



Haverhill
Town Council

Alex Wilson
Director
St Edmundsbury Borough Council
West Suffolk House
Western Way
Bury St Edmunds
IP33 3YU

22nd August 2017

Dear Alex,

Haverhill Town Council response to the proposal for a single council for West Suffolk

Haverhill Town Council (HTC) submits the following responses to this consultation:

- a) Local decision-making: What is the proposal for a locality structure to serve the geographically dispersed communities? The 'summary of information' table on page 5 of the consultation document, suggests the creation of a single council for West Suffolk would give "greater focus on locality based working", but only identifies families and communities under that opportunity. However, given the perception of remoteness of decision-making that already exists within the populations of areas well away from Bury St Edmunds, there is a genuine concern that decisions on matters that are purely local rather than strategic, such as most planning applications, would be made by Councillors from such a wide geographic area who may have little or no knowledge of the community for whom they are making decisions. Could Haverhill have dedicated staff based in the town, such as a planning officer, given the level of workload generated by a large and expanding town? Staff could be embedded in the Town Council as a single point of contact but still be managed by and report to West Suffolk. Local planning committees could deal with planning applications that are referred to the delegation panel at the moment, reserving the large-scale, strategic or most controversial decisions for a council-wide planning committee, which would only meet when needed.
The argument often made against local determination of planning matters is that Haverhill, for example, is represented on the planning committee anyway and in practice Councillors from other areas give weight to the opinion of the local Councillors in these matters. This of course is also an argument for local determination, where more local councillors can be involved.
- b) Redundancies: There is a concern that the projected savings are going to be mainly achieved through redundancies focussed on Forest Heath, as the Council will centre itself on West Suffolk House. What assistance can be given to employees as far as travel to Bury St Edmunds is concerned, so this is not a barrier to staff who live in an area where employment opportunities are not as plentiful as Bury St Edmunds. HTC recognises the constant pressure to make savings, but would ask that a holistic view is taken. Locality working across a broad range of services and responsibilities would maximise the opportunity for the new council to retain staff who are restricted by travel issues – and has green credentials too.

- c) Harmonisation of council tax levels: HTC expresses some surprise that this issue is included as a 'weak positive impact' within the consultation document. There is surely a negative impact on the precept, given the differences in levels of precept and reserves for Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury. Can St Edmundsbury freeze council tax for that long without damaging services or depleting reserves? HTC believes that this issue needs to be set out transparently so that the public and Councillors know what the potential impacts are. Is there a potential for a legal challenge on merging reserves?

- d) Local Plan: How will the different shortage of housing supply be dealt with – will St Edmundsbury area have more houses to mitigate the shortfall in Forest Heath? Much more detail is needed on this matter than an acknowledgement that there is a 'need to continue to find new ways of increasing housing supply'.

HTC fully understands the arguments for a single council for West Suffolk and recognises the opportunities both for efficiencies but also for embracing a locality structure which balances financial efficiencies whilst maximising local decision making to result in a Council more rooted in its communities than the 1974-era top-down local government structures West Suffolk seeks to replace.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Poole
Town Clerk, Haverhill Town Council