

Local Government Structure in Norwich, 2006 – the Qualitative Picture

Summary Report

Research Study Conducted for
Norwich City Council



NORWICH
City Council

January 2007

Executive Summary

Following our 2006 survey of a representative sample of over 1,300 residents in and around Norwich on the future structure of local government in the area, the City Council asked us to undertake some qualitative research to help it to understand more about the findings. We therefore held two 165-minute discussion evenings with a broad cross section of local residents to think through these issues in more depth. They were held at the Assembly House, Norwich on 8 and 9 January 2006. We recruited 48 residents for the two discussion evenings, face-to-face, in residents' homes, to strict demographic quotas, with a view to 32-40 actually turning up. In the event, 42 attended. Each evening comprised two break-out groups. On 8 January the groups were from northern part of the City Council area and from the adjacent urban area in Broadland district. On 9 January the groups were from the southern part of the city and the adjacent part of South Norfolk district.

1. Knowledge and interest is low among residents ... at least until they learn more about the issues

We know from our representative survey that awareness of the proposals for local government reorganisation in Norwich is low. Over half residents in and around the city say they know nothing at all about the proposals (53%), while a third say they know not very much (35%). Only one in ten (10%) say they know a fair amount or a great deal.

Further, most 'ordinary' Norwich residents are hazy at best about the respective responsibilities of public service providers in general and the two tiers of local government in particular. This means that views on local government structure are likely to be volatile. They could well change as evidence is brought to bear about the implications of change.

The low salience of local government structure for participants at the start of the discussions made way for an increasingly informed conversation about its implications as they deliberated on public services in and around Norwich and the strength or otherwise of constituent communities.

From our discussions, the debate has not yet focused residents' minds on the issue and, until this takes place, there is unlikely to be a groundswell of opinion among the general public in favour of change to local government structure. Once a public debate starts in earnest, and local people become more informed about the issues which are important to them (in particular, quality of services and short- and longer-term costs), there is all to play for on both sides of the debate.

2. Once residents think about it, they can understand the implications of change

It is therefore not surprising that in our representative survey, a third of residents did not express a view either way on the unitary principle. However, in our discussion evenings, participants became more attuned to the case for and against change as they became more informed. We found in our representative survey that, of those who express a view, by a margin of around three to two, residents in and around Norwich agreed with the principle of single-tier local government in the city (41% compared with 25% who oppose it).

In our discussion evenings as well, the unitary principle made sense for many participants. They seized on the perception that people would better understand who does what (which they do not at the moment), that 'logically' in the city itself there should be a reduction in bureaucracy, and that as a result services should be run more efficiently and more cost-effectively.

Some participants worried that these things will not necessarily occur and that the voice of the suburban communities of Broadland and South Norfolk may not be heard as priorities are determined by those with the loudest voice in the city centre. Participants from Broadland and South Norfolk were concerned about whether the needs of their communities would be adequately met were they to become part of a Norwich unitary authority. This is consistent with the findings of the recent residents' survey, as residents living in Norwich City Council area were more likely to be supportive of a change to a unitary system than those living in the built-up, urban areas in Broadland and South Norfolk: in Norwich City 44% supported the unitary principle for the area, compared with around one in three in the adjacent suburban areas of Broadland and South Norfolk.

Participants also worried that local government reorganisation could be a distraction from the delivery of public services, that the transition costs may not be paid back, and that there is no guarantee that local representation will be secured.

So they will expect to be convinced on these issues and to receive information on them if they are to form a view. Their starting point of scepticism about information they receive from public and private service providers alike will mean that they may react badly if they get competing information from different interests. But given coherent consistent information they are likely to be prepared to form a view.

3. People are looking for evidence to help them judge

After being briefed, albeit at a high level, on the history and context of local government structure, participants wanted to know about the impact of reorganisation where it had already taken place. They asked: How does the performance of the unitary councils established in the 1990s compare with what had gone before? Is there a correlation between local government

structure and independent assessments of councils' performance – CPA, Ofsted and other inspection regimes? How do single-tier councils match up against two-tier councils in terms of efficiency and cost? In this, they were looking for answers which would help them to frame an informed view. Otherwise they felt that they would be reliant on the assertions of the interested parties on both sides of the debate.

4. Residents don't claim to know what's best but they do want to be heard and will want to be convinced on some key questions

Since discussion evening participants tended not to know a great deal about who does what at the moment, most felt disqualified from expressing a definite view about local government structure. Many would ask: 'Why change?', by default, a sentiment which is reinforced by perceptions that the process of restructuring is likely to be complex or costly.

Participants recognise their views will evolve as information comes to light and they were concerned to know the answers to some key questions. So the first message for residents will need to be around what has happened in the last ten years to move away from the decision made at that time not to change local government structure in Norwich. In the absence of hard information about performance of single-tier councils elsewhere in the country, participants articulated a number of specific issues which they considered should be addressed in the decision on whether or not there should be change.

(i) What will it cost?

We know from our wider work for the Local Government Association and others that perceived value for money is, nationally, one of the key drivers of satisfaction with local government. Discussion about local government services rarely takes place without a reference to perceived high council tax levels. In the Norwich discussion evenings this translated itself to a discussion about the fact that council tax in the city is higher than in the adjacent areas and what this may or may not mean for them in the event of re-organisation. Unsurprisingly, participants wanted to get underneath their top-of-mind assumption that reorganisation would cost in the short term and save in the long term.

Messages to residents will need to acknowledge:

- **participants' innate scepticism about information they receive.** This is not a problem limited to local government. Ipsos MORI has published much research on the decline in trust. But its relevance to local government has been drawn on by the Lyons Inquiry: 'Public confidence and trust in local government needs to be improved if local government is to take on a bigger role with public support.' (Lyons, paragraph E51, May 2006). Scepticism - both about information and about the possibility of long-term savings - is bound up with suspicions mentioned in our

discussion evenings including perceptions of bureaucracy and inefficiency, and that major public sector projects seem to cost more than planned;

- **synergies, economies and diseconomies of scale.** Participants understood the broad concepts of synergies within the city arising from combining services into a single authority giving rise to economies on the one hand, and of passing County Council functions to a new city-based council with potential diseconomies on the other. But the detail was difficult to grasp.
- **consistency of information.** If different messages about the costs and savings arising from reorganisation are given from different sources, this would serve to increase scepticism and may in turn make people less inclined to support change. So far as participants were concerned, this is not yet an issue in the Norwich area as the debate had yet to impact on them.

(ii) Will services improve?

The second key issue which participants thought should be taken into account was whether services would improve as a result. Even if costs reduced, they would still expect some reassurance that the quality of services would improve. We know from other research that residents are often willing to pay more for improved services. Participants tended to feel that reduced costs would not themselves be enough to justify change. They pointed to a need for improved co-ordination between services (waste collection/disposal, planning etc); and for a new council to adopt, and build on, best practice from the range of existing authorities operating in and around Norwich.

There was a perception among some participants that any reorganisation would result in a focus on the process of restructuring rather than service provision, which could lead to the quality of services suffering, at least in the short-term. Reassurance is needed to demonstrate how this will be avoided, as well as how opportunities for greater efficiency and adopting best practice will be maximised.

(iii) Will my community be represented?

There is a concern among some participants about local representation. Participants need to know that there would not be a 'democratic deficit'. This reflects a perception among Broadland and South Norfolk participants in particular that district councillors may be more in tune with local needs, and a concern that, by becoming part of a new single Norwich City Council, the needs of their community might be overlooked in favour of the central city area.

There was also some discussion about participants' perceptions of checks and balances - that district councillors might take up the case if county councillors decide the wrong thing, and vice versa.

(vi) Will the boundaries make sense?

In the discussion evenings, participants negotiated between themselves how they perceived communities and drew them onto maps. We found a broad division in view between participants living in the current City Council area and those in the adjacent built-up areas of Broadland and South Norfolk. Typically residents in the former regarded 'Norwich' as being the total built-up areas including parts of Broadland and South Norfolk. Indeed, some went beyond this and suggested that boundaries should reflect proposed development around the city and should stretch to the outer ring road to the south and the proposed bypass in the north. On the other hand, those currently living outside the City Council boundary generally favoured the existing city council boundaries – for the main part, they did not want to be part of a new City Council.

There were a number of reasons underpinning this difference in view (which also emerged from the 2006 residents' survey):

- They reflected residents' perceived 'affective' communities (i.e. people's sense of belonging and identity) and 'effective' communities (work, transport, roads, hospitals, schools). The former were often quite small areas, the latter tended to be more practical, larger areas. Participants from Broadland and South Norfolk are less likely to engage with the city of Norwich in an emotional sense, even if this forms part of their effective community: it has facilities which some use but they identify more strongly with their local area: e.g. Thorpe Hamlet, Costessey, Mile Cross etc.
- A view that restructure costs could be kept low by focusing change on the existing City Council area only, without the disruption which would be caused by also effecting reorganisation in two further districts.
- Some mentioned the political differences between the areas – that the outer districts were predominantly Conservative, in contrast to the city area.
- There was a perception of the impact of the price of services (i.e. council tax) which was thought to be likely to be higher in the city area.
- And participants who did not live in the city were most likely to voice criticisms of the present City Council, mainly through what they had read in the press.

While there was no clear consensus regarding which of the two options – City Council area or wider urban area – is most appropriate, through discussion participants were able to assemble a range of relatively complex arguments to justify their views. Participants reached these only after consideration of what community and public services meant for them. There will need to be a debate on similar lines among residents in and around Norwich if residents are to come to a view regarding the most appropriate boundaries.

5. This chimes with our representative survey

Participants did not change their minds during the discussion evenings on what are the key issues to be taken into account if consideration were to be given to replacing the two-tier system with one council providing all the county's public services. And participants' views were almost identical to those found in our autumn 2006 survey of residents living in and around Norwich, indicating that they were indeed genuinely typical of 'ordinary residents' in the county. The cost and quality of services are the most important criteria for participants, along with accountability and responding to people's wishes.

At the moment, Norwich City is served by two Councils – Norwich City Council and Norfolk County Council. If consideration were to be given to replacing this system with one council providing all the city's public services, which three or four things on this list, if any, do you think should be most taken into account?

	2006 Residents ' Survey	Discussio n evenings
Base:	(1,351)	(44)
(i) 1,351 residents living in and around Norwich, 18+, quota sample, August-October 2006	%*	n*
(ii) 42 Norwich residents' questionnaires attending discussion evenings, 8-9 January 2007 (completed at end of discussion)		
Ease of contacting the council	33 (5th)	16 (5th)
Being accountable to local people	56 (3rd)	22 (3rd)
Historical or traditional place names	6 (10th)	3 (9th)
Cost of services	61 (2nd)	32 (2nd)
Level of information about the Council and its services	25 (6th)	9 (7th)
Access to local councillors	15 (9th)	3 (9th)
Quality of services	72 (1st)	34 (1st)
Responding to local people's wishes	49 (4th)	20 (4th)
Sense of local community	18 (7th)	9 (7th)
Size of population covered	18 (7th)	11 (6th)

* rank in brackets

Source: Ipsos MORI

6. People expect to be informed

Local government reorganisation is a low salience issue for most Norwich residents and few have given much thought to the arguments for and against

change. Residents need to be able to understand the pros and cons of change, and to feel confident that they are not being led to form a particular view.

They will need evidence of how the above range of factors stack up in relation to structural options. They will need to see the impact on working relationships between public services, relate this to initiatives such as all-purpose one-stop shops, see for themselves how local accountability will be enhanced, and what will be the impact on what they pay through their pocket in the form of council tax.

Further consensus will be important, or at least a seemingly debate. If there is confrontation, there will be a turn-off. People will not know who to believe.

Participants did not generally feel well informed about council services and benefits at present:

How well informed, if at all, do you feel about the services and benefits provided by your local council?

	Start of evening	End of evening
Base: Norwich residents' questionnaires attending discussion evenings, 8-9 January 2007	(41)	(42)
Very well informed	2	2
Fairly well informed	19	18
Not very well informed	14	21
Not at all informed.....	3	1
Don't know/not stated	3	0

Source: Ipsos MORI

There was a strong feeling among participants that the Council has a responsibility to communicate with residents about proposals for local government reorganisation in a clear, accessible format, making use of a range of different mediums.

7. Participants welcomed the Council's consultations

Finally, the discussion evenings also met the Council's important objective of enabling a cross section of 'ordinary' residents living in the city of Norwich to become more informed about the complexities of local government structure and the nature of the debate sought by Government.



Participants reported that they welcomed this opportunity.

The workshop was enlightening. I didn't know about these proposed ideas for councils. I enjoyed the chance to discuss these issues and find out more about what they actually entail.

Female, Norwich City (North)

Useful, informative, thought provoking and well conducted.

Female, Norwich City (South)

I found it very enjoyable and a little bit of insight into the council.

Male, Broadland

I enjoyed this evening and found it most informative.

Male, South Norfolk