

Further Transformation in East Suffolk - FAQ's

1) Is merger a done deal?

At the simultaneous Cabinet meeting on 14th March 2016, councillors agreed that a merger of the two councils is their preferred option out of the 5 different options presented by the Strategic Management Team.

At the Simultaneous Cabinet meeting on 25th July 2016, Councillors considered a more detailed report setting out the full case for merger and they decided to proceed to the next stage with the merger proposal. This will involve public consultation later in the year and each Council will be formally asked whether they wish to merge at Full Council meetings in January 2017.

If they do, there will then be involvement from the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to help determine the number of Councillors for the new Council, its warding pattern and Committee arrangements. This process of merging the two councils will therefore take a number of years to complete and any new council would not come into being until 2019.

2) Who will make the decisions?

The decision whether to put forward a proposal for merger will be made by each Full Council, who will both need to agree if the proposal is to proceed. It is anticipated these meetings will take place in January 2017.

However the final decision whether to approve a merger of Suffolk Coastal District Council and Waveney District Council will actually be made by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The current timetable envisages this being around September 2017.

As part of the process DCLG require us to also consult with Suffolk County Council but they have no decision making role in the process as they are not directly affected.

Proposals for the size (number of Councillors) of any new merged council will also be made by each Full Council. Again each council will need to agree. The current timetable envisages this being in June 2017. Once made this will be submitted to DCLG and again the Secretary of State will make the final decision as to the size of the new council.

It is intended that the initial proposals for electorate forecasting, council size, warding proposals and governance arrangements will be developed by one or more joint, cross party, councillor working groups before being considered by each Full Council.

The final recommendations regarding any new warding pattern (based upon the council size determined by the Secretary of State) will be made by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England during 2016/17. This is the same electoral review process that Suffolk Coastal District Council undertook ahead of the elections in 2015.

3) What are the financial implications of creating a new East Suffolk 'Super District' to replace Suffolk Coastal and Waveney?

Having carried out a detail financial assessment it is estimated that the proposal would result in savings of £1.3m per annum. Since the two Councils have been working 'in partnership' we have been able to save £16m. Taking the next incremental step to becoming one Council is therefore estimated to produce a further 50% increase in the amount saved each year.

Of that £1.3m approximately £900k would be direct 'cashable' savings in what the Councils spend each year. There is also an equivalent of a further £400k that would be gained in efficiency savings, meaning that the Councils' staff would have more time to deliver even more for their residents.

As the Councils have been working 'in partnership' for so long the estimated costs of changing to become a single Council are also extremely low (less than £170k in the year 18/19 and approximately £280k in total). The new Council would therefore start to produce efficiencies and savings as soon as it comes into being in 2019.

There are also significant financial challenges that local government faces in the next few years. Changes to government grants and the Business Rate scheme mean that although more of the money generated locally will be kept locally by the Council, overall District Councils will have less money to invest in their areas unless we can deliver stronger economic growth.

A single Council would however have a significantly different and stronger financial profile than the two current districts, with net assets and reserves of £170m.

4) What will this mean for residents? What will happen to Council Tax?

The principle behind the Councils working 'in partnership' has always been that residents will see the benefits in terms of services being maintained and improved, and the financial costs of local government in their area being reduced; but that they do not notice any change in terms of the Council itself.

If we become a single Council for East Suffolk then this will continue to be the case. Behind the scenes the vast majority of the Councils' services are already seamlessly delivered as a single service to the residents of East Suffolk, and residents will still be able to access their own local Councillor to support them or advocate on their behalf.

Similarly the Council tax levels are already extremely similar (there is only 9p per annum difference between each Council).

Their Councils will however transform from being an operational and partly strategic partnership into becoming a fully integrated operational, strategic and political 'goldilocks' marriage – still small enough to be local, provide accountable democracy, and understand and enable our communities; but large enough and financially strong enough to make greater investments in growth, housing and infrastructure, and challenge and lobby even more effectively on behalf of East Suffolk.

5) How will the merger affect Councillors

The main impact is from the potential change in the number of Councillors. Currently we have 90 District Councillors across Suffolk Coastal and Waveney. It will be for the Councils, meeting through Working Groups and then at each Full Council in June 2017, to propose to the Secretary of State how many Councillors should sit on any new merged council for East Suffolk. This will need to be determined from consideration of how the governance of the new Council will operate and what number of Councillors is needed to ensure there is an appropriate level of democratic representation as a new larger district council.

The documents considered at Simultaneous Cabinet on 25 July 2016 included indicative savings of £115,000 p.a. from a reduction in Councillors. This figure is modelled on a Council size of 65 Councillors and the report also includes figures to demonstrate how these financial numbers could change if the Council size increased to 70 or decreased to 60 Councillors. However these are purely indicative for the purpose of that report. No decisions have been made about how many Councillors there should be for a new Council. As explained above this will not be made without careful and thorough consideration by a Joint Working Group of current Councillors, and then Full Council approval from both Councils in June 2017.

Similarly the level of Member Allowances for any new Council will be a matter for the current Councillors to agree, again at each Full Council, once the final decision has been made by the Secretary of State and following a review by an Independent Remuneration Panel.

Even if there is no change in the overall number of Councillors then there will still need to be a re-warding of East Suffolk in order to rebalance the current ratios of Councillor to electors across the area. Currently the average for each Suffolk Coastal Councillor is approximately 2300 electors (and 2700 at its highest) whereas the average for each Waveney Councillor is 1900 electors (and 2180 at its highest). This work would be carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission from approximately September 2017 ahead of the first set of elections in May 2019.

6) How will a merger affect staff - the report says we are going to make £366k of staff savings?

Suffolk Coastal and Waveney have been working closely together since first sharing a Chief Executive in 2008. We now share a joint Business Plan, designed to integrate the councils business planning approach for East Suffolk, and many of the services we run are already shared across both authorities.

If the merger proposal goes forward there would therefore be little direct impact for the majority of staff, and the more significant impact will be for Councillors (see above).

There are a few service areas however where the teams have not been fully joined up as we have needed to continue to operate across both Councils. In these specific teams there will be a need to look at their structure following any merger in 2019. This would not necessarily be done however on 'day one' of the new Council.

We are extremely proud that our incremental partnership approach between the two Councils has minimised the need for any compulsory redundancies. Whilst we do anticipate that merging the councils could reduce our total staffing numbers by 1% to 2%, we firmly expect that natural staff turnover (e.g. through promotion and retirement) between now and 2019 will avoid the need for any redundancies.

Where any further team restructures are required then as usual there will be comprehensive staff engagement about any proposals, and formal periods of consultation for anyone effected.

7) If the merger goes ahead, will staff be expected to work from and meet at different offices? Will there be an Headquarters somewhere new?

No, the arrangements for staff working at Riverside in Lowestoft, the new East Suffolk House in Melton, and our other offices will remain as they are now. Both current Councils have new buildings and would continue to operate out of both sites as a new single Council. It is anticipated that Council meetings will be rotated around the new district, alternating between East Suffolk House and Riverside.

The new Council would cover a long, thin geographical area and it would best serve customers to retain an office at each end of the district. There have in the past been media reports that have speculated that staff would all move to East Suffolk House in Melton. This is not true, would not be sensible, and would not even be possible given the size of building we are purchasing. We will also continue to maximise the use of technology to minimise unnecessary travel.

8) How do we have our say?

Having received the support of both Cabinets on 25th July 2016 the proposal will now be subject to public engagement and consultation later in the year (see below). All residents and stakeholders, including Councillors and staff are encouraged to have their say during that consultation. The matter will then be fully debated by both Full Councils in January 2017.

If any member of the public has any questions ahead of or during this public consultation then please can you contact the Project Officer, Kelly Wigley at Kelly.wigley@eastsoffolk.gov.uk We will also be continuously adding to this FAQ document as matters are raised so we can ensure that everyone is fully informed.

5) Will there be a vote / referendum?

No, there will not be a public referendum on whether the councils should merge, but there will be other meaningful engagement with residents and stakeholders.

A referendum is a non-binding vote and it would cost a considerable amount of money to run a poll of this kind (around £100,000) when the same information could be gained from alternative forms of consultation. We are also now entering a period of consultation for the Devolution process and the Lowestoft Town Council Review, and a referendum regarding merger could result in confusion for residents. These concerns have been raised by Councillors and officers, and have also been echoed by the Department for Communities & Local Government.

As such it has been agreed that a referendum would be of limited value and that other meaningful and more cost-effective public engagement should take place instead. This will consist of a detailed engagement campaign which would take place from 1 November 2016 to 12 December 2016, which would include telephone polling (a survey of between 10 – 15 minutes) of 1000 residents of East Suffolk. The telephone polling would question a representative sample of East Suffolk residents (by age, gender and location) and will gather information to form an overall view of residents' feelings towards merger and any concerns/questions they may have.

However there have been and will be a number of votes by the democratically elected representatives for East Suffolk, firstly by both Cabinets on 14 March 2016 and 25 July 2016, then by both Councils on January 2017 and then again in June 2017 (the details of these votes are set out in the Timetable within the report).