

## **Council Size Proposal for a Future Council for West Suffolk**

**Submitted on behalf of**

**Forest Heath District Council and St Edmundsbury Borough Council**

In September 2017, Forest Heath District Council (FHDC) and St Edmundsbury Borough Council (SEBC) agreed a business case that supports the formation of a single district-tier Council for West Suffolk. This business case has now been submitted to the Secretary of State, who, under s.15 of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, has the power to issue an Order to create the new Council. The business case and associated appendices is available at <http://svr-mgov-01:9070/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=172&MIId=3649&Ver=4>

That Order will include those ancillary matters necessary to bring the new Council into being. One of the most important aspects is the number of Councillors necessary to operate the new council. Whilst this decision will be made by the Secretary of State, we consider it important that we submit our views, as the current District and Borough Councillors for West Suffolk, on the number of Councillors we believe the future Council should have.

This paper covers:

- Background to West Suffolk as a place
- Background to West Suffolk councils
- Forming our argument for council size, including:
  - o The governance arrangements of the council
  - o Regulatory decision making
  - o Scrutiny and oversight arrangements
  - o Responsibility to outside bodies
  - o The representational role of councillors
  - o Views of the residents of West Suffolk
  - o How our argument creates a council size
- Conclusion

### **About West Suffolk**

West Suffolk is a growing area. By 2023, our population will amount to nearly 190,000 people<sup>1</sup> and as a single Council, we would currently be in the top 10 second-tier District Councils in population terms<sup>2</sup> and the top 10% by geographic area<sup>3</sup>.

As Councils, we have experienced steady growth. Our area sits on national and international trade routes as well as being part of the Cambridge sub-region, a vital engine of the UK economy. It is home to international brands and

companies as well as the being the world centre for horseracing. Therefore, it is an already attractive place to live and build businesses. Inevitably, parts of our area will experience more significant growth than others; for example, work is underway for the delivery of significant developments in both Bury St Edmunds and Haverhill, and whilst growth will be incremental on both sites, experience suggests that local Councillors will be required to support those communities in different ways, ensuring that they can be integrated into the local area and are supported by appropriate facilities.

Our area is predominantly rural. Using DEFRA definitions, only 25% of our residents live in an "urban" area – Bury St Edmunds. 35% of the population live in rural hub towns, while 40% of residents live in genuinely rural areas – parishes, villages and hamlets. It is critical that as a Council, we work to address the needs of all those within our area, striking the balance between the competing demands of a rural and urban society. In our area, there are 85 Parish Councils, and a further 5 Town Councils. The area is proud of its historic significance; Bury St Edmunds, the spiritual home of the former patron Saint of England, St Edmund, and Newmarket, the Home of Horseracing.

In national terms, West Suffolk is relatively affluent. While there is deprivation to tackle, no wards in either current Councils are in the 10% most deprived in England, and employment levels are higher than the national average. The areas still have challenges, though. Our population is growing older faster than the national average so that, by 2039, 1 in 3 people will be aged over 65, representing a 63% increase in those in this age group compared to the present. This change is particularly marked in the current St Edmundsbury area; there are 4 wards in St Edmundsbury where more than 1/3 of the population live in households where all the residents are over 65, and moreover, all but 5 of the current St Edmundsbury wards already rank higher than the national average in terms of residents in households of all over 65s. Social Mobility is lower than average; of 326 local authorities, St Edmundsbury is ranked 176<sup>th</sup> and Forest Heath 285<sup>th</sup> in terms of social mobility.

We also have an unusual position in terms of the number of armed service personnel serving, and living, within West Suffolk. Two US airbases are located at Mildenhall and Lakenheath, and a further RAF base at Honington. It is anticipated that there are over 11,000 serving personnel and dependents within the current Forest Heath boundaries, and in some particular current villages, we believe that up to 50% of the population can be American - meaning a significant distortion between electorate and population (this is notoriously difficult to project accurately, and we are reliant on USAF communications).

This large military population makes demographic analysis for West Suffolk challenging. The military population largely consists of young people, many of whom are starting families, and as such birth and age statistics are often skewed. However this population tends to be fairly static in its make up, and

demonstrates the impact that the ageing population may have on the rest of the District and our communities – an even more markedly disproportionate increase than outlined above. Our Council, and its Councillors, need to be well placed to support our communities, families and residents in managing this and the other challenges they face. While the personnel do not have a right to vote they are part of the local community and still use our council services and call upon councillors for help or support.

West Suffolk is an attractive visitor location. In 2016, Newmarket Racecourse attracted some 367,000 visitors and this will be complemented by the new 'Home of Horseracing' museum. Popular attractions include St Edmundsbury Cathedral and Abbey Gardens, in Bury St Edmunds, and Center Parcs, at Elveden. Many residents and visitors enjoy our natural landscapes – walks in Brandon Country Park and surrounding forest. We are well connected, with strong transport links through the A14, flowing to Ipswich and Felixstowe, and the A11, which connects to Cambridge and on to London.

Economic growth is critically important to West Suffolk. We already benefit from a number of substantial businesses such as the Newmarket horseracing industry (horseracing and breeding industry now makes an annual contribution to the local economy of more than £240m which continues to grow) ; a British Sugar plant; Greene King brewery; Claas agricultural manufacturers; Omar Homes – the Country's biggest manufacturer of mobile homes (Brandon), and leading research businesses such as Sanofi (Haverhill) have recently invested over £100m into the area. Two new Enterprise Zones, for Haverhill and Bury St Edmunds, have been agreed and are being actively supported by the Councils to encourage new business location. The area borders the newly devolved Combined Authority of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and we expect, given our strong connections to the Cambridge growth area, that the benefits of growth that Cambridgeshire will experience will flow into our local economy.

The Cambridgeshire growth phenomenon is well documented and understood. West Suffolk is an important part of this, forming part of the Cambridgeshire housing sub-region, and an important part of the housing and economic supply chains for Cambridgeshire. Places such as Haverhill and Red Lodge, communities in their own right, also serve as important commuter routes for the growing Cambridge economy. Within West Suffolk, we campaign to support the important infrastructure developments required to support growth in our own borders, and the surrounding geography. We are ambitious for our own area, to be strong in its own right and not to just be part of the Cambridge growth. Brandon, for example, has recently been named as a potential area for investment through the "Power to Change" national flagship programme. Our business case to become a single council emphasises how a new Council will have the opportunity to have a stronger voice when looking at the bigger picture.

This ambition is reflected in our sense of place. We have committed to ambitious masterplans for Haverhill and Bury St Edmunds; have a pivotal role in developing a vision and prospectus for Newmarket, and internally are actively leading work to progress proposals for a new Public Service hub in Mildenhall, and development of a new Waste Operational Hub in Bury St Edmunds.

Our Council Size argument will set out how, collectively, our Councillors are a critical part of our ambition to deliver on a greater scale and to address the challenges we face. To do so, Councillors need to have the capacity to deliver, and be able to provide a wide diversity of opinions, skills and experience.

### **About West Suffolk Councils**

Since 1974, Suffolk has operated as a two-tier structure, split between the County Council and 7 Districts. In recent years, there has been a will amongst both St Edmundsbury and Forest Heath members to explore the potential for further close working between the authorities at district level.

Following exploratory work, in 2011, the two Councils entered formal arrangements to deliver all services together. This has resulted in a single officer structure, which has delivered savings to both authorities of some £4m per year, and a comprehensively integrated service structure. Although there is a very small number of differences, residents in either part of the area can expect a similar experience from the Council's core services.

It is over 15 years since either Council experienced a ward boundary review. As a result, we recognise that some of our boundaries are out of kilter with our current communities. Over the past 2 years, we have undertaken community governance reviews of our Town and Parish boundaries, reviewing these to adjust for forecast growth, and creating a new Parish Council for West Row .

In May 2017, the Cabinets jointly requested officers to scope options to review the future of local Government within West Suffolk. This led to a draft business case which identified the preferred option would be to seek a single district-tier Council for West Suffolk. The draft business case was agreed by Councils, to be subject to public engagement. The engagement demonstrated public support for the proposals, and as such a final business case was agreed by Councils in September and submitted to DCLG.

### **West Suffolk Councils: Working Together**

As highlighted above, West Suffolk Councils have been working together since 2011. This has generated significant opportunities to share knowledge and

understanding across Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury, and more importantly, already recognise opportunities for Councillors to work together. This has included:

- Since 2014, both Councils have shared both a Strategic Plan and priorities and Medium Term Financial Strategy. Councillors and officers have collectively worked to comprehensively align Corporate policies, strategies and procedures, including aligning all committee procedures.
- Both Cabinets are currently aligned, with identical portfolios. In particular, we operate with a shared portfolio holder for housing, enabling a wider approach to housing need and delivery across the whole of the future West Suffolk area. Cabinets regularly meet in joint committees and hold joint Cabinet meetings, reducing the need to have separate meetings with Councillors on cross-cutting issues or joint policies / strategies
- As opportunities have arisen, we have already formed a number of Joint Committees and Panels. Each body has a small number of Councillors from each Council to ensure they remain focused, efficient and effective. This includes:
  - A Joint Standards Committee
  - Joint Committees for Health and Safety and Staff consultation
  - A Joint Growth Group, which will oversee the development of the emerging West Suffolk Local Plan
  - Joint Officer Appeals and Appointments Panel
  - Joint working groups in areas such as Development Plan Policies, member development and Constitution Reviews
- Where appropriate, committees across both Councils jointly meet – for example, our Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committees have been meeting jointly since 2014, to assess issues that affect both organisations.

We recognise that there are efficiencies that can still be achieved within our decision-making structures and will set these out further below. However, it is important, in assessing our Council Size case, to appreciate that our proposal to become a single Council is not a “big bang” event, but part of a journey to become a bigger, stronger and more resilient organisation. We have already made changes to the way that our Councillors work, reducing demands from within the Council to enable them to have more capacity to strengthen their Ward Councillor role. Becoming a Single Council presents further opportunities to consolidate, evaluate, and evolve the role of the Councillor, working alongside our communities as opposed to radically changing their role. The structure will put in place now also has to be flexible for whatever the next decades bring to West Suffolk and local government in general.

### **CASE STUDY: COMMERCIALISING SERVICES**

Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury Councils have been working together to assess the way in which services can be evaluated to generate income, reducing demands on the taxpayer. We aim to take a business approach to our operations, within our public service remit. This has already led to joint venture companies such as Barley Homes (delivering new houses for sale and rental) and Verse (Facilities Management).

Developing different ways of working places new demands on Councillors; we expect that under a bigger Council there will be even greater opportunities to use our scale to act differently and invest in our communities. In the short term, Councillors need to respond to the different delivery models the Councils are employing, gaining knowledge and insight to be able to challenge and scrutinise complex delivery arrangements, to , obtain assurance they are operating effectively; and in the long term, Councillors need to develop new skillsets to serve in shareholder roles and understand the way that companies should operate, meeting regularly to consider performance and ensure the Council's needs are being met.

### **Forming our argument for Council Size**

The opportunity to become a single Council has enabled us to undertake a fundamental assessment of the principles as to how our Councillors should work in future, and how we can most effectively discharge our decision making functions over a wider area.

Throughout, we have given due consideration to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's guidance, and in particular, the three key factors to consider when determining Council Size:

- The governance arrangements of the Council, and how it will make its decisions across its broad range of responsibilities;
- The Council's scrutiny arrangements for its own functions, and its responsibilities to outside bodies;
- The representational role of Councillors in the local community, how they will engage with people, conduct casework and represent the Council

#### *The Governance arrangements of the Council*

We recognise that it will be for the new Council to determine its own governance arrangements, and consideration of Council size should not be used to force or dictate what the new Council believes will be the most effective arrangements to discharge its functions. Indeed, our aim is to provide any new Council with

enough flexibility in its initial and future arrangements to be able to model different forms of governance, based on what is right for the challenges we face.

To support our case, we have agreed a set of guiding principles to help establish the basis on which we expect the Council's decision making to operate.

- **Local Leadership and Accountability** – We expect local members to act as true leaders in their communities. Future governance systems can facilitate this through evaluating decision making processes on local issues, which could result in increased schemes of delegation to members, ensuring they have a strong voice in regulatory decisions or, for example, groups of members and local stakeholders coalescing in forums to develop proposals. This builds on the locality working we have been developing through our joint Families and Communities Strategy for West Suffolk since 2014.
- **Contributing to strategic priorities** – There is a keenness to ensure there is a system that enables members to engage with, and contribute to the delivery of strategic goals; where it is appropriate to do so, members should take the initiative to resolve issues and have a firm grasp on the organisational priorities and how they are being delivered. Demonstrating this in practice, our Joint Growth Working Group is a standing body that empowers members to have wide-reaching debates on important strategic growth issues, seeking to influence decision making of partners and drive development within West Suffolk. We recognise that the sheer scope of inclusive growth means this way of working requires further refinement; striking a balance between engaging members in high-level thinking but also allowing opportunity to contribute to the detail and ensuring they have the capacity to do so. This will be a key factor in how our new governance arrangements are developed.
- **Flexibility and Capacity** – We recognise that the system of governance we develop will change, as we develop working models, respond to changing agendas at a local and national level, and adapt to the environment our stakeholders and communities face. We need to ensure that members have the capacity to work in different ways, to adapt and to develop, and there needs to be sufficient capacity within our Council Size to allow us to work in flexible and adaptable ways.
- **Manageable workloads** – We want to ensure that Councillors from all walks of life and a range of different experiences feel confident to come forward, and are not deterred by onerous workloads that may be placed upon them from being a District Councillor. We accept that inevitably, some Councillors will have a greater burden of responsibility and time commitments than others, but there needs to be scope for Councillors who work, who have caring responsibilities, or possibly have other challenges to be able to participate in the Council.
- **Delegated Decision Making** – We recognise that a single council would have greater scale, and therefore schemes of delegation will need to be reviewed to ensure that whilst Councillors actively contribute to significant decisions, lower level decisions can be made by officers quickly, to make

things happen, potentially in conjunction with relevant members – whether portfolio holders or local members.

We expect that our future Council will operate an executive / leader model of governance. Both Councils currently place high expectations on Portfolios to truly take responsibility for the functions within their areas, remaining knowledgeable, driving a programme of work, and working alongside officers to develop programmes and proposals. We believe that operating on a larger scale will present new challenges to portfolio holders, who will need to have sufficient capacity to learn about their role on a bigger scale than before but this same level of expertise on the detail may not be achievable in a new Council with greater scale. With this in mind, we need to ensure portfolio holders have the capacity to build relationships with stakeholders within the different geographies and sectors they represent, and to do so, need to be sufficiently supported within their role as well as having a portfolio that is manageable.

To deliver this, particularly during the short term transition period from two organisations to one Council, we foresee that the new Council may expect to operate with a full range of 10 cabinet members (including the Leader), some of whom may be supported by assistant / support members to help drive forward particular projects, substitute at representative groups or help champion particular aspects of the portfolio's work. This would enable members to have the capacity to develop their knowledge and be leaders of the services they are responsible for leading.

This is particularly important given some of the key aims within our Business Case to become a single Council, most notably the ability to influence on a greater scale. That may well require some members with strategic responsibilities to seek to influence delivery on a wider scale; become involved in new fields and integrate as effectively as possible with other public sector providers.

Further, we also believe that Councillors should have the scope to be able to engage with the Council's executive functions where it is useful or appropriate to do so; whether it be working alongside the portfolio holders to address problems prevalent within their local area, or to engage in working groups to develop policies that may apply to the whole area.

This is a flexible approach to governance; while respecting the authority of the leader and their cabinet to make decisions, all members may have the opportunity to help shape policy, support decision making, raise and champion issues and resolve local challenges. While we set out below how this might appear in a practical structural arrangement, what is most important is that our Council Size should enable us to operate in a flexible way and not leave members feeling overwhelmed by having to take on too much.

## *Regulatory Decision Making*

Working across a wider geography presents challenges; making sure that there is a fair balance between ensuring local voices are heard as an important part in the regulatory environment, and ensuring decisions are made in a lawful, balanced and fair way on the material factors relevant to the case.

At present, both of our authorities operate a development control committee that meets on a monthly basis. We recognise that the demands of a larger, single Council will require us to review the way we operate in practice. At Forest Heath, each of the 14 local wards are allocated a seat on the committee, with members allocated to the seats on a politically balanced basis. At St Edmundsbury, the Committee of 16 members is allocated on a standard politically balanced basis.

For both Councils, when an application is first received, the local member, Parish Council and other statutory consultees / local residents are consulted on the application. Where there is an application that would usually be dealt with by officers using their delegated powers, but the local members or Parish Council(s) have a view that is contrary to the officers, then a delegation panel will consider the application and determine whether the decision should be made by officers, or should be referred to the Development Control committee. Local members may attend the delegation panel, making representations as they wish.

This enables a strong balance to be formed between officers and democratically elected representatives, and members have expressed a strong desire for such a process to continue to operate under a new Council.

However, we also must recognise that with the wider geography, the number of applications a single committee may consider in Committee would increase; the need for site visits will increase, and the scheme of delegation may likely require review as to the number of applications delegated to officers and the level of locality input. We also need to ensure that any committee meetings and decision making processes are fair and accessible to applicants, and remain democratically accountable to the public.

In this regard, we have recognised that future design principles for our planning committee, and similarly for our licensing committees, should be based on the following principles:

- **The local voice is critical** – ensuring local members have a strong voice and are able to represent their public effectively
- **A Reasonable burden of work** – regulatory committees should not create an unreasonable burden of work on those Councillors who are involved, whether it be through their local ward representational role or through serving on the committee.

- **Councillors should be knowledgeable** – members should be well trained and informed about regulatory matters so that they can most effectively support their residents. We would expect some aspects of member training would be mandatory, as in fact some are now, given the need to ensure appropriate local member representations are put forward.
- **Committee meetings should be manageable** – The Committee size itself should be reasonable to conduct meetings effectively, whilst still representing a fair size in relation to the Council as a whole. Further, meetings need to be managed to ensure they are fair to applicants and objectors.

We have not formally determined how we should structure our development control committee meetings, or when and where committees should take place; that will be for the new Council to determine. However, as with our executive arrangements, the Council Size needs to have sufficient flexibility

#### **CASE STUDY: EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS**

West Suffolk Council will recognise the important role that District Councils can play in shaping the future of their area. Becoming a larger body gives us the opportunity to engage more actively with stakeholders, outside our traditional boundaries –such as working alongside the newly formed Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, recognising the mutual dependencies between Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk. We are already working to support emerging proposals put forward by the Combined Authority to develop a new rail link between Cambridge and Haverhill.

The important role that District Councils can have in place-shaping has been widely recognised by numerous studies, for example the King’s Fund “District Council contribution to public health: a time of challenge and opportunity”. This highlighted how District Councils were in a good position to influence many of the factors that influence health.

As one of the largest District Councils in the Country, we expect to be well positioned to demonstrate our ability to be at the forefront of such change, working collaboratively on strategic and local issues and we need to ensure our Councillors have the skills and capacity to be able to act in new forums and arenas, and be seen to be visionary leaders of place.

to allow us to implement a scheme that most effectively works for our Council and its residents, rather than acting as a constraint. Also, we recognise that an enhanced ward member role in the process will have a time requirement irrespective of whether is delivered through formal committee structures or delegation panels.

### *Scrutiny and Oversight arrangements*

At present, the scrutiny arrangements for both current Councils are aligned but not integrated; each Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which performs the traditional scrutiny functions, and each Council has a Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee, which oversees the financial and non-financial performance of the Council and performs the traditional role of the Audit Committee.

We recognise that under a single Council, there will be scope to review these arrangements. For example, at present, both Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committees meet to consider matters jointly, then immediately afterwards, meet to consider items related to their specific Councils separately – such as the statement of accounts or audit reports.

While there may be scope to review such arrangements, it will again be for the new Council to make a determination. For current purposes, we have adopted the approach that as a minimum, there will be requirement to build in the following functions:

- **Scrutiny** – we expect that our new Council will operate a Leader / Executive model, and as such will absolutely require a scrutiny function. Our business case seeks to demonstrate how creating a single Council can enable our influence to increase, and to operate on a bigger scale than present, and Scrutiny can be an important part of this; in particular, helping the Council to identify how it can work more effectively with other partner bodies. A scrutiny arrangement needs to be of sufficient size to challenge the Executive, to undertake a demanding programme of work, and to enable working on a detailed scale, for example through task and finish groups
- **Audit** – Whilst this is not a statutory requirement, it is expected that a form of Audit function will be required to demonstrate openness and accountability in our assessment of the Council's financial and internal control matters. In practice this might involve receiving reports from the Council's Internal and External Auditors, to authorising the Statement of Accounts and the Annual Governance Committee, and potentially overseeing other Corporate Governance matters.

Inevitably, we also expect arrangements will be developed to consider the following matters:

- **Standards** – The Council has a duty to uphold high standards of governance. The Standards Committee, which is a joint committee across both Councils, currently supports the work of the Monitoring Officer in discharging this responsibility. Whilst we recognise that this work could be done through other means (e.g. in combination with the Audit

Committee) it would increase the potential responsibility and workload if combined with another body

- **Officer Disciplinary and Appeals** – The Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 required local authorities to put in place an Independent Panel to oversee potential disciplinary proceedings against Statutory Officers
- **Officer Appointments Committee, Joint Staff Consultation Panel , and Health and Safety matters**

The Officer Appointments Committee deals with, and recommends, the appointment of the Head of Paid Service and the Directors – and if necessary can recommend the dismissal of the Statutory Officers, . In common with many Councils, we operate a Joint Staff Consultative Panel between Unison and Councillors to seek agreement to employment policies and practices. We also operate a Health and Safety Panel. Whilst, again, there are opportunities to review the way these bodies operate, they both form a strong element of ensuring that our corporate responsibilities to our staff and the public are discharged effectively and as such there would need to be a body that takes responsibility for such matters.

In practice, we already operate such committees on a joint basis across the two Councils, and therefore we anticipate there will be minimum changes on the demands of Councillors arising from a single Council approach.

#### *Responsibility to Outside Bodies*

Between the two Councils, at present, 84 appointments (plus substitutes) are made to outside bodies. This is an area where councillors play a strong community leadership role working with residents and partners, and we sense no diminution in the desire to have councillor involvement.

We recognise that this number may see some rationalisation in the future as a result of the single Council - where both Councils appoint a member to a particular organisation and in future, just one would be expected. However, caution should be used as it may be the case that both the new Council, and the third party organisation, may seek to maintain a strong presence from the Council on the organisation's board (e.g. with two representatives in future) and as such, the size of the reduction is expected to be small. Further, as emphasised above, there may be opportunities for Councillors to participate in a wider range of bodies given our growing scale and influence.

There also needs to be consideration given to the distribution of outside bodies. In practice, many of the bodies on whom Council representatives sit relate to urban areas. At present, St Edmundsbury Borough Council makes over 20 appointments to bodies that are specifically related to Bury St Edmunds; significant reduction in numbers of Councillors could mean those Councillors who

represent Bury St Edmunds are expected to pick up a disproportionate burden of work in order to service these organisations.

A further factor to consider is the quasi-outside body position. As with many other Councils, we have been seeking to act in commercial ways, investing in alternative business models and ventures. This has resulted in new representations on joint committees and shareholder groups, helping to shape the direction of bodies in which the Council has a significant stake, and ensuring that the Directors and officers of such companies are held to account in spending public funds. Our appointments include Anglia Revenues Partnership (a joint committee of 7 Councils to operate a revenues and benefits service); and the Shareholder Advisory Group for Barley Homes, our external housing development company. These types of role are expected to grow as the Council's commercial operations continue to develop. This creates additional expectations on Councillors, who are then expected become knowledgeable in these subjects, and in the running of companies or other types of organisation (if they are not from a commercial background). Whilst we cannot absolutely determine whether or not the single Council will continue to seek new venture opportunities, it is unlikely this role will decrease.

#### *The representational role of Councillors*

Our business case to become a single Council recognises that: "Critical to the success of a single council is the leadership role of ward members, who are at the frontline of our engagement with communities and integral to our ways of working, championing their localities, and providing local leadership, including liaising with town or parish councils."

West Suffolk has been at the forefront in promoting the positive role that District Councils can have in developing community resilience to reduce demand on public sector services, and the important role that Councillors can play within this. Our joint Families and Communities Strategy, first adopted in February 2014, seeks to foster resilience in local communities, addressing the dependence culture so the council is not the first port of call. It is a preventative approach to our community working, building on the strengths of communities rather than simply highlighting problems.

Our approach to community working was endorsed and reflected within the University of Birmingham Public Services Academy publication, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Councillor. This research identified how Councillor roles are changing to the context in which Councils are now finding themselves, and developed 7 "roles" for Councillors:

- Being a steward of place, working across their localities in partnership with others;
- Advocate – acting to represent the interests of all citizens;
- Buffer – mitigating the impact of austerity on citizens;

- Sensemaker – translating a shift in the role of public services and the relationship between citizens and institutions
- Catalyst – enabling citizens to do things for themselves;
- Entrepreneur – working with citizens and partners to encourage local vitality and develop new solutions
- Orchestrator – helping broker relationships, develop new connections

As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Councillor report recognises, this is a change; a shift in the relationship between local Councillors and their communities, and between the Councillor and the Council. Investing in our Councillors, as our community representatives, reflects an investment in the people of our area.

Working in this way has set the expectation within our communities for strong, representative ward Councillors, knowledgeable about, and committed to their communities on a 1:1 basis. Each of our Councillors are currently provided with £2,500 locality funding within their ward, and has an allocated Families and Communities Officer for their area. Councillors work closely with officers and their communities to identify community needs and resolve challenges; the basis for the funding sets a clear expectation for Councillors to have strong links to their communities to identify needs – not simply relying on voluntary groups or officers to come forward with solutions.

Becoming a single Council gives us a unique opportunity to assess the Councillor and community relationship. We want to show how strong, empowered Councillors are a critical part of their community, not just decision makers in a room. We want to build upon the successes we have had in promoting Councillors as facilitators and enablers in their communities, and contributing to genuine change in the relationship between our communities and their council.

We appreciate there are authorities who have remodelled their ways of working to effectively “manage” the relationship between Councillors and their communities; for example, parish clustering so that Councillors actively meet with groups of Parishes rather than having to attend all Parish Council meetings. Whilst we appreciate this can be a powerful way of drawing communities together, and we may wish to explore greater area partnership working as part of a new Council, it can also have the effect of divorcing the Councillor from their community and as such, the expectation will remain on our Councillors to be attending meetings and be an active part of their community, unless those communities themselves want to work differently with their councillors.

This can only happen if we have Councillors with the capability to deliver, but most importantly, the capacity to do so. We already know the hard work and commitment our Councillors invest in leading their areas, and we want this to continue; a significant reduction in our local representational role will prevent this from happening.

*Views of the residents of West Suffolk*

During the summer of 2017, we undertook a period of public engagement to understand the level of resident and stakeholder support for our proposals to become a single Council. This engagement included the commissioning of a phone poll of residents from ComRes, an independent polling company, which primarily focused on local residents' favourability or otherwise to the formation of a new council, but also included questions related to the concerns of residents on the proposals, and their perception of Councillor numbers in future.

The survey identified that one of the most significant concerns associated with becoming a single Council was the potential loss of local Councillors, and in particular the concern that a reduction in the number of Councillors would result in the loss of a local voice and a perceived loss of political accountability. Quotes from local residents include "fewer Councillors in a bigger area of governance will mean it's less personal and there are fewer people for local issues. They might be less able to maintain a connection with the localities" and "it will take away the localness of the councils and their local knowledge of the area"

When asked what they felt the impact would be if the number of Councillors was reduced, those who were opposed to the creation of a single Council were particularly concerned that there would be a negative impact through a reduction in the number of Councillors. This may lead to the inference that reduced Councillor numbers was a key concern in the minds of those opposed to a single Council.

Whilst, overall, a reduction in the number of Councillors was perceived in fairly neutral terms (34% felt there would be a positive impact; 34% felt there would be no difference, 26% were opposed), we believe this outcome demonstrates that whilst there may be some support towards a reduction in the number of Councillors, there may be public concern if Councillor numbers were reduced to a significant degree.

At the same time as the ComRes phone poll residents were asked to make comments and concerns online. The feedback from this showed that people were worried there would be a reduction of local representation in a new single council, with too few local councillors being able to champion their area or issues.

#### *How our argument creates a Council Size*

The narrative above sets out our rationale for having Councillors that have sufficient capacity to discharge an effective local ward representative role, and ensuring there is sufficient flexibility within our Councillor numbers to manage our committees and workload. We want to be small enough to be efficient, but still large enough to be 'local' and connected.

To draw this argument into an overall Council number, we have reflected on a potential committee structure that may operate for a new Council. This should

be seen entirely as a possible structure; for example, in terms of development control, a proposed structure with one Development Control Committee could comprise of 15 Councillors, but a structure with two Committees could involve 24-26 Councillors. As such, a figure of 20 has been proposed to strike a proportionate balance between the two positions.

First, we recognise the importance of ensuring that our Committee structure is understandable, and ensures transparent and open decision making by ensuring independence between decision makers and those who hold decision makers to account. For this reason, we have identified a set of core committees on which we would expect no overlap between Committee members:

Cabinet	10	As set out above, we want to ensure our executive has sufficient capacity to deliver. We believe a structure of 10 Cabinet members with up to a further 5 support roles provides sufficient scope for a future Council executive.
Cabinet Support Roles	5	
Figurehead roles	2	The Chairman / Vice-Chairman of the Council (or Mayor / Deputy Mayor if a Borough Council) – we recognise that this role would be significant for the individual, who may have limited capacity to take other committee appointments.
Overview & Scrutiny	15	We believe this would be sufficient representation to discharge the roles set out above, ensuring a strong balance between executive decision makers and scrutiny bodies. This would also give sufficient scope for scrutiny committees to be able to consider task and finish groups, or to undertake detailed reviews.
Audit Committee	10	
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	

In addition, we believe the further Committee roles would also be required:

Development Control	20	As set out above, earmarking committees of this size would give sufficient flexibility in terms of the arrangements we choose to employ
Licensing	20	
Standards	8	
Statutory Appointments / Dismissal	6	
Working parties/committees	45	We would expect further places on working parties, groups and panels to be appointed depending on the nature of work. Earmarking this figure would again give us sufficient flexibility to constitute a range of working groups to effectively engage members on matters – for example:

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working groups related to developing local planning policies</li> <li>• Working groups to oversee major change projects</li> <li>• Working groups to consider local issues or Council issues in depth</li> </ul> <p>At present, there are 45 places allocated on joint working groups across both Councils. Whilst we anticipate the nature and role of working groups may change substantially, given the proposed ways in which the Council may change (as set out above), this figure does provide a good benchmark on what may be expected in future.</p>
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	

As such, overall, there is a total of 141 places we would expect to be filled on Committees in this model.

If the 42 members on non-overlapping committees also took a place each on one of the regulatory or working party committees (so 84 places in total), there would still be a further 57 committee places that would require member allocation. On the basis that backbench members would have capacity to take a further 2-3 committee places each on average, between a further 19 and 29 Councillors would be required to discharge the Council's work effectively.

We recognise that workloads will vary, and as such, believe that it would be feasible to discharge the Council's functions with 64 Councillors.

### **CASE STUDY: ACCELERATING GROWTH**

In their 2017/18 budgets, Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury agreed to fund a £40m capital investment programme across the West Suffolk area, to support initiatives to promote the creation of jobs and economic growth.

This set a clear statement that both existing authorities are ambitious in their plans for growth; a new, single Council for West Suffolk will give us the scale to accelerate thinking, and deliver programmes such as ambitious master plans to re-vision our Town Centres, lead the £40m multi-partner Mildenhall Hub and to fund a major redevelopment of Western Way, Bury St Edmunds. In total, we have over 60 major organisational projects/programmes of which a substantial part relate to driving growth..

In the past, most major programmes have been developed in consultation with Cabinets and local members and then received endorsement of Councils. However, the accelerating scale of our vision means that we need to revisit how our Councillors operate in this sphere; how we engage with “backbench members” to enable them to act as community leaders in the locality; developing collective knowledge and understanding to shape and design based on community need, and to challenge critical financial and qualitative needs and assumptions made within proposals to ensure they are robust.

### *Conclusion*

A figure of 64 represents an 11% reduction compared to the current total of Councillors across both Councils.

Our case has recognised there may be some savings in the workload of Councillors as a result of the coming together of Committees; however, many of our working parties are already collaborating across both parties and as such savings will not be significant in this area. Further, the expectations of a new Council – gaining influence on a wider basis, increasing demands placed on Councillors and the growing aspirations of the Council – places new demands on Councillors, both in leading such a body and holding it to account.

A Council Size of this number enables us to maintain our strong and powerful local ward member role; to maintain our strong links with our local communities; to balance the growing expectation on Councillors under a single Council; to enable transparency and independence in decision making; and to recognise some saving in capacity. We recognise this reduction is not as significant as some Councils may put forward, however we believe it is appropriate for West Suffolk and reflects closely what the public have recently told us in our consultation for the new Council.

We believe that a new Council for West Suffolk has the potential to genuinely make a significant step-change in the way that we can deliver and support to our communities; continuing the good progress we have made as Councils working together, but also provides a one-off opportunity to assess how we should work in future. We need capacity and scale to deliver; we need scope to be ambitious. We believe that this Councillor number of 64 is right to enable change, to facilitate delivery and support us in delivering what is right for West Suffolk.