

PROPOSED “KEEP NORFOLK LOCAL” REFERENDUM

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report seeks Council's agreement to delegate to the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, the authority to agree to participate in a referendum being discussed by King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council, Breckland Council, North Norfolk District Council and South Norfolk Council. The delegation would also give the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, the authority to agree the details.

2 KEY DECISION

- 2.1 This is a key decision and has been published in the Forward Plan.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The initial discussion of a possible referendum took place at the Cabinet meeting on 13 August 2007. It was resolved amongst other things to:

“request the Secretary of State to give an assurance that, in directing the Boundary Committee, provision should be made to include holding a referendum to seek residents' views; in the event that this assurance is not forthcoming, discussions take place with all Norfolk authorities with a view to organising a countywide referendum and, in the event that all authorities do not agree, to request the Returning Officer to organise a referendum for Broadland.”

- 3.2 The Council has approved a budget of £100,000 to support public engagement and publicity associated with Local Government Review (LGR). It was reported to Cabinet on 8 September 2008 that spending to that date was £48,063. The Council has also committed to spend up to £12,000 on PR and lobbying to support the Keep Norfolk Local Campaign. Thus, the total commitment is £60,063.

- 3.3 King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council has obtained a quote to undertake a referendum. Some parts of the quote are known quite accurately as they are based on the number of electors. Other parts of the quote are speculative as they are based on the number of voting papers returned. Thus, if there is a high turn-out costs increase and vice-versa. The cost to Broadland is predicted to be in the region of £45,000 but a turn-out approaching general election type levels could increase the cost to over £50,000.

4 KEEP NORFOLK LOCAL

- 4.1 Members will have seen references to this campaign. It is the “brand” being

used by the four District Councils referred to in paragraph 1.1 and Broadland District Council to raise awareness about LGR and to put forward the Councils' views on this very important issue.

- 4.2 The Councils have been discussing the potential to conduct a referendum in January 2009 to give the public a voice and to provide evidence to the Secretary of State. There is agreement, in principle, from all partners to proceed. The Head of Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer produced a helpful paper to Cabinet on 8 September 2008 (attached at Appendix A) that sets out the legal parameters for a lawful referendum and associated publicity.
- 4.3 The referendum not only has to be lawful, it has to be credible otherwise the Secretary of State will dismiss the results out of hand. That, of course, would mean that the costs incurred had had little benefit. It has to be said that the Secretary of State has dismissed referendum results in other parts of the country because of the tenor of the publicity and/or low turn out.
- 4.4 The referendum will need to be conducted in January 2009 once we know the Boundary Committee's recommendation. Decisions will need to be made quickly about:-
- (1) Whether to participate
 - (2) Cost
 - (3) Content of publicity
 - (4) Question to be asked
- 4.5 The most practical way to deal with this is for authority to be delegated to myself in consultation with the Leader to make the necessary decisions.

5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Given the current expenditure and commitments and the likely cost of a referendum to increase the budget for this activity to £120,000. This can be found from reserves.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 These are fully articulated in the attached Cabinet report dated 8 September 2008. Members are particularly referred to paragraph 6.7 of the report that advises "Members need to be satisfied that holding a referendum would serve a useful purpose in the review process..... the Council needs to consider very carefully whether this is a cost effective method of obtaining public opinion.

7 RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1 To **AUTHORISE** the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to take any decisions necessary about a referendum on LGR in Norfolk that are in the Council's interests and support the Council's stance.

Colin Bland
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Background Papers None

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