

25th March, 2008

Structural Review Team (Norfolk & Suffolk)
The Boundary Committee for England
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London
SW1P 2HW

Dear Sir

Suffolk - Structural Review of Local Government

1. The Suffolk Preservation Society (the Society) is pleased to be able to submit the following representations aimed at assisting the Boundary Committee in its consideration of this important issue.
2. The Society has 1800 members, including one third of all Town and Parish Councils in Suffolk as well as 54 amenity societies. Its aim is to ensure that the distinctive character of Suffolk's built environment, coastline and landscape is protected. Where change is proposed the Society will use its expertise and resources to play a proactive role in all the relevant processes so as to ensure that change is undertaken sympathetically and to the highest standards of design and sustainability.
3. There are, at this stage, three main issues the Society would ask that the Committee have regard to in determining any changes to the structure of Local Government in Suffolk.

Role of Town and Parish Councils

4. Town and Parish Councils play a critical role in reflecting the needs, aspirations and concerns of the local community. They are the tier of local government all too often forgotten about and ignored. They feel that they are remote from decision making, are unable to influence decisions in their area and their views and opinions are not valued and are not taken into account.
5. It is critical that any changes to the structure of local government in Suffolk does not, in any way, further erode their role and importance but instead, strengthens them. They must feel a part of decision making and have the ability to influence directly the level of services they receive and the decisions that impact on them. **If any new structure fails to deliver these it will not have the support of the many different rural communities in the county and is most likely to fail.**

A Rural Structure

6. The Society believes that in order to look at the possible structure of local government in the county there has to be a clear understanding of the characteristics of the county and its people. The fact is that Suffolk remains a rural county with a rural structure of settlements, way of working and lifestyle. It still has market towns which primarily function to serve their rural hinterland. While the larger towns of Ipswich, Bury and Lowestoft appear urban, they remain as service providers to rural areas and the market town in their vicinity. A local government structure suitable for the delivery of services in an urban type environment or situation is therefore unlikely to be a suitable model for Suffolk in the Society's view.

7. It may be that a unique solution (if one different from the existing structure is considered necessary or needed) is required which reflects the way in which the county works, the needs of its people and the need to get back to a more bottom up form of 'decision making'.

8. Consideration should be given at this stage to creating smaller councils as well as larger ones, more in line with those which existed pre 1974 and which were accountable to the rural area. It should not be assumed that creating larger structures is the only way forward. Nor should it be seen that the delivery of economic savings should be the sole focus or test of delivering any new structure. ***Any new structure must be measured against the test of delivering what the people of rural Suffolk need. It must also ensure the unique environment is properly managed.***

9. The review should include an examination of the role of town and parish councils whose function and purpose could be strengthened especially in relation to planning.

Town Planning and its Delivery

10. The Society engages on a regular basis in various aspects of planning. It is a major part of the work of town and parish councils and it has a profound and permanent impact of their lives and their environment. It is perhaps the single most important work they do. But most, if not all the town and parish councils in Suffolk, feel totally dissatisfied with the current system of consultation. They feel the planning system only works one way, top down from central, regional and district levels of government and they are unable to have any influence on the planning decisions made in their area.

11. The danger is that any new structure of local government in Suffolk which delivers larger district councils will mean town and parish councils will feel even less able to influence planning decisions. It is critical that this detailed aspect of local government is addressed in the review. It might be that consideration should be given, as mentioned in paragraph 8, to delegating downward some planning decisions to town and parish councils, or at least significantly increasing their ability to directly influence decision making.

12. The Society is also concerned about what might be the impact of any new structure especially if it delivers new larger councils. This might lead to an exodus of trained planning professionals at a time when the planning services across the county are all under pressure. Overall larger councils may mean less planning professionals being employed across the county making it more difficult for councils to truly engage with communities on planning issues. Larger structures do not necessarily mean they will be more efficient or effective.

13. The Society hopes that the Committee will take all of the above issues into account when considering this issue. It requests to be consulted at all stages of the review.

Yours sincerely

Richard Ward

Director

cc Suffolk MPs

cc SALC

cc Suffolk Acre

cc Town and Parish Councils

cc SPS Executive

cc Media consultants

cc David Green

cc Chief Executives - Suffolk District Council & Suffolk County Council

cc All Council Leaders

cc Greg Peck, CPRE Norfolk

cc Corinne Meakins – CPRE Eastern Regional Office