

County Councillor's Report

March 2025

Well, it's fair to say that 'devolution deals' and 'Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)' dominate the chat at County Hall. But what we don't know still far outweighs what we do know.

Devolution consultation

The 'devo deal' for Norfolk will create a new directly elected Mayor for Norfolk and Suffolk – technically known as a 'Mayoral Combined Authority'. What that means is that we all get to vote on who the Mayor will be and their work will be shared by appointed representatives from the 'top tier councils' in Norfolk and Suffolk. For now those top tier authorities are Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils. If LGR goes ahead they will be the new unitary councils.

The Mayor will have powers over various strategic issues like transport planning and the allocation of housing that are currently with the government.

You can read more and have your say on the plans through this link:

<https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/article/38871/Norfolk-devolution-and-local-government-reform-updates>

Local Government Reorganisation

Alongside the devolution deal there is an expectation from the government that Norfolk and Suffolk will come up with a new structure for local government. This will replace existing County and District Councils with a single tier of councils across the area.

The government says it expects the new councils to have a population of at least 500,000 people. Since the population of Norfolk is just under 1 million and Suffolk is about 700,000, that would mean two (or at most three) councils. Norfolk County Council favours two councils – one for Norfolk and one for Suffolk.

The District Councils across Norfolk are working together to come up with an alternative plan. Norwich (and the Labour Party) are hoping they can persuade the government to accept councils with less than 500,000 population so that a Norwich (or Greater Norwich) council can be made a Unitary council. Initial proposals have to be with the government by 31 March. Final proposals have to be with the government by September.

The Deputy Prime Minister has said in Parliament that the County Council elections (originally to be this May) will be postponed for one year. However, she also said the reason for scrapping the elections was to avoid the expense of holding elections for councils that will cease to exist. Problem is, no one expects the government to be ready to hold elections for the new councils within a year so either they will have to extend the term of County Councillors by two years or they will have to hold elections for a council that will cease to exist 12 months later.

So, anyway, things will be a little bit clearer by 21st March and a little bit more clear by September. My hope is that things move quickly and that we have a unitary council for

our area that is smaller than Norfolk County Council so that we can all feel that the issues we care about are dealt with by a council that recognises who we are and where we live. I also hope the councillors that are elected have the idea and ambition to create councils that work really well for local people.

Debt

It's unfortunate that media stories circulated that LGR would land North Norfolk residents with a share of the County Council's debt. I asked about this in the County Council's Scrutiny Committee and the official in charge of the budget confirmed my assumption: that the debt is rather like mortgage debt, not credit card debt. So, although it is a lot of money it is backed by assets which will transfer to the new councils along with the debt.

The local press has had a good time running scare stories about the impact of Local Government Reorganisation on tourism (currently responsibility of the District Council); the future of Cromer Pier (currently responsibility of the District Council); and the impact on coastal management (currently the responsibility of the District Council). It should be noted that the District Council leadership says it is excited by the opportunities presented by Local Government Reorganisation. So maybe the EDP is getting its stories from somewhere else...

The County Council's budget

The County Council continues to have to save large amounts of money from its budget in part because of growing demand for services and cuts to government funding. At the 'Scrutiny Committee' where we examined the budget I asked what success the council had had in making savings in the past (as against just being bailed out by the government which happens most years). I also asked what they are going to do about needing to save hundreds of millions of £ in the next five years too. I didn't get answers to either question but I will keep asking. For information, the key points from the council's budget are:

Key facts and figures from Norfolk County Council Budget

- **Gross budget:** Norfolk County Council has a gross expenditure budget of £2.2 billion (£1.7 billion excluding schools).
 - We spend over £700 million in Adult Social Care, £367m in Children's Services (non-schools), £283m in Infrastructure, £44m in Communities and Environment and £46m in Fire.
- **Net Budget:** The council has a net budget for 2025-26 of £572m. This is the amount we raise in council tax to fund the services we provide.
- **Budget growth:** The 2025-26 budget provides growth of £121m, including
 - £31m of inflationary pressures
 - £35m Legislative pressures (including increase in National Living Wage) and the cost of increased Employers National Insurance

- £15m demand and demographic pressures
- Budget growth of over £25m to fund recurrent 2024-25 overspends in Adult and Children's Services.
- **Funding and savings:** At the same time as £121m cost pressures, funding has only increased by £32m. Government has abolished Rural Services Delivery Grant and diverted funding from rural areas to metropolitan areas. To balance the position, the 2025-26 budget includes savings of £45m.
- **Council tax:** For 2025-26, an increase of 4.99%, including an increase of 3% for general council tax, and 2% for the Adult Social Care precept.
 - A Band D household will pay £1,755.63 per year, or approximately £34 a week, for county council services in 2025-26.

Norfolk County Council 2025-26 council tax bands:

A - £1,170.42

B - £1,365.49

C - £1,560.56

D - £1,755.63

E - £2,145.77

F - £2,535.91

G - £2,926.05

H - £3,511.26

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