

## Report from your County Councillor, Cllr Steffan Aquarone



**December 2024**

Many of you will be aware of the ongoing developments around “devolution”, which I last updated the parish council on in May. At the time, I explained why—albeit with limited enthusiasm—I was prepared to support the proposal for Norfolk to pursue a devolution deal with Government. The deal at that time extended to a directly elected mayor, a modest investment fund, and control over adult education spending.

Since the change of Government, Norfolk County Council has made a few attempts to continue pursuing this deal. However, it was finally rejected in the Autumn—not to my great surprise.

I believe both major political parties often take a less-than-wholesome approach to devolution, seeing it as a way to create a single point of contact for Whitehall and Government, rather than a genuine transfer of power. Personally, I am committed to meaningful devolution—where locally accountable people are empowered to make more decisions for and about their communities.

In recent weeks, the question of devolution has resurfaced. I now understand that the leadership of both Norfolk County Council and Suffolk County Council have submitted written support for a combined Norfolk-Suffolk mayoral authority. This proposal includes local government reorganisation in both counties.

In Norfolk, such reorganisation would have significant implications for local democracy, including the removal of all district councils, and their replacement with potentially just one Unitary Authority. While this proposal offers some opportunities for genuine transfer of budgets and powers, it also raises serious concerns about local accountability. If Norfolk were to become a single unitary authority, it would be the second largest in the country, after Birmingham—a scale that warrants careful consideration.

Throughout these discussions, I have worked to maintain cross-party dialogue with Norfolk MPs and councils across the area. My focus remains on what I believe is in the best interests of Norfolk. I am currently awaiting more details in the forthcoming white paper on devolution.

As part of these conversations, I have emphasised the opportunity presented by bus franchising, which the government offered earlier this year. I believe this could have a transformative impact on rural public transport in Norfolk. In fact, the Transport Select Committee, on which I serve, has just announced its first inquiry will focus on rural bus connectivity—an issue of particular importance to our communities.

As always, I welcome your thoughts on these matters. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with me in my ongoing capacity as your County Councillor.