directly elected mayor.

1.4 SALC has extended an invitation to the district councils to work with them on keeping local councils informed from their perspective. They will also keep local MPs informed of the views of local councils.

1.5 While devolution might not have the fundamental impact on local councils that it has on principal local authorities, it would change the nature of democracy in Suffolk and the means by which this Council engages with other public services in order to obtain benefits for Lowestoft. It also will have direct impacts including in respect of transparency (not least audit and standards) and potentially in respect of community ownership of local assets (right to buy).

The aim of the White Paper is to 'relight the fire of our economy and ignite growth in every region' through 'a decade of national renewal' which will increase regional equality, including by reducing central government control and the need for regions to compete for funds. Mayoral devolution is cited as a success in delivering what the people want.

1.6 The White Paper is focused on Mayoral Strategic Authorities and 'local government' in the sense of principal local authorities. However, local councils have three specific mentions:

- In Jim McMahon OBE MP's introduction, he refers to 'quality parish status' as part of the reform agenda which is leading to outcomes for local people. Lowestoft Town Council does not have this status and it is not clear how evidenced the advantages of quality parish status are and how this would add value for the Lowestoft taxpayer;
- Within the context of local government connecting with community voices and people having influence over their place and community assets, the White Paper states 'We will also work with the town and parish council sector to improve engagement between them and local authorities.'
- Within the context of neighbourhood engagement, the White Paper states 'We will also rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice' but this is not detailed.

1.7 Given that local councils are a very minor part of the consideration in this White Paper, the NALC approach of taking this as an opportunity for raising any wish-list governance and funding improvements is understandable.

1.8 The major changes proposed In the White Paper include:

- More devolved authorities with the continued development of new Strategic Authorities (Foundation and Mayoral). Government favours arrangements partnering more than one local authority over a large geography and they want all areas to become Mayoral Strategic Authorities ultimately. They will not allow individual local authorities to benefit from Mayoral devolution arrangements. Foundation Strategic Authorities include non-mayoral combined authorities and combined county authorities automatically, and any other local authority so designated. Strategic Authorities will be 'convenors on public service reform, working in partnership with local authorities.
- There will be an increase in joined up public services in areas of Mayoral Strategic Authorities e.g. Policing with Fire, and a new duty in relation to health improvement and inequalities. Long-term, Government wants all public service boundaries to align with those of Strategic Authorities, which will become the default delivery institution for appropriate new programmes or activity.
- There will be consistent and set devolutions for each type of authority. Areas with Mayors (not local councils) will see major devolution benefits including greater powers and streamlined and flexible funding, although other Strategic Authorities will also see some devolution. Mayors will have strong governance backing to ensure a) key decisions cannot be blocked by a single council and b) decisions will drive long-term economic growth.
- Mayors will be free to set the priorities for funding that suit their areas best. They will have a greater role in transport and roads and the process for taking buses back into public control will be simplified. Strategic Authorities will develop a Local Transport Plan. There will be more devolved functions in skills and employment support. They will be new local powers in housing and planning, including to call in planning applications of strategic importance and to apply a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy. All areas (including those without a

Strategic Authority) will produce a Spatial Development Strategy with the aim that this will increase the new homes being built.

- To help deliver the government commitment to ‘making Britain a clean energy superpower’, there will be increased roles for Strategic Authorities including some funding devolution and a greater role in local energy solutions and in Local Nature Recovery Strategies. There will be an increased role in business support and research for Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Strategic Authorities will have a greater role in building local resilience.
- The hardwiring of devolution into central government will continue through measures such as the Council of Nations and Regions and the Mayoral Council, and Mayors will have a statutory duty to produce a Local Growth Plan.
- Local government reorganisation will mean more unitary councils. The White Paper claims unitary councils can lead to better outcomes for people and the economy and that there will be increased accountability, as having fewer politicians creates more focus on delivery for residents. Invitations for reorganisation proposals have been sent to all remaining two tier (county and district) areas and those unitaries where there is evidence of failure or where their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver. This will be considered at the same time as the ongoing devolution implementation. The new Leaders Council will help local and central government engagement.
- There will be increased local government control and empowerment including through improved and increased funding (including multi-year settlements), reducing micromanagement, rebuilding workforces and recognising the vital role of councillors (including by enabling remote attendance at meetings and potentially proxy voting too, and removing the requirement to publish their home addresses).
- There will also be increased community empowerment e.g. by ongoing partnerships with the most deprived areas, a new community ‘right to buy’ replacing the ‘right to bid’, and a new ‘right to rent’ long-vacant premises. With the potential localisation of byelaws, there could be an opportunity to empower local councils as well as principal authorities.
- Strengthened accountability and audit arrangements will support devolution. The commitment is to ‘fundamentally reform the local audit system’ without returning to the ‘bloated Audit Commission’ but it will include closing the Office for Local Government. The consultation on the standards regime is intended to address the fact that current arrangements are ‘ineffectual, inconsistently applied, and lacking in adequate powers’, bringing back in ideas such as suspending councillors for six months. Local authority scrutiny arrangements will be improved and Strategic Authorities will have due oversight.

1.9 The White Paper specifies that:

- the optimum unitary population size is generally 500,000 or more
- Strategic Authorities should be comparable in size to existing institutions with the default being a population of 1.5 million or above
- Strategic Authorities must cover geographies that are sensible economically and functionally (including in relation to devolution and public service boundaries), contiguous (now or in the future), absent of ‘devolution islands’, and create an identification with which the public will engage.

1.10 As part of the consultation, views are sought on whether the list of areas of competence for Strategic Authorities should be extended now or in the future beyond:

- Transport and local infrastructure
- Skills and employment support
- Housing and strategic planning

- Economic development and regeneration
- Environment and climate change
- Health, wellbeing and public service reform
- Public safety

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To note the White Paper and the decision of SCC.
- 2.2 To agree to consider any emerging devolution proposals affecting Suffolk.
- 2.3 To agree to consider any relevant and related consultations including on ethical standards.
- 2.4 To agree the Clerk should provide a paper on the merits of progressing Quality Parish Status.