

Call-in

We the undersigned wish to call in the following decision for scrutiny:

Report Title/Ref No: BCa/17/22 – Future Options for “Working Together” between Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils

Decisions Made by Cabinet:

1.1 To provisionally endorse the approach of formally dissolving the two district Council’s and creating a new larger District Council.

1.2 To utilise Transformation Funding to jointly conduct stakeholder, public and staff engagement during Autumn 2017.

1.2a Subject to the outcome of the public engagement a draft (DCLG compliant) business case for the dissolution of BMSDCs and creation of a new single district council for the area could be considered by each Council.

Reason for decisions: In order to ensure that the two districts were in the best possible position to respond to, and take advantage of, the emerging opportunities and challenges within Local Government and Suffolk.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected: None

Any Declarations of Interest declared: None

Any Dispensation Granted: None

Our reasons for the call in are as follows:

1. The decision notice states that no alternative options have been considered and rejected. Clearly, however, there are many other options which should be considered before any decision to proceed with merger is made, even provisionally. For example, Suffolk County Council have not been consulted over a unitary option, even though we now share their building.
2. The decision does not appear to be listed as a Key Decision yet there could not be anything more key than an existential threat to Babergh planned by its own cabinet, not only with no mandate to do so but with a mandate from the 2011 local referendum *not* to do so.
3. This appears to be a decision to consult on merging with inadequate preparation and information release.
4. We are concerned about the likely bias of any consultation. Without a *published business case*, it is difficult to see what can and will be consulted on, other than an argument constructed to meet the wishes of the Administration.
5. We believe there should be an opportunity to scrutinise the even-handedness of the consultation/surveys. Should feedback be positive from such a consultation, the Administration may seek to remove the need to challenge the business case developed

thereafter, or to hold a poll. A business case published *in advance of consultation* would certainly ensure it builds the argument to proceed.

6. The financial appendix to the report is far from a full and unbiased picture of the current and projected situation. It reads more like a sketch of what the Administration wants us to hear.
7. Paragraphs 4.2 through 4.6 of the Chief Executive's report appear to be written about an entirely hypothetical divorce in which the weakness of Babergh's General Fund is emphasised. Yet it is quite clear that decisions already taken, for example over the Boundary Review, would make it probable that a merged council would increase Babergh's Council Tax more than halfway towards Mid Suffolk's and spend some of Babergh's much healthier Housing Revenue Account on housing in Mid Suffolk.
8. Paragraph 4.3 suggests such a divorce would be 'reputationally damaging', implying that Babergh District Council would get the blame for it in the public mind, yet there could not be anything more reputationally damaging for Babergh District Council than to go ahead with merger in defiance of the will of its own electorate clearly expressed in the 2011 referendum.
9. Paragraphs 10.1 through 10.7 of the Chief Executive's report and his Appendix 1 make the truly bizarre claim that the Mid Suffolk result in favour of merger in the 2011 local referendum provides a 'mandate' to proceed. This misrepresents the 2011 requirement that each district with its voters counted separately had to vote in favour of merger for merger to proceed. Paragraph 10.7 says that this was all a long time ago but then again cites the Mid Suffolk referendum which was held on the same day as the Babergh referendum!

It is our view that for these and many other reasons this paper provides inadequate grounds for a decision as uncertain in process as this. We believe that this decision needs thorough scrutiny in all respects before the Administration is allowed to proceed.

Signed

Tony Bavington

Dave Busby

Sue Carpendale

Luke Cresswell

Derek Davis

John Hinton

Bryn Hurren

James Long

Alastair McCraw

John Nunn

Stephen Plumb

David Rose