

Briefing on the English Devolution White Paper for Town and Parish Councils in Suffolk

Introduction

This briefing summarises two key areas of central government policy in relation to local government in Suffolk: devolution and local government reorganisation.

If the government's policy is fulfilled, it would mean the biggest change to local government arrangements in Suffolk for over 50 years.

Devolution would see the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Authority, likely covering Norfolk and Suffolk, with mayor elected in May 2026 and holding devolved funding and powers over strategic policy areas like transport infrastructure, health improvement and blue light services.

Local government reorganisation (LGR) would see the abolition of the county, districts and borough councils and replacement with a single (or multiple) unitary councils. Town and parish council structures would not change as part of LGR in Suffolk.

This briefing answers a number of commonly asked questions and updates town and parish council colleagues on the latest position.

What are the latest government policy developments on devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR)?

On 16 December 2024, the Government published the [English Devolution White Paper](#) (the White Paper) that set out its policy direction for devolution and local government reorganisation.

It sets a preference "to see all of England benefit from devolution" (the White Paper p24). This would be devolution of powers and funding to mayors of strategic authorities over an assumed "combined population of 1.5million or above" (the White Paper p31). Areas that would be devolved include new powers to mayors over health improvement, net zero, nature recovery, skills, infrastructure, transport and economic development. These are described in a new devolution framework (the White Paper pp86-90) that government intends to include in forthcoming legislation.

The White Paper also states that government "will expect all two-tier areas and smaller or failing unitaries to develop proposals for reorganisation." (the White Paper p100). It also highlights "for most areas this will mean creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more, but there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area, including for devolution, and decisions will be on a case-by-case basis."

Along with the publication of the White Paper, the minister for local government sent letters to council leaders inviting commitment and interest to being included in the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP) that government is establishing. The DPP offers a fast-track timeline to securing devolution and LGR.

In addition to requests to be included in the DPP, the minister's letter signalled his "intention is to formally invite unitary proposals in January 2025 from all councils in two-tier areas". This letter will outline more detail on the criteria for business cases to cover and expected timeframes.

What is the Devolution Priority Programme (DPP)?

It provides a fast-track timeline to securing devolution and LGR, with the intention of elections for mayors (and establishing Mayoral Strategic Authorities) in May 2026. LGR business cases are to be submitted to the minister by Autumn 2025.

What is meant by local government reorganisation (LGR)?

Where county and district/borough councils provide local government functions between them, unitary councils remove that arrangement and create a single-council that provides all local government functions in an area. Sometimes this is a single council across a county area (e.g., North Yorkshire), sometimes this is more than one council within a county area (e.g., Cheshire). There is no change to existing parish and town councils' boundaries or structures.

The White Paper sets out government's reasoning for pursuing unitary councils:

"Fewer politicians, with the right powers, will streamline local government to focus on delivering for residents. We will deliver this process as quickly as possible, including through legislation where it becomes necessary to ensure progress. Clear leadership locally will be met with an active partner nationally." (the White Paper p100)

It also outlines expectations for how new unitary councils should relate to and incorporate community arrangements:

"We know people value the role of governance at the community scale and that can be a concern when local government is reorganised. We will therefore want to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level." (the White Paper p100)

What might this mean for the county council elections scheduled for May 2025?

The minister's letter to leaders states that he "is minded-to lay secondary legislation to postpone local council elections from May 2025 to May 2026" to help local areas meet the timeframe and deliver the changes needed to deliver devolution and LGR."

As requested by the minister, the leader's letter contained in appendix C of the Cabinet papers, requested a delay to the May 2025 county council elections. Delaying the elections is a ministerial decision requiring Parliamentary process. We expect to hear his decision by the end of January/early February 2025.

How might town and parish councils be affected?

The structural changes arising from LGR will change county and district/borough councils. They will not impact town and parish councils. Town and parish councils will be important stakeholders, particularly as a voice for local communities. The White Paper acknowledges their role in local governance and representation, stating government's intentions that:

"We will also work with the town and parish council sector to improve engagement between them and Local Authorities." (the White Paper p94)
and

"We will also rewire the relationship between town and parish councils and principal Local Authorities, strengthening expectations on engagement and community voice." (the White Paper p100)

What has Suffolk County Council decided so far?

Following the publication of the White Paper and the ministerial letters on 16 December, the county council held an extraordinary Council meeting followed by an extraordinary Cabinet meeting on 9 January 2025.

The Council decision was to:

“Endorse that the leader responds to the minister expressing Suffolk County Council’s interest in joining the Devolution Priority Programme, noting that acceptance onto this programme: i) makes a clear commitment to delivering both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe and ii) may postpone the 2025 County Council elections.”

The subsequent Cabinet decision was to:

“Agree that the leader responds to the minister expressing Suffolk County Council’s interest in joining the Devolution Priority Programme by 10 January as requested in the minister’s letter of 16 December (appendix A); noting that acceptance onto this programme: i) makes a clear commitment to delivering both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe and ii) may postpone the 2025 County Council elections.”

As requested by the minister’s letter, the county council’s leader’s response (appendix C to the 9 January 2025 Cabinet papers) stated:

“I can now confirm:

- Suffolk County Council’s commitment to delivering both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe (with inaugural mayoral elections in May 2026) and
- Request that we be included in the Devolution Priority Programme:

The papers (including the ministerial letters) can be viewed here: [Meeting Documents - Committee Minutes](#) (Council) and [Meeting Documents - Committee Minutes](#) (Cabinet)

The meetings can be viewed here: <https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/the-council-and-its-committees/county-council/webcasting> (Council)
<https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/the-council-and-its-committees/cabinet> (Cabinet)

What happens next?

We are currently waiting for the minister to confirm which areas he has decided to include on the DPP and, as a non-unitary area, all councils in Suffolk will receive a letter from the minister inviting them to develop proposals for LGR.

If Suffolk is included on the DPP, there will be government-led consultation on devolution (including establishing a new Mayoral Strategic Authority) early in 2025 (by March). Also, the minister is likely to run a consultation at the end of 2025 on LGR proposals (following submission of the LGR business cases in Autumn 2025). Prior to that, it is likely that there will be locally led engagement to ensure that residents and partners are kept informed.