

# **Suffolk County Council Devolution research report**

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# 1 Introduction and methodology

## 1.1 Background and quantitative methodology

In December 2022, the Government and Suffolk County Council signed a proposed, in principle, devolution deal which would transfer certain powers and funding from the Government to Suffolk County Council. Suffolk County Council launched a public consultation on 18<sup>th</sup> March – 26<sup>th</sup> May 2024 to gather the opinions of local residents, businesses and elected representatives.

Ipsos UK carried out 1,024 telephone interviews with adults aged 18+ living across Suffolk County between 8<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024. Fieldwork was completed via Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) using Random Digit Dialling (RDD) and targeted mobile sample, used to identify those based within the selected area.

Quotas were used for gender, age, work status and district and the achieved data were weighted by gender, age, work status and district council to match the population profile of Suffolk, sourced from the 2021 Census.

Where percentages in this report do not add up to exactly 100% this is due to computer rounding.

Significant differences are tested at the 95% confidence interval and only statistically significant differences are commented on. If a comparison was not made it is likely that there was no statistical significance between these groups. However, in some instances it is mentioned where there are no differences between groups if it is important to the context or narrative of the overall findings.

## 1.2 Interpreting qualitative data

Qualitative fieldwork took place between the 23 April and 25 April 2024. The research included 15 participants across 3 focus groups, with all participants based across Suffolk's five districts: Babergh, Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Ipswich. Focus groups were 90 minutes long and took place online via Zoom.

When considering these findings, it is important to bear in mind what a qualitative approach provides. Qualitative research is illustrative, detailed, and exploratory. It explores the range of perceptions and opinions of participants in detail, and it provides an insight into the key reasons underlying participants' views.

Qualitative research is not – and does not set out to be – representative of the wider population. When analysing the data, we were not seeking to understand prevalence but rather the values and experiences which underpin people's perceptions and opinions. The findings cannot be considered quantifiable as they are not drawn from a statistically representative sample. As such, the findings should not be treated as generalisable to the wider population.

Throughout the report, we have referred to "participants" and provided evidence through verbatim quotes where these illustrate findings. To protect participant anonymity, quotations have been attributed as "focus group participant".

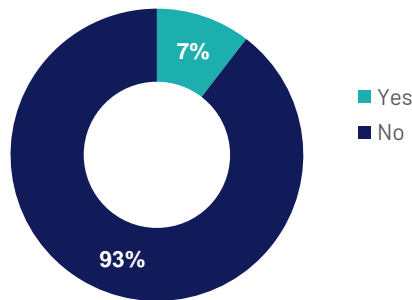
## 2 Context and local area

### 2.1 Awareness of the consultation and proposed devolution deal

More than nine in ten (93%) residents had not previously been aware of the ongoing public consultation before participating in the research as shown in Figure 2.1. Just 7% of residents knew the public consultation was running.

**Figure 2.1: Awareness of the public consultation**

Q Prior to this interview, were you aware that Suffolk County Council was running a public consultation about this?



*Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.*

Among the few who had heard of the consultation, the main sources were newspapers or magazines (25%), or local news websites (23%).

Focus group participants were largely unaware that a proposed devolution deal for the county was being consulted on. In some cases, they recalled hearing about the proposal in passing, either on social media sites such as Facebook or through friends and family. However, they were unaware of the detail, timeframes or that the consultation was currently in progress. During the groups, participants sought further information about how they could respond.

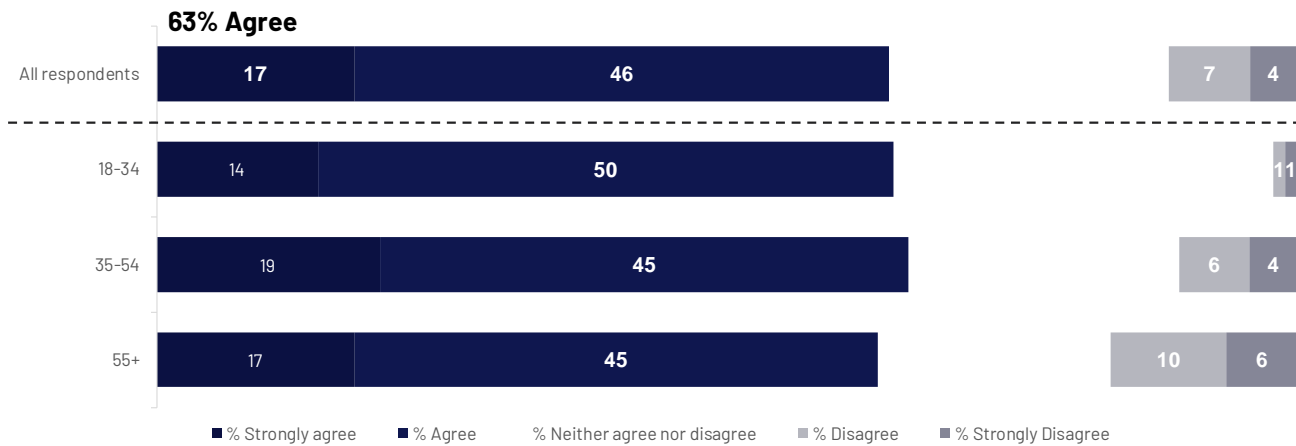
### 2.2 Devolution

A majority of residents taking part in the survey agreed with the general principle of devolving powers and funding from government to Suffolk County Council (63%), while around one in ten (11%) disagreed. Levels of support were largely consistent across age groups and the five districts.

However, those aged 55+ were more likely to disagree than other age groups. One in six (16%) of those aged 55+ disagreed with the principle of devolution in general, compared to 10% of 35–54-year-olds and 2% of 18-34-year-olds.

## Figure 2.2: Agreement with the principle of devolution

Q To what extent do you agree or disagree with the general idea of devolving powers and funding from Government to Suffolk County Council?



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

In the qualitative focus groups, when prompted on their understanding of devolution in general, participants had mixed levels of understanding. This ranged from having never heard of the term or being unsure about the meaning, to identifying it meant funding and power transferred down through levels of government to a local area.

**“My understanding is that it's the government giving money to the local council for them to make a decision around what to spend the money on.”**

Focus group participant

Those opposed to devolution considered it as a backwards step – the opposite of evolution – and that Suffolk would be losing out as opposed to gaining in power and decision making.

**“You've got evolution, you know creating more I guess and bigger things and then you've got devolution which is really detracting and decreasing.”**

Focus group participant

### 2.3 Attitudes towards Suffolk

During the focus groups, participants reflected on their local area. They appreciated the unique and positive aspects of different parts of Suffolk but also identified things requiring improvement and the local challenges they faced as residents.

Residents appreciated that Suffolk is in a unique position with access to a variety of green spaces, countryside, and beaches.

**“Nice and rural but 10-15 minutes and you're at the beach 30 minutes [you're] walking down the river it's all green, it's not built up at all around here so it's very nice.”**

Focus group participant

They also appreciated the variety of local facilities and amenities such as football pitches, leisure centres and local independent high streets.

**“I love living here because it's a really like sweet, nice village but you've also got within five minute walk fields. You've kind of got everything around really and the village has got so many amenities.”**

Focus group participant

However, participants raised concerns about a number of services and prominent issues in Suffolk. This included:

- Transport links and road quality
- Crime and anti-social behaviour
- Access to public services

**“The transport links like buses and trains, they're not regular or all of a sudden they just disappear so the roads are pretty atrocious [in Suffolk] but they are everywhere these days. There's only the A12 and that's it to get anywhere.”**

Focus group participant

**“Crime rate is probably on the up I imagine, so you've got vandalism increasing, got local kind of shops closing, higher crime rate, then does that then lead into the other local areas.”**

Focus group participant

Trust in politicians and elected officials at all levels of government was concerning for residents. This was an issue raised when discussing the local area as a place to live and quality of service delivery, but also permeated the discussion around the proposed deal and devolution of powers and funding from government to Suffolk County Council.

**“I don't trust anybody to have Suffolk's best interests at heart. I don't think they're competent enough. They're not now competent enough.”**

Focus group participant

Participants felt that they did not have trust in politicians both nationally and locally to prioritise the interests and needs of local communities. They were not convinced that additional powers and responsibility would change current outcomes in service delivery and investment given the same people would remain responsible.

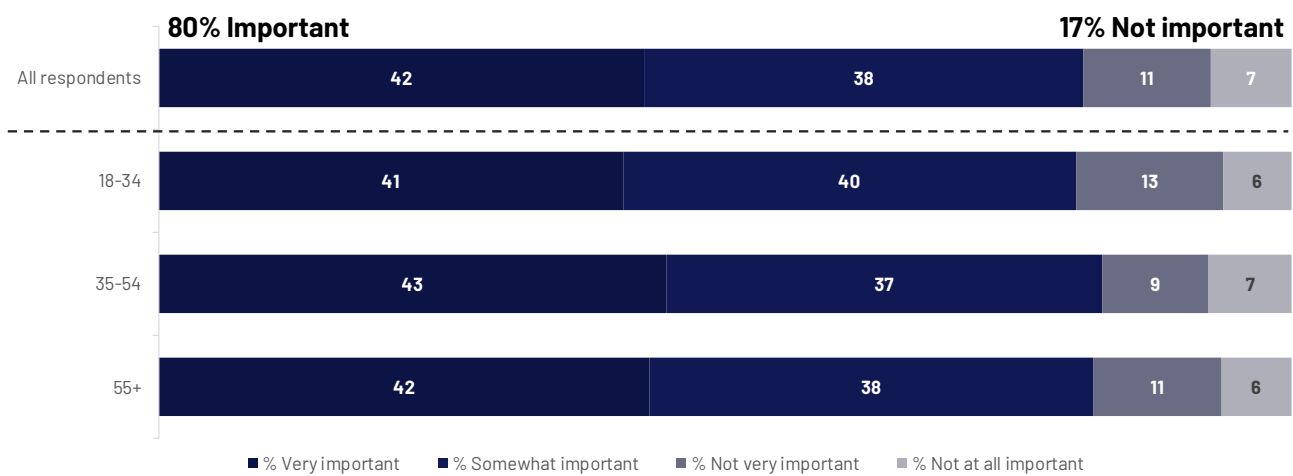
### 3 Adult education budget

Under the proposed devolution deal, Suffolk County Council would control the delivery of skills training in the area, enabling it to be tailored towards Suffolk’s employment needs. The adult education budget is expected to be £9.4 million in 2025/26.

Controlling the adult education budget was important to 80% of adults in Suffolk, including 42% who believed it was *very important*. In comparison, one in six (17%) stated that having the council control the budget was not important.

**Figure 3.1: Importance of control of the adult education budget**

Q How important is it to you for Suffolk County Council to have control of the Adult Education budget



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

Attitudes towards the importance of controlling the adult education budget varied across groups:

- Among those who agreed with the principle of devolution, 87% said it was important for the County Council to control the adult education budget. In contrast, 56% of those against the principle of devolution agreed with giving the County Council greater control in this area.
- Women were also more likely than men to view the adult education budget as important (85% vs. 76%, respectively).
- Residents living in Babergh were more likely to state that the adult education budget was not important (24%), compared with 14% of those living in Mid Suffolk.
- Three-quarters (75%) of those from ethnic minority backgrounds considered adult education funding to be *very important*, compared with two in five (40%) of those from white backgrounds.

The prospect of upskilling the local workforce was met with enthusiasm in focus groups, as was having increased autonomy over adult education provision within Suffolk. Residents thought that the council would be better suited to making these decisions than the national government, since they have a better understanding of the local economy.



Participants in the focus groups were sceptical about whether the funding available would go far enough to provide education to adults in Suffolk and improve the local economy. They emphasised how the proposed budget would be used to address multiple policy areas across a wide geographic location.

**“Is there going to be enough money to spread across all of these proposals for the entirety of a county?”**

Focus group participant

Another area that participants believed required attention was accessibility, as they thought that people living in rural areas, with poor public transport links would struggle to access education. Barriers to access would need to be removed for the services to be utilised and for the benefits to be seen across Suffolk. Residents suggested that this could be done through offering training services online. It was also suggested that residents may face financial barriers to access, including those who may suffer financially if training required taking time out of the job market and did not provide people with an income.

**“Some people just can't afford to travel very far for courses.”**

Focus group participant

Participants suggested that education could be further tailored to Suffolk's needs through consulting residents to understand the areas that would most benefit from increased funding. There was support for tailoring training to specific growth industries, including those based in Suffolk. However, it was said that the number of job opportunities available in the county should then reflect the training opportunities provided. Participants also felt that, for it to be seen as worthwhile for residents, training should lead to some form of employment in Suffolk.

**“It would be really good if the jobs at Sizewell [Power Station] were taken by local residents, who'd received whatever training needed for it.”**

Focus group participant

**“How are they going to find out what the local residents want and need? Because if nobody is hearing about [the consultation], then who's going to be the one who's just making decisions?”**

Focus group participant

## 4 Brownfield sites and regeneration

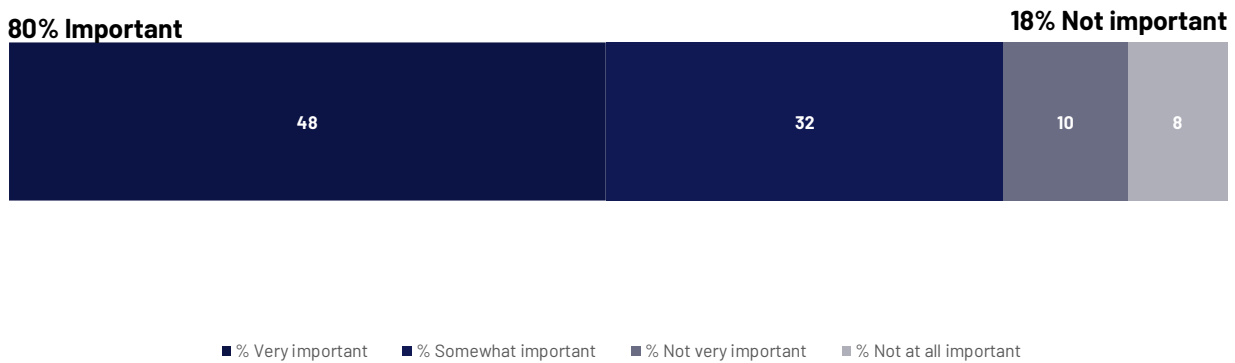
Under the proposed devolution deal, the council would receive £5.8 million of new funding to get brownfield sites ready for development. Land could be purchased for housing and development projects by the council, without having to bid for funding from the national government.

Eight in ten (80%) survey respondents considered it important for Suffolk County Council to have the funds and powers to regenerate areas of Suffolk under the deal. Nearly half (48%) of all respondents considered this to be *very important*.

In contrast, 18% of adults in Suffolk did not see this aspect of the deal as important. This figure 10% seeing it as *not very important* and 8% as *not at all important* for Suffolk County Council to receive funding and powers for regeneration.

**Figure 4.1: Importance of funding and regeneration powers**

Q How important is it to you for Suffolk County Council to have the funds and powers to regenerate areas of Suffolk under this deal?



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

Those from ethnic minority groups were less likely than white respondents to consider this aspect of the deal to be important (74% compared with 80%)

Of the adults in Suffolk who agreed with devolution in principle, 85% saw it as important for the council to have the funds and powers for regeneration. This compared with six in ten (62%) of those against devolution.

Nearly nine in ten (86%) 18–34-year-olds considered regeneration powers and funding to be important, compared with three quarters (76%) of those aged 35-54 years.

In the focus groups, the prospect of regenerating brownfield land and using it for housing developments was not met with much initial enthusiasm by participants. This was due to the belief that previous developments were not accompanied by increased infrastructure in the area. For example, where new housing developments had been built across Suffolk, participants felt that the infrastructure and services available to residents, such as roads, transport links, GP surgeries and schools had become strained due to the increased population.

**"My little girl goes to a village school and they've recently built 500 houses and they've had to say this year that they cannot take any more children outside of the village."**

Focus group participant

Participants were also fearful of the potential visual and noise pollution associated with land-clearing for brownfield sites. The natural landscape of Suffolk and its abundance of green spaces were highlighted as some of the county's best qualities, and it was feared the disruption from large scale construction may threaten this.

In line with reactions to other features of the devolution deal, participants were not confident the council could be trusted to build the promised housing and infrastructure. This was due to perceptions the council had previously failed to meet similar commitments and the insufficient funding outlined in the deal.

**"I think there's perhaps a bit of a theme on level of trust (...) you can trust them to build the houses, but do we trust them to then build the promised infrastructure around those houses?"**

Focus group participant

Participants believed the level of funding proposed would only build a few extra houses. They also assumed development would occur in locations which need affordable housing the least.

**"This 5.8 million if my maths is right, it equates to 29,000 pound per site. It's nothing, it's pathetic."**

Focus group participant

To ensure the delivery of brownfield development is in line with the interests of residents, participants proposed implementing checks and balances on the council's actions. When allocating funding, participants wanted to see the introduction of time constraints, so that if land is purchased, it must be developed within a specific time frame. Similarly, they felt that the use of regenerated land should be decided following consultations with the public.

# 5 Multi-year transport funding

Currently, Suffolk County Council receives annual funding for transport from the Government. The proposed deal would include multi-year funding for longer-term planning of transport and infrastructure projects in the area. A total of £250k funding would also be provided for two years to support the development of a local transport plan.

A majority (85%) of survey respondents believed that Suffolk County Council gaining control of multi-year transport funding was an important element of the proposed deal. Almost six in ten (59%) felt this element was very important. On the other hand, 13% felt this element was unimportant.

**Figure 5.1: Importance of multi-year transport funding**

Q How important is it to you for Suffolk County Council to be given multi-year transport funding for longer-term transport investment?

**85% Important**

**13% Not important**



■ % Very important   ■ % Somewhat important   ■ % Not very important   ■ % Not at all important

*Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.*

The youngest residents (18-34) were more likely to think that multi-year transport funding was not an important element of the proposed deal compared to other age groups. Almost a quarter of those aged 18-34 (23%) felt this element was unimportant compared to 11% of those aged 55+ and 9% of those aged 34-54.

Similarly, nine in ten residents who were supportive of the principle of devolution said multi-year transport funding was an important element of the deal, compared to seven in ten (69%) of those who disagreed with the principle in general.

Participants in the focus groups responded with queries around the level of funding for multi-year transport as, unlike other aspects of the proposed deal, there were no overall figures attached to the proposals.

**“It hasn’t said how much which is quite interesting.”**

Focus group participant

There were also questions about the £250k funding for the Local Transport plan. This was seen as a comparatively small funding pot which would be unlikely to have a transformational impact. The proposal to invest this fund into a plan, as opposed to transport infrastructure and improvements, was deemed to be wasteful in terms of time spent and monetary resources.

**“250k a year isn't that much money. That can easily go. So again, you'd want to see, what does that strategy look like? What's the transparency between the residents in the area and how that money is being spent.”**

Focus group participant

Participants supported the multi-year element of the proposal. This was seen as appealing compared to the current annual settlement as priorities could be identified and funded on a more structured and long-term basis. However, there was scepticism around the ability of those in power to retain funding for the full period and spend it on residents' priorities such as road repairs and upgrades and improved rural bus services.

**“I think they will pretty quickly run out of money and then they would say sorry we've got no more money so then you know the budget will be blown up in the first year and then the next few years would be nothing.”**

Focus group participant

Residents who used bus services in the area hoped there would be significant investment in rural services increasing the frequency, reliability and quality of these services as a priority. One participant also noted that free buses for school children had been cut in recent years. They hoped the funding could be invested in providing free bus travel for children who currently have to travel on services with standard fares to and from school.

The importance of high-quality and reliable bus services to more isolated residents, young people, older people and those who do not drive was recognised as an important element for investment.

**“I think the idea of developing a better public transport would be really good. Having the oyster card system will really help not just older people but also youngsters.”**

Focus group participant

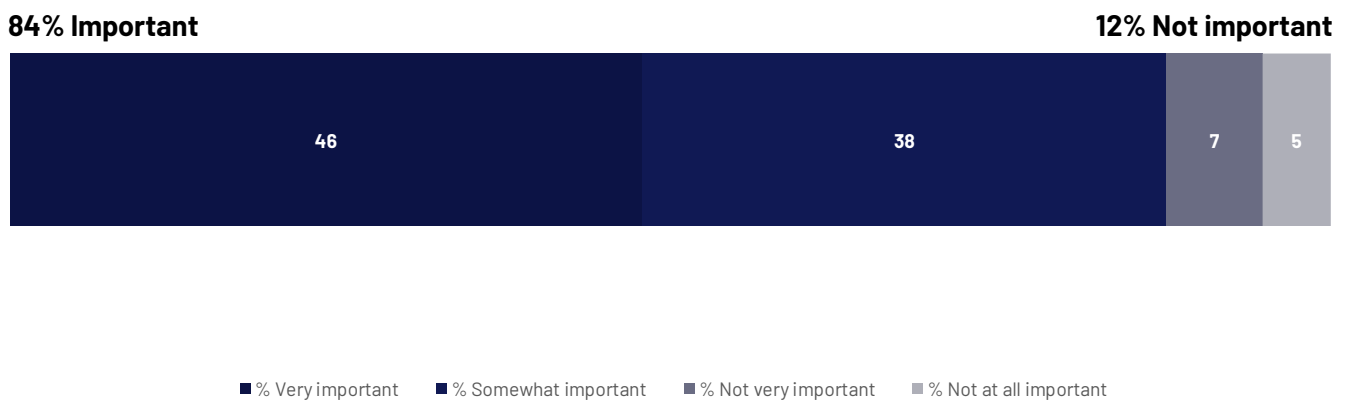
## 6 Investment fund

The proposed devolution deal for Suffolk contains detail for a planned investment fund of £480 million to be delivered over a 30-year period, to invest in the needs of the area in partnership with local actors.

The funding element of the deal was important to 84% of residents in Suffolk, with 46% stating that the investment fund was *very important*. A further 38% deemed the investment fund to be *somewhat important*. Of the 12% of residents who did not think that the funding element was important, 7% said it was *not very important*, while a further 5% thought it was *not important at all*.

**Figure 6.1: Importance of the investment fund**

Q How important to you is this funding element of the devolution deal?



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

Those in support of the principle of devolution were more likely to agree with the importance of the funding proposals (93%) than those against the principle of devolution (61%).

Nine in ten (91%) ethnic minority residents also responded in support of the investment fund. Less than one tenth (7%) of this group stated the funding element of the devolution deal was either *not very important* or *not at all important* to them. In contrast, the group most inclined to view the funding element of the deal as not important was those within the DE social grade (16%).

Focus group participants were keen to note that the previous funding allocation within Suffolk had led to regional disparities. Across the county, the distribution of infrastructure and services was seen as unequal, with certain areas being prioritised over others, particularly those with larger towns and cities or around areas such as Newmarket with high tourist footfall.

**“More money is put to Newmarket than anywhere else.”**

Focus group participant

Initial reactions to the deal were centred around demands for accountability and transparency. Since participants saw inequality across the county as the direct result of decisions made by the council, there was widespread distrust of officials among residents and how money would be spent.

**“I don't trust anybody to have Suffolk's best interests at heart. I don't think they're competent enough.”**

Focus group participant

They believed £16 million per annum would be insufficient to accomplish the wide range of policy goals described in the consultation, which included:

- Local business support
- Regeneration, housing infrastructure
- Helping young people access free bus travel
- Supporting victims of domestic abuse
- Investing in transport infrastructure

Participants suggested residents would be better served by a fund concentrated on one or two specific goals, or areas that have been underfunded previously. This could include healthcare, infrastructure and education, which participants cited as notably absent from the proposed areas of expenditure.

**"I don't see anything around education, I don't see anything around NHS."**

Focus group participant

While acknowledging that any additional funding would be beneficial, participants feared that, despite having access to the investment fund, nothing would change, and business would continue as usual. In order to avoid this, it was suggested that residents should be consulted when determining the allocation of funding, with emphasis placed on the opinions of young people and other groups who are not as engaged with decision making and are impacted disproportionately by decisions on their future.

# 7 Local decision-making

Under the current system, councillors choose the council leader from elected members. Under the proposed devolution deal, the leader would be directly elected by residents every four years – voted for at the same time as councillors. The leader could come from any party, irrespective of which party has overall control of the council.

More than eight in ten residents (83%) considered the direct election of a council leader to be an important part of the proposed deal, whereas one in six (16%) considered this element to be unimportant.

**Figure 7.1: Importance of a directly elected Leader**

Q How important is it to you for the residents of Suffolk to be able to directly elect the Leader of the County Council?



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

Those in support of the principle of devolution were more likely to be in agreement with devolution of decision making than those in disagreement with the principle (87% vs 77%). Similarly, nearly nine in ten women (88%) were in agreement that a directly elected leader was important to the deal, compared with almost eight in ten men (78%).

Residents of all groups were in support of devolved local decision making as part of the proposed deal. However, one in five of those aged 18-34 (20%), and 17% of those aged 55+ were of the opinion that devolved decision making was unimportant, compared to 11% of those aged 35-54.

The proposal for residents to directly elect a leader every four years was welcomed by participants. The fact that the elected leader would not need to come from the largest party (as under the current system) was largely supported. However, there were also concerns that this could lead to gridlock in the council, if the leader and councillors of other political persuasions had differing views, priorities or proposals.

**“Do you not think that there's a high possibility that whoever is voted in might not represent the council in terms of politics, and therefore everything they want to do would be blocked by politicians?”**

Focus group participant



It was also important to them that whoever was elected leader was a local resident, with local knowledge and an understanding of the issues and priorities across the whole county, which could lead to better quality decision making.

**“It could be a massive big deal if the person really does have you know the local areas best interests.”**

Focus group participant

However, there was scepticism about a four-year term for the elected leader. Although they acknowledged a leader would need sufficient time to enact their priorities, given low levels of trust in officials, it was felt that this would give too much time for someone to make poor decisions and remain in power for a long period.

**“I think four years is a long time isn't it. I mean who can guarantee? What happens if they're doing an awful job after two years, do they just stay the other two?”**

Focus group participant

Despite this, residents saw the positives in the power to choose being devolved to them, enabling them to have an opportunity to decide who would lead the county and ultimately make decisions on their behalf.

**“I think it's giving power to the people isn't it really. I personally think I do pay a lot of interest to my local area and everything, so I think it will be good that we will be sort of given the opportunity to.”**

Focus group participant

Participants also had concerns about the responsibility to elect a leader directly, as they didn't feel they were informed enough on political issues, the candidates and what would be best for the county.

**“I do think we won't necessarily know a great deal about this person. They'll all put out their information and we'll read it but really we won't know much about them at all really. I think making decisions really hard.”**

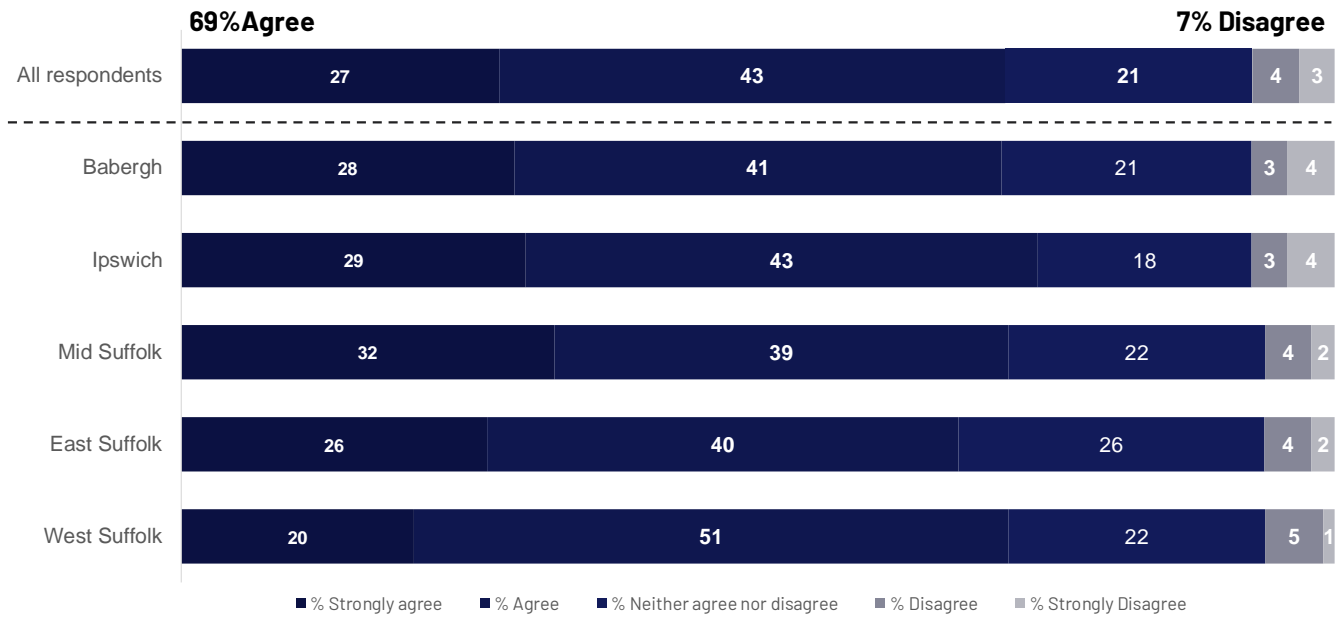
Focus group participant

# 8 Overall responses to the proposal

Overall, nearly seven in ten survey respondents (69%) agreed that the proposal as a whole should be accepted by Suffolk County Council. Fewer than one in ten (7%) disagreed that the deal should be accepted in its current form. Around one in five (21%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal.

**Figure 8.1: Overall agreement with the proposed deal**

Q To what extent do you agree or disagree that Suffolk County Council should accept the proposed deal?



Base: All Suffolk residents aged 18+ (1024); Telephone survey conducted 8th – 30th April 2024 with adults aged 18+ in Suffolk.

There was a significant difference in the acceptance of the deal between those already in support of the principle of devolution and those who were not. Nearly nine in ten (86%) supporters of devolution agreed that the proposed deal should be accepted, whereas just 36% of devolution opponents were in agreement.

A quarter of female residents (25%) said that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposal, compared with 17% of male residents. Support for the deal was consistent across the five districts of Suffolk as shown in Figure 8.1.

Focus group participants noted that the additional powers granted to Suffolk through a devolution deal would increase the opportunities available to residents.

**“I think we need new opportunities. I think it'll open up such a huge opportunity for the area.”**

Focus group participant

However, the deal itself was criticised as being vague and lacking enough detail on the specific elements of the proposal, funding amounts and timeframes. More information about how the funding would be allocated to each area of expenditure, and how this funding would benefit residents was raised as

important. The lack of detail led to scepticism that the deal would not bring about tangible improvements to Suffolk- especially given the distrust in politicians to deliver.

**“I would accept it because I think you want everything in your own hands, but I do agree with the others when they say you want more information. There's not enough money. There's not enough clarity.”**

Focus group participant

Participants also felt that the consultation process to date had not been well publicised. Residents noted they had not heard about the consultation prior to taking part in the focus group. This led them to believe they were being shut out of the process of decision making on the future of Suffolk- particularly given the proposed devolution deal would affect them and their families.

Overall, there was no consensus within the focus groups as to whether the proposed devolution deal was right for Suffolk, but participants were keen to seek out further information, and make a more informed choice about what they had heard.

**“It's exciting. it's a step in the right direction. But people need to know about it.”**

Focus group participant

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