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**Comment text:**

South Suffolk Constituency Labour Party proposes a reduction of 21% to 34 councillors in Babergh District. This number will reduce the size of the council without compromising the capacity of councillors to represent their communities effectively. Details of proposed ward boundaries are in the attached document. The proposed boundaries take account of anticipated growth in the district whilst protecting the separate interests and identities of the wards in both rural and town areas.

**Uploaded Documents:**

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## **Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on the electoral review of Babergh District Council**

### **South Suffolk Constituency Labour Party**

**August 2017**

#### **Background**

South Suffolk Constituency Labour Party (SSCLP) is the largest and fastest growing political organisation in Babergh District with just under 700 members. The South Suffolk parliamentary constituency includes the whole of Babergh District Council together with wards to its west that form part of St Edmundsbury District. The Labour Party has one member on Suffolk County Council, one member on Babergh District Council (BDC) and numerous members on parish and town councils in Sudbury, Great Cornard and Hadleigh. In the 2017 general election, Labour took a 28% share of the vote.

The review underway was invited by Babergh District Council. It coincides with a review of Mid-Suffolk District Council (MSDC) which is adjacent to BDC and with which BDC shares officers, policies and functions. The MSDC review was required by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) as a result of electoral inequalities between wards.

Political leaders of both BDC and MSDC are seeking to merge the two authorities. The notion of a merger has not been the subject of any recent public consultation. In 2011, BDC spent £140k on a referendum on merging the two councils which included a leaflet distributed to each household outlining the advantages. Local voters decisively rejected the idea, but the objective of merger has been persistently pursued despite this.

#### **Proposal by Babergh District Council**

Babergh currently has 43 members elected from 28 Council wards. A proposal to reduce this number to 31 was submitted by the Council to LGBCE earlier this year. This represents a 28% reduction in council members. Although this amounts to a major change, the proposal was submitted totally without public consultation. SSCLP considers that public consultation should be a pre-condition of such proposals for change. SSCLP is highly critical of BDC for its apparent contempt of the electorate to which it should be accountable. SSCLP contends that issues of governance are as much a matter for the governed as for those engaged in governing, and that LGBCE should arrange public consultation on the issue of reduced Council size.

Much of the Babergh submission on council size appears designed to justify the decision to change to a cabinet model, rather than to fully explore options for council size. Neither does the submission address the proposed difference in reduction of councillors between MSDC and BDC and the potential for MSDC councillors to outnumber BDC councillors should the two councils pursue

merger in future. It is our view that the council may not have fully considered the implications of its proposals for the relative size of the two councils.

The submission for reduced representation in Babergh coincides with political change and major change in the member structure at the Council. From 1974 to 2015, no political party in Babergh had overall control of the council, partly because of a long history of the election of a significant number of Independent councillors. For this period of 40 years the council was run using the committee model. When, for the first time, Conservatives took control in 2015, they immediately - in the teeth of opposition from all other councillors - adopted the Leader/Cabinet model. Along with changes to the Council's Standing Orders, the role of elected members outside the Cabinet has been much diminished and marginalised.

There is currently only a single Labour Party councillor elected to Babergh District Council: the member for Great Cornard (North) has been returned in successive elections. The 31-member proposal sees the Great Cornard North ward enlarged to include rural areas with which this urban ward completely lacks any affinity, shared identity or common interest. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the proposed changes to Great Cornard (North) ward are intended to reduce or remove prospects of future Labour representation. The proposal can be read as the Conservative majority preferring to alter the number and boundaries of wards as a means to eliminate their main political opposition, than to seek to defeat them at the polls.

Proposals to the LGBCE should be designed and intended to enhance and extend the quality of representation and democracy not to advantage one political party's interests over others. The LGBCE has suggested that it is 'minded to accept' the submission by BDC for 31 members. SSCLP is deeply concerned about this position: for the Commission to be 'minded to' accept Babergh's proposal here undoubtedly risks it being seen as partisan.

SSCLP accepts that the total number of councillors in BDC should be reduced from the current 43. However, in addition to the concerns highlighted above, the proposal for 31 members is unacceptable as the three statutory criteria required by LGBCE cannot be balanced with only 31 councillors. This number of councillors requires them to be grouped across urban and rural areas, or between parishes without, in each case, any shared interests or identities beyond geographic proximity..

### **Local Context**

Babergh is a large geographical area made up of urban fringe (Pinewood), market towns (Sudbury and Hadleigh), villages (of varying size), many hinterland villages, and rural sparsity.

Babergh contains two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), which are considered as important as National Parks. These are the Dedham Vale/Stour Valley and the Shotley Peninsula. It also contains 29 conservation areas, with

some villages such as Lavenham and Long Melford having national significance. Along with farming, tourism is key to the Babergh economy.

Babergh's landscape is considered a 'heritage asset'<sup>1</sup>. Safeguarding the historic landscape and countryside is a corporate priority for the council. Any re-drawing of council ward boundaries should note the need for councillors to have knowledge of the special characteristics of the district and the need to preserve shared service delivery and identity especially in more isolated or rural areas (for example on the peninsula).

The proportion of people aged 65+ in the population is increasing rapidly. The increased life expectancy that underpins this rise is welcome. However, it brings challenges for councils in delivering public services and in ensuring that growth and development in towns and villages adequately reflects the needs of the local population.

BDC is currently seeking first-stage approval for a new Babergh and Mid Suffolk plan. Significant development is anticipated in the district and has been approved by BDC, though to date, development outside Great Cornard has been slow.

As shown on the Commission website, the highest volume of growth is anticipated in the following areas: Sudbury (East), Great Cornard (north and south), Alton and Berners. This is expected to relate to current or planned development in the following locations: Chilton, Great Cornard, Brantham and Shotley. SSCLP's preferred number of councillors takes this growth into account.

Allocation of housing and early availability of land in the Great Cornard area makes it likely that the number of electors in Great Cornard is anticipated to exceed predicted totals on the Commission site, and to reach 8000 by 2022.

### **Warding arrangements**

SSCLP will not accept extension of wards to include neighbouring rural areas. Rural and town wards face different challenges both in terms of future development and everyday services (recent years have seen recurrent cuts to bus services from the rural villages into Sudbury and other local towns, for example, whereas concerns over air pollution dominate the agenda in Sudbury).

Villages face different challenges in relation to planning – such as access to the major road network and public service infrastructure and particular problems with sustainability due to the price of housing and ageing population. These problems exist even in rural areas which are adjacent to towns. Protracted debate and appeals over proposals for development in a number of villages in Babergh in recent years, such as Capel St Mary and East Bergholt, have highlighted these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils Landscape Guidance, 2015. Available at <http://www.babergh.gov.uk/assets/DM-Planning-Uploads/Joint-Landscape-Guidance-Aug-2015.pdf>

## Warding Proposal for Babergh district by SSCLP

SSCLP proposes 34 councillors. This would be a reduction of 21% on the current arrangements. With 34 seats and a total number of voters at 74,029, the average number of voters per seat would be 2177.

### Advantages of this proposal

1. The number of wards in which variation is beyond 10% from average is less than in other options of between 30 and 36 councillors, and the extent of the variation is less extreme.
2. The proposal allows for expected growth in Sudbury & Great Cornard and other key villages (e.g. Shotley)
3. The boundaries of Pinewood are interrupted by Ipswich Borough Council; this proposal follows that split to create two single member wards for Pinewood. It also avoids combining the majority of Pinewood (BDC's only urban fringe) with villages it shares no links or amenities with.
4. It takes account of the unique geography and community links on the peninsula.

### Potential disadvantages to this proposal

There is one disadvantage to this proposal, namely that five wards (8 members) have populations above or below the 10% advised variance.

- The largest variance is Great Cornard at -13.5. However if the anticipated 2022 population of 8000 for Great Cornard is applied to the 34 member proposal, this variance would reduce to -8.1. The alternative arrangement, that Great Cornard have 3 councillors reflecting current numbers of electors (and at current rates of registration), would result in Great Cornard wards having 12% above the average number of electors. Given the development already underway in Great Cornard, this would not be a sustainable solution in the short or medium term.
- Two villages (East Bergholt and Capel St Mary) are distinct areas. Variation beyond 10% is preferable to splitting these large villages.
- One is a rural area characterised by rural sparsity, with no obvious alternative grouping and which is unlikely to see significant development.
- One (Pinewood north) is the larger part of Pinewood, which is separated from the other part of Pinewood by Ipswich Borough Council.

**Table 1: Proposal for 34 members**

Ward	No of voters	Ward total	Number of members	Variance from average (2177)
Somerton	77	2017	1	-7.3
Hartest	378			
Lawshall	811			
Stanstead	297			
Shimpling	357			
Boxted	97			
Glemsford	2880	6202	3	-5.0
Long Melford	3209			
Alpheton	213			
Cockfield	733	2203	1	+1.2
Thorpe Morieux	201			
Brettenham	211			
Preston St Mary	267			
Kettlebaston	70			
Brent Eleigh	143			
Hitcham	585			
Wattisham	93			
Whatfield	271			
Aldham	164			
Elmsett	674			
Hintlesham	559			
Chattisham	162			
Burstall	194			
Lavenham	1523	4649	2	+6.8
Acton	1487			
Great Waldingfield	1350			
Little Waldingfield	289			
Sudbury *	10609	10913	5 (2x2 + 1)	+0.3
Chilton*	304			
Great Cornard*	7529	7529	2x2	-13.5
Little Cornard	268	2157	1	+0.9
Assington	349			
Leavenheath	1129			
Newton	411			
Stoke by Nayland	541	2333	1	+7.2
Bures St Mary	829			
Nayland with Wissington	963			
Edwardstone	323	2350	1	+7.9
Groton	242			

Boxford	1077			
Polstead	708			
Milden	95	2456	1	+12.8
Monks Eleigh	420			
Chelsworth	114			
Bildeston	916			
Nedging with Naughton	339			
Semer	121			
Lindsey	148			
Kersey	303			
Hadleigh	6804	6804	3	+4.2
Layham	469	2003	1	-8.0
Shelley	49			
Raydon	423			
Wenham Magna	125			
Wenham Parva	28			
Higham	127			
Holton St Mary	174			
Stratford St Mary	608			
East Bergholt	2412	2412	1	+10.8
Capel St Mary	2439		1	+12
Sproughton	1231	2289	1	+5.1
Copdock & Washbrook	1058			
Pinewood north	2418	2418	1	+11.1
Pinewood south	953	2163		-0.6
Belstead	198			
Wherstead	309			
Bentley	703			
Brantham*	2195	2195	1	+0.8
Freston	109	2196	1	+0.9
Woolverstone	270			
Harkstead	247			
Erwarton	120			
Tattingstone	466			
Chelmondiston	984			
Stutton	738	2226	1	+2.3
Holbrook	1488			
Shotley*	2099	2099	1	-3.6

\*denotes area with higher levels of anticipated growth

### Fall-back position

As a fall-back position, SSCLP would support the proposal for 32 seats as submitted as an alternative by Babergh. However this proposal fails to take into account a number of key concerns:

- It results in 6 wards (11 members) having more than the +/-10% permitted variance from average.
- In addition, variation for Sudbury would be at +18%. This is significantly higher than variation found in the 34 seat proposal and allows no room for expected growth.
- It places Pinewood (urban fringe) with a rural village (Sproughton).
- Grouping Copdock & Washbrook with peninsula villages does not take account of community links or of the division of the county by the A12.

Table 2: Fall-back proposal. 32 seats, average no of voters 2313

Ward	Ward total	No of members	Variance from average (2313)
Somerton Hartest Lawshall Boxted Stanstead Shimpling	2017	1	-12.8
Glemsford Long Melford Alpheton	6202	3	-10.6
Whatfield Aldham Elmsett Hintlesham Chattisham Burstall	2024	1	-12.5
Cockfield Thorpe Morieux Brettenham Preston St Mary Kettlebaston Brent Eleigh Hitcham Wattisham	2203	1	-4.8
Brantham	2195	1	-5.1
Stutton Holbrook	2226	1	-3.8
Lavenham Acton Great Waldingfield Little Waldingfield	4649	2	+0.5

Sudbury and Chilton	10913	4	+18
Great Cornard	7529	3	+8.5
Little Cornard Assington Leavenheath Newton	2157	1	-6.7
Stoke by Nayland Bures St Mary Nayland with Wissington	2333	1	+0.9
Sproughton Pinewood	4554	2	-1.6
Copdock and Washbrook Bentley Tattingstone Belstead	2425	1	+4.8
Wherstead Freston Wolverstone Chelmondiston Harkstead Erwarton	2039	1	-11.8
Edwardstone Groton Boxford Polstead	2350	1	+1.6
Milden Monks Eleigh Chelsworth Bildeston Nedging with Naughton Semer Lindsey Kersey	2456	1	+6.2
Hadleigh	6804	3	-1.9
Layham Shelley Raydon Wenham Magna Wenham Parva Higham Holton St Mary Stratford St Mary	2003	1	-13.4
Capel St Mary	2439	1	+5.4
East Bergholt	2412	1	+4.3
Shotley	2099	1	-9.3

**Conclusions:**

South Suffolk Labour Party recommends a reduction of 21% in councillors, from 43 currently to 34. This would enable the council to reduce costs without compromising the capacity of councillors to represent their communities effectively. The proposed warding arrangement takes account of anticipated growth in the district whilst protecting the separate interests and identities of rural and town wards and recognising the topography of the district.