

Local government structure in Norwich**- Note on stakeholder interviews for Norwich City Council, 17-19 January 2007**

1. Norwich City Council asked us to interview by telephone a number of stakeholders in order to inform its submission to Government about the future structure of local government in the city. We interviewed nine stakeholders and a further stakeholder emailed comments to us.
2. Interviews were semi-structured. Stakeholders were asked one formal question, similar to one we ask in our quantitative work with residents on this subject: *'Overall, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the view that there is a need to change from the existing two-tier system with two local authorities (City Council and County Council) to a new system with a single council providing all local authority services in the city?'* Our stakeholders were overall clearly in favour of the unitary principle. Seven stakeholders agreed with the statement, one disagreed and two did not express a view. However some of these views were conditional on the area which would be covered by any new council. This was not a poll. We did not interview a representative sample of stakeholders, if such is ever possible. A different group of stakeholders might provide a different set of views. But it serves as a context for their views.
3. Most thought the Government's ultimate decision on the structure of local government in the city is important to their role.
 - i. *It will be a new powerful council to deal with – and it will be much easier than dealing with four councils.* (Public sector partner)
 - ii. *It is very important – unitary is the way to go. It is a great opportunity for the Council.* (Public sector partner)
 - iii. *I think it is quite important. It is the emotional arguments which are most important. It would make a lot of difference to the sense of place and the self-confidence of the city, its people, and its businesses.* (Business partner)

And on the other side of the debate:

- iv. *It is very important because there would be a bit shift in power in relation to the two big services. This could be expensive and cause duplication.* (Business partner)
4. Stakeholders had participated in the debate to varying degrees but most were interested and were prepared to contribute to formal consultations. Some wanted to understand the issues more. Indeed, there was a general enthusiasm for finding out more and understanding the debate. They all had a view at present, and were prepared to articulate it, but they were concerned about the reliability of the messages which were being put forward on both sides of the debate. Some felt it was assertion, not evidence, which was being put forward.

county. This was, overall, the key issue which exercised stakeholders. Even from our research with residents for the Council – and the Council will have a far wider perspective than ours – this presents a multi-faceted communications challenge. If our stakeholders do prove to be typical of stakeholders in general, then they are alongside city residents in promoting extended boundaries, against the population who live in the affected parts of Broadland and South Norfolk, and the Government, neither of which has been effusive about the prospect of boundary change.

- i. *If it used the existing boundary it would not be worth the trouble of reorganisation. Unitaries took a long time to bed down in the 1990s – it is not easy.* (Public sector partner)
 - ii. *It makes sense to anticipate the growth in the city.* (Public sector partner)
 - iii. *It needs careful consideration, as city councils have historically been impeded by their boundaries, being restricted to tight boundaries, with the implications for inner cities and low council tax bases. The north-east is an example of this. It makes sense to re-draw the existing boundary.* (Public sector partner)
 - iv. *The current boundary is a nonsense – a new unitary can only work with an extended boundary. This would enable the new council to make decisions about economic and strategic growth, as well as transport links etc. Suburban Norwich is part of Norwich, not rural Norfolk, despite what some of them like to think. They are best served by Norwich's various services.* (Business partner)
 - v. *It is ludicrous that you have the majority of people working in the city and within the 'practical community' of Norwich who do not pay for the services. Equally it cannot be right for the City Council not to be able to affect the people it serves.* (Business partner)
 - vi. *I don't think Norwich is big enough to be a unitary on its existing boundaries. There are four councils effectively serving Norwich, so it would make a lot of difference to make that one council.* (Business partner)
 - vii. *I am worried about the ambition of the City Council – that it will put in a submission on the basis of the advantages of the larger area, but end up with the smaller area which is just not viable.* (Business partner)
7. There were some further themes which emerged from most interviews.
- a. The key service issues are education and social services.
 - i. *Education is not well provided for in Norwich. The City Council will need to convince people that education and*

social services will be better under a unitary structure. (Business partner)

- ii. *There would be a big shift in the provision of education and social services. Under a unitary structure, this could be expensive and cause duplication. Can I be sure that the County Council would shed the jobs which would be associated with these functions. (Business partner)*
- iii. *What really concerns me is that education and social services are not in a mess. If they were, it might be worth moving onto a unitary structure. But I have no evidence that a new council would do it better other than the City Council's assertion that it would. (Business partner)*

b. Reputations:

- i. *The City Council has not covered itself in glory. I have little faith in the councillors and even though it would be a new council I think that the same councillors would be in place. (Business partner)*

c. Public opinion

- i. *It is important to take the public with you when making any major change of this sort – particularly in the affected parts of Broadland and South Norfolk. (Business partner)*

d. Cost:

- i. *The City Council will have to convince people that there will be long-term savings – otherwise there is no point doing it. (Business partner)*
- ii. *On the City Council's case that it would provide a focus, that is a strong point. But I am hearing that it will cost £12m just to make the change. Yes, I think that a unitary council would be better able to focus but the cost of that concerns me. (Business partner)*

e. Accountability:

- i. *With two-tier structures, both accountability and the public's perception of accountability are confused. Norwich and Norfolk have particular requirements, cultures, needs etc. A two-tier structure lacks focus. There are too many agendas. I feel that the County Council is often a dampener on Norwich's ambitions and focus (Business partner)*

f. Emotional focus:

- i. *The most important thing is the emotional element – having a proud city with which everyone can engage at every level. (Business partner)*

8. Finally, there is a recognition that there is very little understanding of the issues among ordinary people (which also emerged starkly from our representative survey in autumn 2006):
 - i. *Most people in the street see this as the existing City Council taking on more responsibilities. They need to be aware that this would be a new council.* (Business partner)

Methodological note

Contact details for nineteen stakeholders were provided by the City Council to Ipsos MORI between 17 and 19 September 2007. We managed to contact all but two of them. Some declined to be interviewed, usually because of the short notice. But we interviewed nine stakeholders and had email comments from a tenth, which have been included in this note. Six were business partners and four were public sector partners (we are including religious representatives in this definition). All gave their comments strictly in confidence. This was a particularly sensitive point in some cases, either because they represented organisations or activities with an officially neutral stance, or because they currently work with both the City Council and the County Council and, until any reorganisation takes place, will continue to do so. In order to respect our commitment to confidence, we have not provided you with a list of respondents. Equally respondents were asked to treat the discussion in confidence as well. This note is therefore not intended as a public document but as an aide memoire of the discussions we held. We have written records of each of our nine interviews (and recordings, where appropriate). These are on file for inspection by our auditors (we are independently audited twice a year as part of ISO 20252). The telephone discussions typically took around ten minutes and worked to a guide agreed with the City Council. Interviews were conducted by Graham Keilloh (Senior Research Executive) or Colin Wilby (Director) on behalf of Ipsos MORI. The project is subject to our standard terms and conditions.

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19 January 2007