

## NORWICH SOCIETY RESPONSE TO BOUNDARY COMMITTEE PROPOSALS

### Introduction

1.1. For eight decades the Norwich Society has sought to preserve and improve both the built fabric and the prosperity of our ancient and unique City. We exist to further the planning, character and heritage of Norwich and its surroundings. Our relationship with the City Council has not always been easy, but we have applauded its successes over the years just as we have felt obliged on occasion to point out shortcomings.

1.2. As an independent group of concerned citizens and a registered charity, we support no political party, but we believe very strongly that a healthy local democracy is essential to the present well-being and future advancement of our community. The next twenty years are likely to be very difficult as the UK struggles to maintain prosperity in the face of the pressures of globalisation. Democracy, coupled with good leadership, is still the best, the most efficient way, to deal with difficult decisions. To be able to deal with those decisions, to take the hard and complicated choices that face our City, we believe that that democracy should operate within coherent boundaries, and have the funds and powers needed for the task in hand.

1.3. This has plainly *not* been the case since 1974, when the City Council was reduced to district council status. Working within boundaries that were too small as long as a century ago, City Hall has struggled to attract sufficient talented and dedicated staff and councillors. In addition, the task of running a huge and disparate county has, we believe, meant that County Hall has all too often neglected the specific and very different needs of Norwich. And in the areas where responsibilities are divided (as over Norwich's historic but sadly-neglected Castle Mound), indecision and inaction has often been the result.

1.4. It is a fact that areas of population need authoritative focal points to create a dynamic that stimulates the whole area. Norwich is *the* point for Norfolk, and can still lay claim to perform (as it did for many centuries when it was England's Second City) a similar role for most of East Anglia. But in recent decades it has become clear that the City lacks the financial resources to sustain that historic status.

1.5. This has come about for two reasons. First, Norwich's historic boundaries have not been changed to embrace the suburbs that have built up around it, settlements that are close enough to derive the benefits of living within the city without having to contribute financially to their provision. Second, the further cut in resources when the City was reduced to District Council status without expanding to its natural boundaries in 1974. With this limited financial status, it has proved hard for Norwich to successfully sustain its role as a dynamic focal point. The City needs to be its own master with finances derived from its true population, from the *entire* community that it serves on a day-to-day basis.

1.6. With this in mind, we find the Boundary Committee for England's draft proposal of a unitary council for the whole of Norfolk, including Lowestoft, and the

consequent abolition of a system of city government developed over 600 years, to be extremely disappointing. In our view it is incapable of delivering the kind of improvement in governance necessary. It is a classic case of the baby (i.e. Norwich City Council) being thrown out with the bathwater. We also strongly believe that the Committee's preferred option of a Unitary Norfolk and Norwich would simply hasten the slow strangulation of the City taking place under the present system of local government.

1.7. Finding the right form of governance for Greater Norwich would, we contend, release a potential for economic and developmental dynamism, held back by the present fractured and muddled system of councils, that would benefit Norfolk as much as Norwich. We believe that the best solution for both City and County would be for Norwich to become a Unitary Authority within the expanded boundaries designated by the Committee as two unitary authority pattern B, the so-called "Doughnut Solution". This would give Greater Norwich the basis on which to thrive as a proper focal point for Norfolk and beyond. The empirical growth of settlements adjoining the City, yet not part of it, must be corrected, and now is the time to do so.

### **Criteria**

2.1. The Boundary Committee lists five criteria set it by the Secretary of State when making its judgement [2.5]. These are that proposals should, in aggregate:

- attract a broad cross-section of support;**
- provide for strong, effective and accountable strategic leadership;**
- deliver the empowerment of citizens and communities;**
- provide value-for-money services;**
- be affordable.**

2.2. **Support.** The Committee is, of course, better placed than we are to judge the pattern of support for, or rejection of, its proposals. But from reaction already published, and from our own soundings, it is plain that the Unitary Norfolk proposal (including Lowestoft) is by no means universally popular. It has in fact raised a storm of protest, and we believe that our rejection of it has been the immediate reaction of almost all the interested and informed bodies within the City, and of many in the County.

2.3. **Leadership.** Norfolk is a huge county – at 544,000 hectares the fifth-largest in England and with a population approaching 900,000. The committee itself recognises [5.19] that the Norfolk unitary authority it proposes would have one of the largest populations in England, and the immense space between Great Yarmouth and Wisbech is filled with a huge variety of towns, villages and hamlets, not to mention the expanding City of Norwich. Norwich has a population within its real boundaries of over 200,000 already (as large as many existing unitary authorities), but the best it can aspire to in the foreseeable future would be to provide a third of the total electorate of Norfolk.

2.4. There is also a real problem over a likely bureaucratic attention deficit. A county as diffuse as Norfolk is thickly dotted with highly vocal communities, each shouting loudly to be heard. In a County Council chamber where City councillors will always

be outnumbered by those representing villages and small towns, the different needs of Norwich, more complex and in terms of deprivation more serious in quantity if not in quality, will not get the attention they require.

2.5. The County Council argues that since Norwich is the engine of growth for Norfolk, Norfolk would suffer if it lost control of the City. We argue the opposite: that a self-governing Norwich, with all the powers and revenue of a unitary authority and free of the bureaucratic shackles that bind it to communities as far away and as disparate as Downham Market and Diss, would be free to make better, faster and more accountable development decisions, thus benefiting the county as a whole. As an enterprising, innovative and well-run City, Norwich would be able to take the lead in pulling Norfolk out of its status as a relatively low-wage county.

2.6. We will argue (see 2.7 below) that under the county's control, that engine of growth is only firing on three cylinders. To gauge the County Council's fitness to take complete control of Norwich, we would ask the Boundary Committee to look closely at three areas that we at the Norwich Society have monitored, and where Norfolk has had complete control since the Seventies – strategic planning, transport planning and passenger transport.

2.7. In spite of the fact that it has around a quarter of the county's population, Greater Norwich creates about half of Norfolk's GDP. We note with interest the recent study by the Work Foundation [“How can cities thrive in the changing economy?” July 2008] which characterised Norwich as a curiously under-performing “stuck city”, one of several around the country, with a large private sector, but without the economic performance to match it. It has slipped from 12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> place in the list of “most thriving cities” since 1995. Stuck cities, says the Work Foundation, “are often blighted by either chaotic or complacent leadership”. We argue that such blight can also be the result of an inappropriate system of governance.

2.8. If the Work Foundation study is correct, it seems that Norfolk County Council, in its capacity as strategic planner for the City for the last three decades, has presided over an under-performing private sector. In contrast, the City Council's decision to use what powers were left it by the 1974 Local Government Act, has resulted in thriving shopping and night-time economies which draw in income from all over the region, and place Norwich sixth in the national league table of retail centres. The contrast is clear – decision-making at local level delivers economic growth more effectively than that diffused on a county-wide basis.

2.9. The County Council's stewardship of its responsibility for the transport infrastructure of both County and City cannot be said to be overly successful either. The main reason given time and again by business for lack of investment in the City is poor communications to the rest of the country. To be fair, we recognise that failure to improve Norfolk's rail links, dual the A11 and the A47, build a complete Northern Bypass for Norwich and any kind of bypass for Long Stratton on the A140, is largely due to the low priority accorded the City and County by central government.

2.10. The kind of long-term cross-party unified lobbying by councils and MPs, normal elsewhere in England, which is needed to change Whitehall's mind on transport infrastructure priorities has only really got underway in recent times. And

only then as part of a joint effort. The fact that we are considered as being at the end of the line (literally as well as metaphorically) means we need to shout twice as loud to be heard. We have to do better, and we believe that a Greater Norwich Unitary Authority would be better able to lobby for the City economy than a County Council which has traditionally flirted with the concept of Fortress Norfolk.

2.11. Norwich has also suffered from confused and piecemeal planning of its passenger transport network. The bus station built after several years of closure by the County Council was always going to be too small to serve the City's growing appetite for bus travel, and is in the wrong place for any meaningful transport interchange. The consequence, as we have pointed out several times in the past, is the growth, willy-nilly, of a de facto half mile-long bus station snaking through and polluting the middle of Norwich. Unlike many other authorities, Norfolk has only recently accepted the urgency of forming a partnership with local bus operators to improve services.

2.12. That said, we gladly acknowledge the undoubted success (on a national level) of the County Council's one major transport initiative, the Park and Ride system. But even here, Norfolk could be criticised for showing more interest in getting people *into* and *out of* the City, rather than helping them to travel *within* the conurbation.

2.13. **Empowerment** is defined by the Boundary Committee as enabling all communities to "have power and resources to influence the decisions that affect them in their localities". We believe that the above examples show the County Council to have been at best an indifferent servant to the citizens of Norwich in areas where it has full control, in spite of having the power and resources to make radical improvements, and that this is a consequence of the *under-Empowerment* of the City's electors by the 1974 Act. Since a Norfolk Unitary Authority would have much the same ratio of City to County representatives as the existing County Council, we have no confidence that that Authority would improve on its predecessor's record as far as Norwich is concerned.

2.14. Perhaps even more important, abolition of Norwich City Council after many centuries of civic self-government (going back either 600 or 800 years depending on which Royal Charter you count from) would, we believe, create a massive democratic deficit. As we have already argued, Norwich's representatives on a Norfolk Unitary Authority would be in a permanent minority. We also believe that such domination by county interests would lead to frustration with and eventual cynicism about the democratic process from Norwich citizens. The strong sense of identity shared by the inhabitants of a community more than a millennium in the making cannot be removed at the stroke of a pen, and decisions about Norwich being taken by a majority of councillors living outside the City - some as much as 60 miles away - can hardly encourage participation in or trust of local government .

2.15. We are also very concerned by the failure of Norfolk County Council to take a clear democratic vote of all councillors on the proposals it has put to the Boundary Commission. Such indifference to the importance of transparent democracy in making decisions as vital as these does not augur well, especially for the citizens of Norwich.

Neither, we believe, do the County Council proposals for protecting the City's clear and distinct interests within a council where it has only minority representation.

2.16. It is, for example, proposed that there should be five Area Members sitting in the County Council cabinet *in addition to the existing cabinet* [Norfolk County Council, "Initial concepts for unitary structures across Norfolk", November 2007, P.14]. Only one of these would represent Greater Norwich, in spite of the fact that the conurbation constitutes more than a quarter of the county's population, and might grow to a third in the foreseeable future.

2.17. In further proposals to devolve power and spending down from County Hall, a number of Community Partnership Boards have been promised, involving local county councillors, parish and town councils and so on. The County Council has outlined in some detail potential areas for such Boards outside Norwich, but the membership and powers allocated to a proposed Norwich Development Board appear much vaguer. We note the Boundary Committee's reservations here [5.16], and simply reiterate that however good such proposals eventually look on paper, *in cabinet and on the council floor, where it matters, the City's representatives will always be outvoted, and its interests there generally subordinated to those of the county's more disparate communities.*

2.18. Lastly, there is the sheer impracticality of constructing a single representative body for a county as vast and disparate as Norfolk, and we welcome the recognition of this by the Boundary Committee. As they rightly point out [5.28], the 120-member council proposed by Norfolk "is a large number of councillors for any local authority". A chamber of this size and complexity (representing the second largest local government franchise in England!) would be unable to provide the kind of tough scrutiny of the executive required, and the only solution – fewer councillors – would give those councillors constituencies so huge that it would be very difficult to exercise any kind of local representative democracy.

2.19. **Value-for-money Services.** The Secretary of State and the Boundary Committee state that such services "should be provided effectively, efficiently and in an integrated and coherent way". We take this to mean that Value-for-money services will not necessarily be the cheapest and that cost is only one necessary yardstick in the provision of high quality services. We take it that effectiveness and efficiency are just as important, and may not be produced by employing the cheapest possible solution.

2.20. First and foremost, the quality of services provided has to be measured against the need for them. Money must be spent well, but to overcome the problems of planning and deprivation that Norwich has, it must be *spent*. Historically speaking, Norfolk County Council has often put more emphasis on saving rates and council tax than on spending them wisely. This fiscally cautious approach often results in

underspending and massive cash reserves – hence an underspend this year of £2.2m and reserves predicted to reach £68m. Norwich City Council has not always been the tightest of financial ships (see 2.23 below), but some problems can only be solved by spending money.

2.21. It is certainly true that the City Council in its three decades as a District Council has not delivered a universally high level of services. In the Norwich Society's main areas of interest, planning and conservation, we have most recently (May 12) given evidence on our concern over past weaknesses in the planning, conservation and architectural control staff to the Audit Commission (while applauding the efforts of the present administration at City Hall in bringing that department back up to strength).

2.22. We would argue however, that the right way to go is to *strengthen* the City Council, rather than abolish it. Only a council with full powers and the finance to provide a complete career structure can build up the kind of permanent cadre of experienced, committed officers that a City with the very specialised planning needs of Norwich requires. Again, we would emphasise that the problems faced by an historic city aiming to conserve the best of the past while coping properly with the stresses and strains of being a Growth Point for population and jobs are quite *other* than those faced by a very large, predominantly rural county.

2.23. The Boundary Committee is obviously concerned with the City Council's recent failures of budgetary control, as contrasted with the County Council's three-star financial status [5.40 & 5.52]. We would ask the Committee to consider two points: that the Audit Commission itself has recognised that steps are being taken to remedy the situation; and that the City's financial black hole may well have arisen from the on-going disparity between the needs of a City such as Norwich and the relatively meagre resources made available by the County to a District Council. Once more, we would draw the conclusion that the solution is to strengthen rather than abolish. Having the financial clout and structure of a Unitary Authority would enable the City fully to be empowered – in this case the past does not inform the future.

2.24. **Affordability.** The Boundary Committee's yardstick is that the change to a unitary structure should "deliver value for money and be self-financing", with a five year payback period. The Committee itself has felt unable so far to apply that yardstick [2.56], and has only requested the information from councils on which to do its sums by September 5. We also are therefore clearly unable to make such a calculation, and feel we cannot make any useful comment on that issue at this time.

### **Other Considerations**

3.1. The Norwich Society, as the Civic Society for the City, has focussed its efforts on deciding which of the three alternatives posed by the Boundary Committee would be of greatest benefit to the conurbation. As stated above, we reject the Committee's

main draft proposal abolishing the City Council as damaging both to City and County, and believe the two unitary authority pattern B, the “doughnut”, to be the best solution.

3.2. That leaves on one side the question of whether, as the Boundary Committee believes, both Norfolk and Lowestoft would benefit by including that Suffolk town in all of the three options. This is mainly beyond our remit but we can see the sense in being able to plan the future of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft as a joint economic unit. The developments bound to be brought by Yarmouth’s new Outer Harbour will bind both communities closer together, with new growth in Yarmouth being drawn to the South.

3.3. Equally, because of the poor communications between Norwich and Yarmouth, along an undualled A47, we believe that the two unitary authority Pattern A, the so-called “Wedge” approach, is less satisfactory than Pattern B. Uniting two of Norfolk’s three main pockets of deprivation within a single authority without a coherent infrastructure would inevitably lead to a less vibrant and dynamic Norwich. As we have already argued, we believe that unshackling the City, giving it an enabling structure that empowers it to achieve a series of strategic objectives in economic planning and development, is the best way to bring up the surrounding communities, *including* Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

3.4. There remains the question of how a Unitary Greater Norwich would fit into a pattern of sub-regional planning, of the kind exemplified by the Joint Core Strategy at present being developed by a partnership of Norwich, Broadland and South Norfolk District Councils. Plainly matters would be greatly simplified if the only two authorities left standing were a unitary Greater Norwich and a unitary Norfolk, each with the kind of powers enabling them to make decisions untrammelled by the kind of lengthy discussion and horse-trading necessary to develop a joint policy between three district councils.

3.5. Equally plainly, an overarching strategic planning body containing both councils would be required to face up to the kind of problems posed by Government projections of greatly increased population, employment and housing in Norfolk, most of it centred on the Greater Norwich conurbation and its radial roads, but with much still outside the boundaries of Greater Norwich. We suggest that in setting up such a joint body, due consideration should be given to providing some representative mechanism recognising Norwich’s greater economic importance per head of population. It is also important that the work already put into the Joint Core Strategy (and therefore the new Local Development Framework for 2026) should be taken on by the new planning body.

3.6. Finally, it has recently been reported that the Secretary of State may decide to make Norwich a Unitary Authority within its existing borders. This would undoubtedly improve the City’s ability to exert proper planning control over development within the historic centre. But failure to include the prosperous suburbs which are part of the Greater Norwich economic zone would leave the City unable to

achieve the kind of critical mass necessary for it to become the engine of growth for Norfolk that we envisage (see 2.3 to 2.12 above).

### **Conclusion**

4.1. It is implicit in this exercise that the Secretary of State has a fall-back position – do nothing! This should not be considered as an option. It would simply continue a situation where the City’s economy fires on only three cylinders, where development in and around Norwich continues on an un-coordinated, piecemeal basis, where difficult decisions are ducked or left to the market, and strategic planning is at the mercy of sectional interests.

4.2. It would be strange indeed if a Government which has proclaimed its intention to reduce a perceived democratic deficit in local government should end up destroying local democracy in one of England’s earliest and historically most successful self-governing boroughs. The Boundary Committee and the Electoral Commission’s own literature proclaims, *Democracy Matters!*

4.3. The Norwich Society believes that a strong, independent, self-governing City of Norwich can only benefit the County of Norfolk, and that undertaking the unprecedented experiment of placing all the City’s affairs in the hands of a massively unwieldy County Council would only accelerate Norwich’s relative failure to gear up to the challenges of the future. On the other hand, giving the City more responsibility, more power and scope, and charging it with leading the regeneration of Norfolk, could be the saving of the county and the region.

*Norwich Society*  
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