

Local Government Review - and all that!

Readers may recall that in previous issues of *Babergh Matters!* we have tried to cover both the progress of the present Local Government Review into the future of councils in Suffolk and Babergh's opinions as to the best option available for residents.

What's happened so far?

Basically, the Boundary Committee for England (BCE) has been asked by the Government to make recommendations that could involve the scrapping of both the County Council and all District and Borough Councils in Suffolk and their replacement with a one or more 'unitary councils' that will provide all of the existing County and District/Borough services. The BCE has also been conducting similar reviews in Norfolk and Devon. In July 2008, the BCE came up with a draft proposal for a two-unitary solution involving a council covering Ipswich, Felixstowe and a number of rural parishes currently in the Babergh, Suffolk Coastal and Mid Suffolk districts ('North Haven') plus a council for the rest of the county excluding Lowestoft ('Rural Suffolk'). It also felt that an alternative proposal for a single unitary covering the whole of Suffolk, again excluding Lowestoft ('One Suffolk') had some merit. At that time, the BCE proposal recommended that Lowestoft be included within a Norfolk unitary.

As reported in the November issue of *Babergh Matters!*, Babergh councillors backed the two-unitary option as they believed that a two-unitary solution would create councils that were large enough to provide cost-effective services through good economies of scale whilst not being so large that they would be remote from the communities they served.

Having consulted on this proposal under the original timetable, the BCE was due to make its final recommendations to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in December 2008, although this was later revised to February 2009. It was expected that on the original timetable, any new unitary structures for Suffolk, Norfolk and Devon would be up and running by April 2010. However, in response to a challenge from a Devon council - and a resulting legal opinion that more than one potential uni-



tary option could have been consulted upon in each county - the deadline by which the BCE had to make its recommendations for unitary local government in these three counties was extended to July 15 2009. This extension was to allow for a further period of consultation on any further draft proposals.

What's the position now?

The immediate impact of this has been to push back the earliest start date for any new unitary structures to April 2011. Working to the new July 2009 deadline for making recommendations to the Secretary of State, the BCE has now issued two draft proposals for Suffolk. One is for a single unitary council for the whole of Suffolk, including Lowestoft. The other is for a North Haven unitary (as in its original draft proposal) and a separate unitary for the rest of the county, but now including Lowestoft. The earlier proposal to include Lowestoft in Norfolk's unitary arrangements has been dropped.

So, what impact - if any - has the revised proposals and timetable had on Babergh's thoughts on unitary government for Suffolk? *Babergh Matters!* quizzed Babergh Chief Executive, Pat Rockall, on the Council's views.

Q: What is the Council's view on the two draft proposals for Suffolk?

A: At its meeting on April 21 2009, the Council decided to back the BCE's draft proposal for two unitary councils for Suffolk and to urge the BCE to reject the single unitary option for the county.

Q: What impact would the new two-unitary proposal have on the Babergh area compared with the BCE's original draft proposal?

A: The impact on the Babergh area is exactly the same as it would have been under the BCE's original draft proposal i.e. the area broadly to the east of the A12 would become part of the North Haven unitary whilst the remainder of the district would form part of the unitary serving the rest of the county.

Q: Although supporting the BCE's original draft two-unitary proposal, Babergh had previously raised issues as to whether the possible inclusion of Lowestoft into the Rural Suffolk authority might necessitate changes to the proposed boundary between it and North Haven. How has this issue been dealt with in Babergh's response to the BCE's latest proposals?

A: We certainly believed that the inclusion of Lowestoft risked undermining the rationale behind having a rural unitary council alongside North Haven. Last September, we suggested that the possibility of the BCE including Lowestoft in Suffolk unitary arrangements was an opportunity to re-engage with the existing Suffolk councils as to whether something closer to dividing the county into a more equal east/west split might then be a better option than the BCE's own two-unitary proposal.

Whereas we still believe that a two-unitary model based on an east-west split could possibly be the best solution for the county, we have to recognise that other options could also work well, including the BCE's own proposals.

In relation to the BCE's latest proposal,