

## **OPINION RESEARCH BUSINESS**

### *FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SUFFOLK – JANUARY 2009*

#### **A SUMMARY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Forest Heath District Council, St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Waveney District Council commissioned Opinion Research Business to carry out independent research in January 2009. This was undertaken with a quantitative telephone survey of a representative sample of 804 Suffolk residents.

Established in 1994, ORB have grown to become one of the UK's leading bespoke corporate and issues-led market research companies. They have worked successfully with over 150 clients in the private, public and voluntary sectors in over 65 countries.

#### **SECTION A: 'ENGAGEMENT' WITH LOCAL AREA**

**FINDINGS:** *There is no such thing as 'One Suffolk'*

People like living in Suffolk - 96% of residents are satisfied with the county as a place to live; 57% very satisfied. But while associations with the county are strong (as the debate about Lowestoft's future inclusion within the county shows), there are very different communities of interest within Suffolk, based on diverse geographical, economic and historic realities.

Residents have a strong sense of association with the town or village where they live (80% feel very or fairly strongly that they belong to these places). However, with just one exception, across the whole of Suffolk, people feel they 'belong' more to their current district/borough than they do to Suffolk as a whole. This undermines the arguments that people will readily identify with the remote and homogenous concepts of either a single unitary or a large rural unitary for Suffolk.

#### **SECTION B: AWARENESS OF PROPOSALS**

**FINDINGS:** *The Boundary Committee have not engaged Suffolk communities in the process*

53% of those questioned were 'not aware of the review' and only 2% were 'aware – and know a great deal about what is being discussed'. This indicates a clear inability on the part of the Boundary Committee (motto "Democracy matters") to engage properly with the residents of Suffolk and present preferred options to them in a clear and digestible manner.

## **SECTION C: PREFERENCES FOR FUTURE STRUCTURE**

### **FINDINGS:** *Three is the right number*

Suffolk residents are clear that three unitaries is their preferred option. People were asked twice during the interview about their preferences: initially, and then after having considered the issue carefully. In terms of the initial view, the majority preference (60%) among respondents was for an “Ipswich, East and West” three unitary structure in Suffolk. This option had more than twice as much support as One Suffolk (25%)

This support for three unitaries was marginally higher among residents of Forest Heath (65%), St Edmundsbury (68%) and Waveney (72%) council areas, reflecting the mandate we have been given to pursue this option from local people. But this popular mandate also applies in Suffolk Coastal, Babergh and Mid-Suffolk (where support for Mid-Suffolk District Council’s approval of a ‘One Suffolk’ model is only 19% - less than the average for Suffolk as a whole).

Only in Ipswich was there a less clear picture, with support split fairly equally between all three options. It is worth noting, however, that 67% of Ipswich residents favour one of the two options which give them their own council.

### **FINDINGS:** *Three unitaries would be more efficient and more accountable*

ORB asked people why they favoured one option over another. As the research shows, unprompted reasons for people preferring three unitaries surround concerns about the size of the county, and a feeling that Suffolk as one entity is simply too big to be accountable or to efficiently manage local services.

### **FINDINGS:** *Lowestoft must stay in Suffolk*

It is no surprise that 78% of those who expressed a preference opposed the moving of Lowestoft into Norfolk. The level of opposition is highest in Waveney district itself where opposition is 86%. However, levels of support for the transfer were generally low throughout the County, including the West Suffolk districts.

### **FINDINGS:** *If local government is being reviewed, a fuller range of options should be considered*

86% of those who expressed a preference (or 76% of all respondents) felt that the three unitary option should also be included in the consultation alongside the Boundary Committee’s own two options. This is an overwhelming message to the Committee from the people of Suffolk that the review is currently incomplete.

## **SECTION D: SERVICE DELIVERY**

### **FINDINGS:** *Three unitaries would deliver better value for money*

While the minority who support One Suffolk highlight its perceived efficiency as a benefit, the majority of people do not make the connection between huge councils and effective use of resources.

ORB asked the question: “Overall which of the three options do you think will provide citizens like you with the best value for money? That is which one will most likely give the best quality of local services for the money that it costs to run them?”

There was majority agreement (58%) that it was the "Ipswich, East and West" structure which would provide the best value for money. Even residents in Ipswich are more likely to think "Ipswich, East and West" would provide better local services.

**FINDINGS:** *Three unitaries are better for jobs and prosperity*

Concerns about employment ranked high in the list of local issues people in the survey identified. 61% of people felt that the three unitary model would be most successful in improving deprived areas through regeneration and employment creation.

**SECTION E: ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST VARIOUS PROPOSALS**

**FINDINGS:** *Smaller is better*

Although people can see advantages in larger councils, there is strong support for an upper limit to the size of a council, beyond which the size of a council becomes detrimental. A majority of respondents agree that:

- Different parts of Suffolk have different needs (74%)
- Larger councils are likely to be less accountable and harder for people to influence (76%)
- Services are better being delivered by smaller authorities (80%)
- Smaller local authorities better understand residents' needs (87%)
- A single council will make it harder for people to influence decisions (74%)

**SECTION F: POLITICAL IMPACT**

**FINDINGS:** *Voting tendencies at the next General Election could be affected*

30% of those asked admitted that they would consider changing their political allegiance if their preferred candidate supported an option they did not want.

**FINDINGS:** *On reflection... three unitaries is still better!*

Once respondents have considered the option and the question of preference was asked again, support for three unitaries hardened by four percentage points to 64%.

**SECTION G: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

Indicating the wide demographic range of those questioned.

ORB completed telephone interviews between 13<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009, among a total of 804 Suffolk adults aged 18+. Respondents were randomly selected from a cross-section of Suffolk residents, representative by borough/district council, age, gender and socio-economic status.

Unless otherwise stated, figures are based on all respondents expressing a preference of the responses or options presented to them at each question.