

2022 County Deal for Suffolk Public consultation report

Disclaimer: The 2022 proposed, in principle, county deal between central government and Suffolk County Council was abandoned by ministers on 12 September 2024. Although Suffolk County Council was disappointed, it committed to publishing the results of the public consultation that considered that specific deal. As the deal is now off the table completely, the consultation is no longer specifically relevant. However, we have published this consultation report to conclude that piece of work for the public record.

1. **Headline findings**

- Overall, there was a majority of support the general idea of devolution and the deal as a complete package.
- There was variation in levels of support between those who responded to the IPSOS sample survey and those who responded to the Suffolk County Council consultation, especially when considering the questions on the general idea of devolution and the overall deal.
- Across the consultations, there was overall consensus that the individual elements of the deal were important to Suffolk, albeit (again) people who responded to the IPSOS sample survey were generally more positive than those who responded to the Suffolk County Council consultation.

2. **Background**

In December 2022, Suffolk County Council and the government signed a proposed, in principle, devolution deal which would transfer certain powers and funding from the government to the county council. It would mean more decisions about Suffolk's future being made in Suffolk, rather than nationally.

As part of this process, Suffolk County Council undertook a public consultation exercise following a pre-engagement phase.

3. **Getting Suffolk ready for the consultation**

Throughout February and early March 2024, Suffolk County Council spoke to more than 1,500 people to tell them about the proposed deal and that the consultation would be launched on 18 March 2024. This included sharing information and holding online and face to face meetings with representatives from a wide range of organisations and sectors, including:

- Businesses and business federations
- Community organisations and other public bodies
- Town and parish council elected members and staff
- District and borough council elected members and staff
- Suffolk County Council elected members and staff
- Suffolk's MPs.

Feedback from the discussions further informed the design of the consultation. Key points included the need to:

- Not assume knowledge and explain clearly how things work now and would work under a deal

- Explain that the investment fund is not index-linked and so it could decrease in value over time if inflation rises
- Explain the possibility that a directly elected leader could be from a different political party to the majority of elected councillors, or no political party at all
- Explain the important role that working with partners would play in delivering the deal
- Confirm that the governance changes would not require any new layer of local government and nor would the directly elected leader be able to set their own council tax demand
- Explain that this type of county-level devolution deal was new and that Suffolk was one of the first to explore it.

The Consultation Institute was engaged to ensure impartiality, rigour and support through its Quality Assurance Programme. Before the consultation was launched, the Institute confirmed that it was content that our approach to the planning of this consultation and our documentation was consistent with industry good practice standards.

4. Consultation methodologies and promotion

The overall public consultation period ran for 10 weeks from 18 March to 26 May and was made up of two main surveys. Both surveys carried the same questions but had different collection methodologies.

Suffolk County Council created an online survey. This was also available in hard copy in public buildings across the county, via a dedicated phone line and in easy read format. Copies in other languages were available on request.

The council hosted a dedicated webpage which provided details of the devolution deal with links to the survey and explanatory information. The consultation was available for anyone to share their views and 1,787 survey responses were received. Of these, 1,761 were online with an additional 26 hard copies.

The consultation was advertised widely through social media, local media and in all Suffolk Libraries and Suffolk County Council public-facing buildings. The county council also published information about the proposed deal on its website and made available a three-minute video explaining the deal and the consultation. At the time of going to consultation, more than 43,000 people had viewed the video for 15 seconds or more and more than 800 people had accessed the webpage www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution.

Due to local police and crime commissioner and district and borough elections, a moratorium period was in place from 24 March through to 5 May. During this period, the consultation was not promoted. Consultation promotion also ended four days early because of the start of the 2024 General Election moratorium period (22 May 2024). The consultation was however available for people to complete throughout the periods of reduced promotion.

During the consultation period, the council also contracted IPSOS to undertake a quantitative representative sample survey of Suffolk residents. IPSOS conducted 1,024 telephone interviews with adults aged 18+ living across Suffolk between 8 and

30 April 2024.

Fieldwork was completed via Computer Assisted Telephone Interview using Random Digit Dialling and targeted mobile sample, used to identify those based within the selected area.

Quotas 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.

Significant differences tested at the 95% confidence interval and only statistically significant differences were commented on in final reports. The same question set and information was available - albeit adapted for a telephone-based survey.

IPSOS also undertook qualitative fieldwork. The research included 15 participants across three focus groups made up of participants who were based across Suffolk's five districts. Focus groups were 90 minutes long and took place online via Zoom.

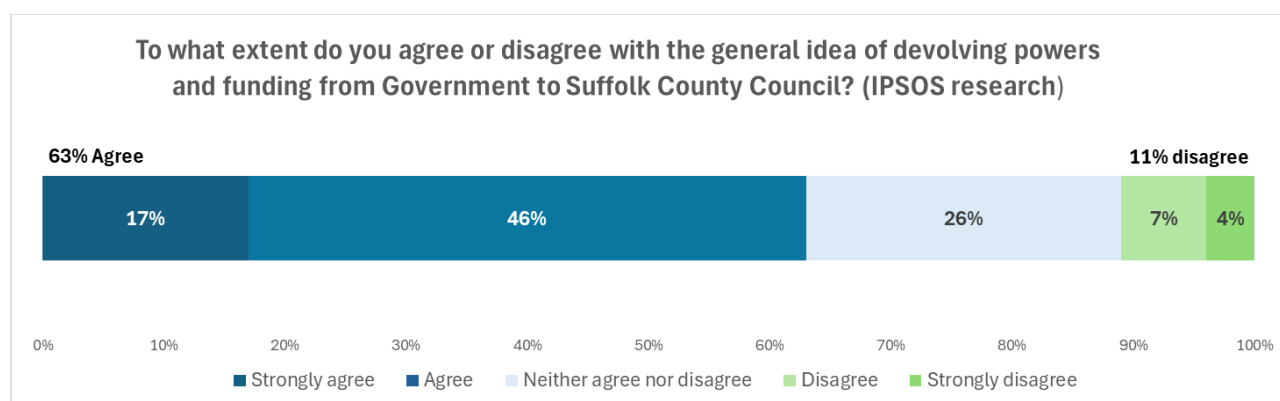
Qualitative research is not – and does not set out to be – representative of the wider population. When analysing the data, IPSOS was not seeking to understand prevalence but rather the values and experiences which underpin people's perceptions and opinions. The findings cannot be considered quantifiable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

5. Consultation responses

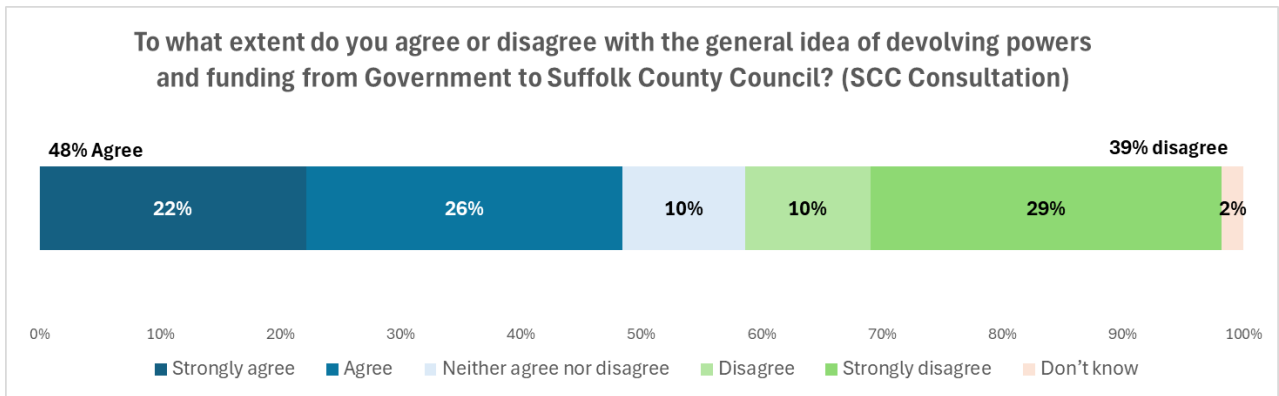
Note: Where percentages in this report appear not to add up to exactly 100%, this is due to rounding.

5a. The general idea of devolution

The IPSOS sample survey demonstrated overall support for the idea of devolution, with 63% of people stating that they agreed/strongly agreed. 11% said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.



The Suffolk County Council consultation also demonstrated overall support for the idea of devolution, but the split was more even. 48% of respondents stated that they agree/strongly agree, 39% disagree, 10% neither agree/disagree and 2% were unsure.

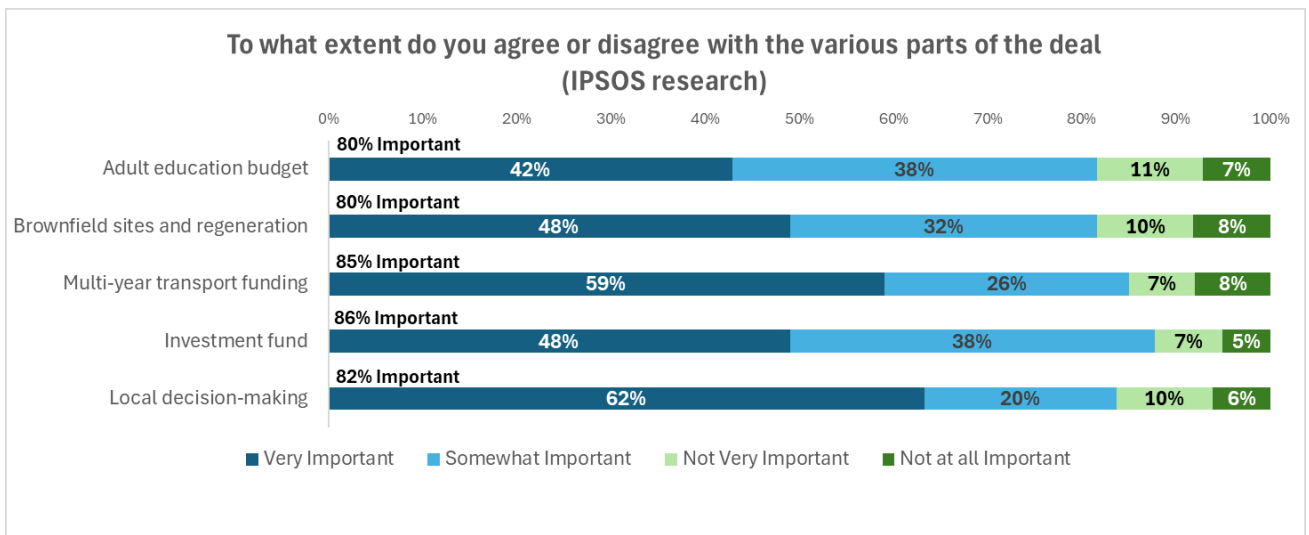


Focus group participants had mixed levels of understanding about devolution in general. This ranged from having never heard of the term or being unsure about the meaning, to identifying it meant funding and power transferred down through levels of government to a local area. Those opposed to devolution 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.

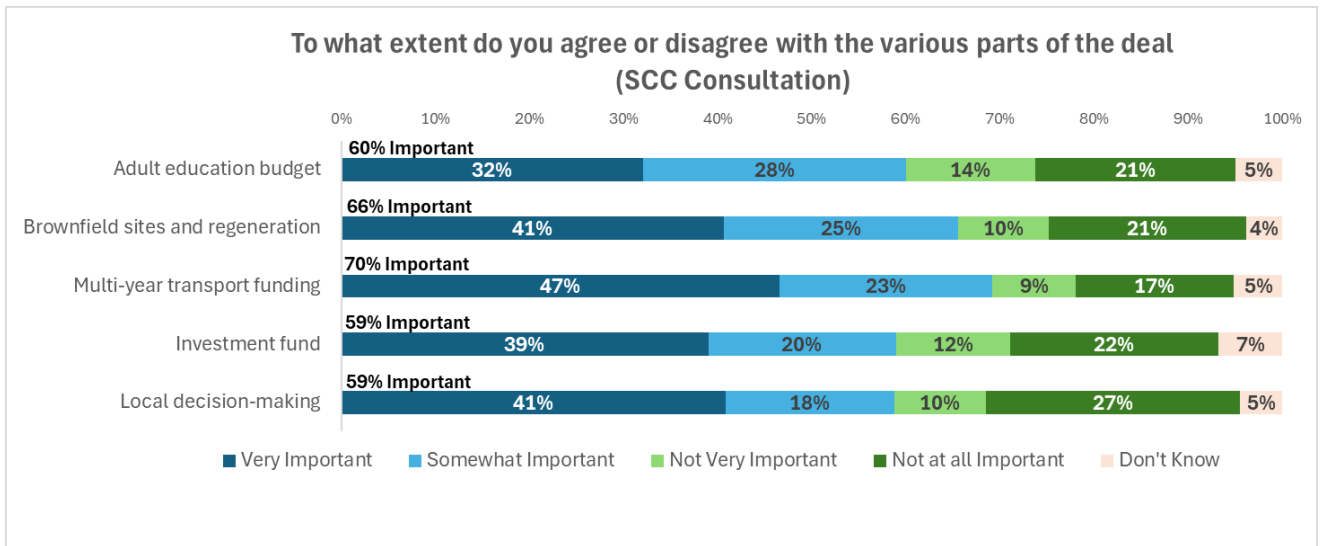
Trust in politicians and elected officials at all levels of government was concerning for residents. This was an issue raised when discussing the local area as a place to live and quality of service delivery, but also permeated the discussion around the proposed deal and devolution of powers and funding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

5b. Individual elements of the deal

The IPSOS sample survey demonstrated that various elements of the deal were generally all seen as equally important.



This general picture is replicated in the Suffolk County Council consultation. Transport investment (70%) and brown field sites (66%) were seen as significantly more important than other elements of the deal.



Adult education

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.

Brownfield sites and regeneration

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.

Participants were also fearful of the potential visual and noise pollution associated with land-clearing for brownfield sites.

Multi year transport funding

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.

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.

Participants supported the multi-year funding 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.

Investment fund

Focus group participants were keen to note that the previous funding allocation within Suffolk had led to regional disparities. Initial reactions to the deal were centred around demands for accountability and transparency.

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.

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.

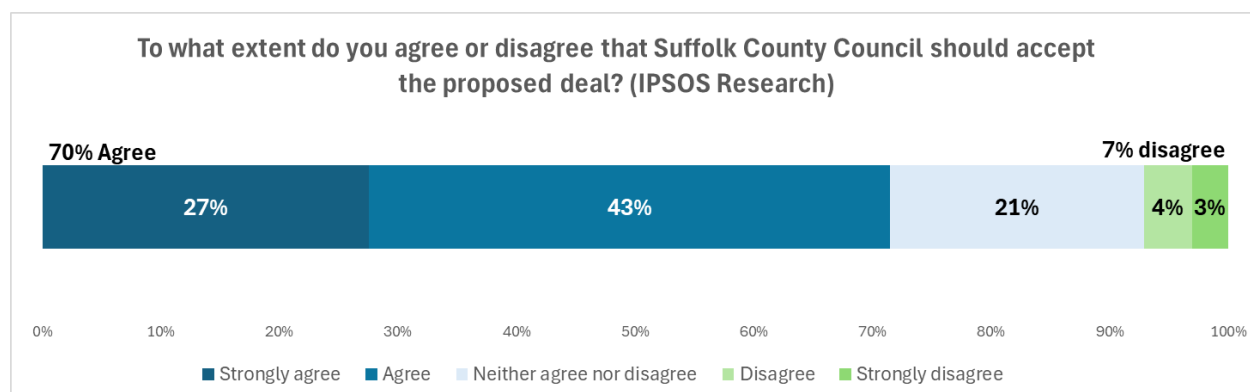
Local decision-making

The proposal for residents to directly elect a leader every four years was welcomed by focus group 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.

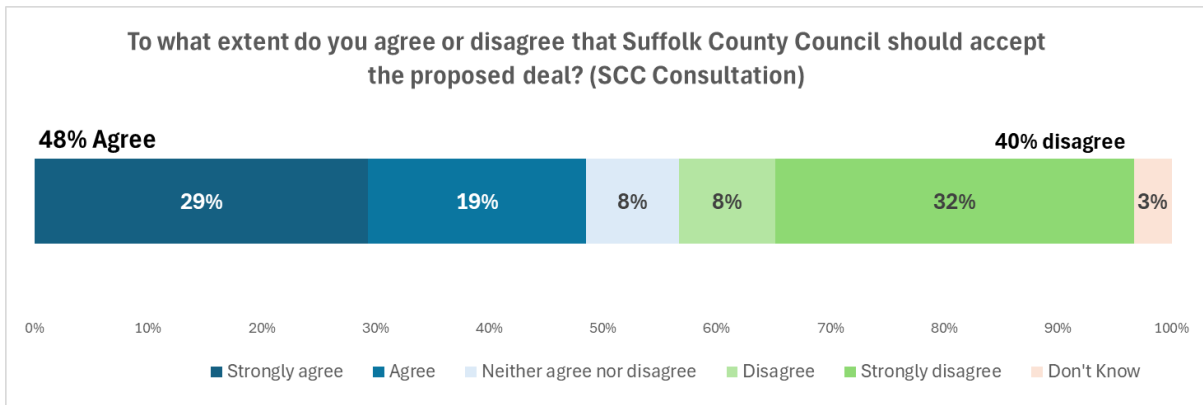
However, there was scepticism about a four-year term for the elected leader. Despite this, residents saw the positives in the power to choose being devolved to them, enabling them to have an opportunity to decide who would lead the county and ultimately make decisions on their behalf.

5c. Overall support for the proposed deal

The IPSOS sample survey demonstrated that 70% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the deal, with little difference in support across the district and borough areas within the county. 7% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the deal and similarly this saw little variation across the county. 21% neither agreed nor disagreed.



The Suffolk County Council consultation also demonstrated overall support for the idea of devolution, but the split was more even. 48% of all respondents were in favour of the deal, 40% of respondents were opposed and 11% neither supported nor opposed the deal, or did not know.



Focus group participants noted that the additional powers granted to Suffolk through a devolution deal would increase the opportunities available to residents. However, the deal itself was criticised for being vague and lacking enough detail on the specific elements of the proposal, funding amounts and timeframes. Overall, there was no consensus with 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.

6. Free text responses

There were 11 questions in which a respondent could provide a free text response. 7112 free text responses were received in total, across the 14 questions where a free text option was available. All free text responses are available in appendix 2 to this report.

7. Sources of further information

- Appendix 1 – IPSOS sample survey and focus group report
- Appendix 2 – SCC public consultation report

Disclaimer: The 2022 proposed, in principle, county deal between central government and Suffolk County Council was abandoned by ministers on 12 September 2024. Although Suffolk County Council was disappointed, it committed to publishing the results of the public consultation that considered that specific deal. As the deal is now off the table completely, the consultation is no longer specifically relevant. However, we have published this consultation report to conclude that piece of work for the public record.