

APPENDIX A: Fifteen Questions

These questions are ordered by each of the five criteria, preceded by four overarching questions.

1. As senior, respected professionals in your fields you will be used to considering and weighing up robust evidence and logical argumentation in drawing your own conclusions. To what extent do you think you are able to base your advice to the Secretary of on your own guidance to us that proposals should be evidence-based, taking account of the socio-economic patterns of people's every-day lives and the factors that influence them?
2. To what extent are you comfortable with adding further complexity to the existing pattern of local government in England, which has already seen a second tier introduced in London whilst at the same time removing tiers in some parts of the country, leaving two tiers in others, mixing county-wide councils with sub-county unitaries, by potentially inaugurating the concept of a unitary within a unitary?
3. A unitary system of local government does not have to be on a gigantic scale. If the concern was for local engagement and accountability in the local democratic running of their area, the answer would be smaller, perhaps district-based unitaries. If the sole concern was for cost cutting and 'efficiencies' deemed achievable only through merging councils, the answer would be massive, county based unitaries. To what extent would you agree with our assessment that neither of these extremes appear to strike the right balance between these two criteria of community empowerment and value for money?

Strong, Effective & Accountable Leadership

4. You will have contemplated long and hard the desirability, or otherwise, of providing city-based unitaries. Norwich is by no means the only city not to currently operate under a unitary system of administration. Indeed, you are of course aware that Chester, a similarly sized city, has been accommodated within a larger council area, reflecting its socio-economic reach. Given the peripheral geography of Norfolk, with half of its border meeting the North Sea, have you seen sufficient evidence to persuade you that a unitary city would leave a workable unitary solution of equal standing for the remainder of Norfolk? How does the stated benefit of an 'urban council focusing on urban issues' square with the fact that the 'rural' council under the 'doughnut' proposal actually covers a greater urban population, with more severe pockets of deprivation, than does the 'Norwich' council.
5. Are you reassured that Norwich City Council's proposals for a doughnut solution for Norfolk will not marginalise the democratic needs of the rural, residual authority? We note that not only will each councillor represent twice as many electors in the 'rural council' as in the Norwich council, but that plans for the governance of the rural council are, at best, sketchy. How therefore are you persuaded that the draft proposals will facilitate strong, effective & accountable leadership of a rural council?
6. Norwich City Council is fond of illustrating how unique Norwich is by comparison with the rest of Norfolk, which they paint as uniquely bland and homogenous, and suggest the city receives a worse deal in terms of public spend. The Norwich arguments can be made for any area within the county on issues that are important within that locality. In west Norfolk we are challenging the county council's current satisfaction that GCSE results are now above the national average, when the figures in the west are below that average and the gap is widening. To what extent do you think local services will be improved through either of your proposals which seek to remove the local councils that currently champion their communities?

Neighbourhood Empowerment

7. The unitaries inaugurated in 2008 no longer align with the real places within which people actually live and work. The solution is the creation of unelected, precept-less neighbourhood boards, panels or forums, ironically looking – not just in proposals for Norfolk, but also in Cornwall, Wiltshire and the other new unitaries – not dissimilar in geography to the old urban and rural district councils. This concept may be a noble attempt to provide a mechanism for engagement with the vast bureaucracy that will be required to support such a large organisation. How comfortable are you recommending a solution for Norfolk that relies on a set of non-statutory structures that are vulnerable to budget and operational pressures and that are not an enforceable element of the proposals?
8. You may be aware of Max Caller has been quoted as saying that some early proposals ‘came with plans for the co-ordination of strategic issues that pretty much mirrored having a county council over the top’. Do you agree that by applying the same logic it could be concluded that the provision of five area boards and more than 21 community partnerships not only mirrors the existing structure of district councils but adds complexity to it? If so to what extent do you reach the logical conclusion that this is no more than a ‘deck chairs on the Titanic’ proposal, with the only obvious difference in that locally elected councillors are removed from the equation?
9. Hazel Blears is quoted as saying that ‘without local democracy there is no democracy’. Until the 1970s, Norfolk’s population (627,000 in 1971) was served by 31 councils and 1,174 councillors, or one for every 534 people. Proposals for around 120 councillors in a county-wide unitary of 840,000 people would provide one councillor for every 7,000 people - a democratic deficit of 92% over this time period. To what extent do you think these proposals improve local democracy and local democratic accountability? How local do you think local has to be in terms of giving local people a voice that is heard and responded to within the fabric of a democratic society?

Affordability

10. How comfortable are you recommending a two-unitary solution in which one council is dependant on the other for its financial solvency, and what evidence do you have that this arrangement will enable the residual council to deliver against the other four criteria? In particular, we would assume you have seen and considered evidence that consciously creating this dependency does not emasculate the rural authority and its leadership from exercising any real strategic leadership or from delivering quality, value for money services?

Broad Cross-Section of Support

11. To what extent does the evidence of your consultation overcome the test set out by Max Caller (LGC, 24th July 2008) that ‘any pattern that worked really well for 80% of the population but not for the other 20% would be a failure’? Surely you are unable to foresee a situation in which you provide advice to the Secretary of State which by this definition is branded a failure?
12. The case made by Norwich focuses on the benefits to Norwich from this arrangement, rather than presenting a compelling case for the remainder of the county, which serves three-quarters of the population and 96% of the area. Are you comfortable recommending a solution in which there is no-one standing up for and championing one of the councils, and if so what evidence have you seen that this would not hinder implementation? How in particular does any such evidence address the ability of that council to relate to the area it covers - providing cohesion within and across the hundreds of diverse communities and hundreds of thousands of people living in that area?

Value for Money

13. building on your conclusions in relation to questions 2 and 9, what evidence have you seen that removing Norwich, which enjoys economies of scale from high population densities compared to the rest of the county, and from which much of the county infrastructure radiates, from a pattern of unitary local government improves local administration and the delivery of value for money services in the rural element of the doughnut proposal?
14. There is some evidence of the impact of such a proposal without watching the development of the new unitaries. NHS Norfolk, born out of the 2006 merger of six Primary Care Trusts, is a live example of the impact of this policy of amalgamationism. We invite you to talk to our colleagues within the Breckland or West Norfolk LSPs, or at the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn, to hear for yourself the damage that would be done if a similar fate was inflicted on Norfolk's councils. The health inequalities agenda, for example, is only pursued in the West of the county thanks to the partnership's concerns that there is an eleven year age gap in life expectancy yet the PCT remains conspicuous by its absence.
15. None of the 'improvements' talked about by the County Council in support of the Single County unitary, nor by the City Council in respect of the Doughnut, are fundamentally reliant on re-organisation in order to bring them about. Indeed you will have received representations around the range and scale of improvements that have been achieved within Norfolk's current arrangements as you have gone about your work. In order to arrive at a judgement on whether the proposed options will achieve value for money, to what extent have you compared your proposals with the current arrangement of two-tier local government, without which such a judgement cannot, by definition, be drawn?

Your answers could go along way to proving that you have taken local needs, views and circumstances into consideration and will certainly assist us in helping to understand the thinking underpinning your final advice, whether we ultimately agree with it or not. This will be important to us as we continue to fulfil our obligation to the local people who have elected us to represent them and who will naturally want to know why the committee have reached the conclusion they have.