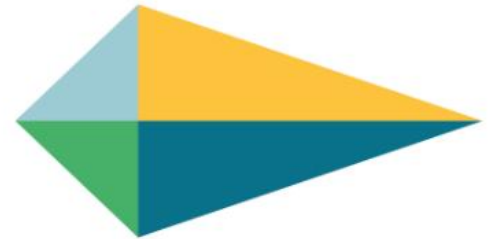




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COUNCIL

## **Citizens Advice Service Review Executive Summary (R1)**

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Touchstone Renard Project Number: ESC 1305

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The three East Suffolk CABs – CANES, Felixstowe and Leiston – are working well and have many strengths. They are solvent, able to deliver services to clients even during Covid-19, have capable and dedicated staff and volunteers and have good relationships with funders. As we have been asked: “The system isn’t broken, so why does it need fixing?”

One answer to that question is that both Suffolk County Council (SCC) and East Suffolk Council (ESC) have made further funding after March 2021 partly conditional upon ‘transformation’ of services. Our review is described (in the Request for Quotation (RFQ)) as a ‘transformation review’, and **we believe that a merger of all three CABs offers the best opportunity for a genuine transformation of services across East Suffolk**. We have based this opinion on three main types of analysis:

- A review of the current situation, which shows significant differences in the ways that the three CABs operate, especially between CANES and the other two CABs (see Section 5).
- Discussions with four CABs from other parts of the country that have undergone recent mergers, which show the potential that mergers offer for expanding and improving services (see Section 7).
- Scoring the different options (no merger, merger of two of the three CABs, merger of all three CABs) against a set of criteria including the ones mentioned in our RFQ. The merger of all three CABs had the highest score, by a considerable margin (see Section 8).

**The case for merger is not about cost savings or greater efficiency.** Some cost savings, for example by sharing local premises with other agencies, could be made irrespective of mergers (though mergers can provide a further impetus to reduce premises costs). Most of the cost savings on Chief Officer (CO) salaries would be offset by the likely need to offer a higher salary to the CO of a larger, merged CAB and the need for effective deputies to manage reporting lines and share leadership tasks. Relatively minor cost savings can, however, be made on governance, audits and membership fees payable to National Citizens Advice (NCA). CABs that have merged have mentioned additional costs such as new equipment, marketing and changes to office layouts.

**The case for merger is about creating better opportunities to fund and improve services.** CABs that have merged have found that their relationships with core funders (mainly councils) have improved and that new opportunities for collocation and closer cooperation have arisen. Funders value having a single point of contact for local CABs, rather than multiple ones.

Opportunities for project funding have also increased for the CABs that have merged, along with the ability to recruit more specialised skills to be deployed across a wider area. Within East Suffolk there are clear disparities between the project funding currently used by CANES on the one hand and Felixstowe/Leiston on the other, providing opportunities to spread local sources of funding more widely across the whole district. **For CABs that have merged, financial resilience has improved overall.**

CABs that have merged have all reviewed their systems and processes and (generally) have rolled out the best existing practices across the whole of their new areas. They have told us that this has improved services for clients, but there are associated risks as we indicate in Sections 7 and 9.

Other opportunities that stand out include:

- Closer links with councils, DWP and other voluntary sector organisations (VSOs) could enable greater numbers of vulnerable clients to be referred to CAB before their problems escalate out of control.
- More could be done to record outcomes for clients more fully and consistently across the three CABs, and to make use of the combined statistics to demonstrate the impact of CAB’s work to funders.
- Merging Trustee Boards enables a new merged CAB to select the most motivated trustees with the most relevant skills, from a large pool of legacy trustees.

- Better career progression for staff within the one organisation, and the potential to offer higher salaries.
- Better strategic planning for the whole district, in times that are increasingly uncertain.
- Combining the lessons learned from the lockdown, especially as regards remote delivery of services.

Concerning the last point above, **we reject the idea that face to face services can be fully replaced by remote services.** The lockdown has greatly improved CABs' capabilities, processes and technology for providing remote services, but there has clearly been an unmet need for face to face services during the lockdown, especially for more elderly and vulnerable clients. Consequently there should be no question of closing offices or reducing outreach locations on the pretext of greater 'efficiency', though there may be a case for a more strategic approach to providing a face to face CAB presence throughout the main population centres across the district.

**A merger of CABs does not have to mean a loss of local identity.** Some of the CABs that have recently merged have retained the local name ('Citizens Advice Thurrock' for example) within a legal entity that covers the wider district ('Citizens Advice South Essex'), and this would be possible for any of the three local CABs in East Suffolk.

As mentioned above, there are risks associated with a merger of the three CABs. It is important that the three CABs are able to work together to maximise the benefits and reduce delays, and a structure would need to be put in place to enable that to happen.

**A merger between Felixstowe and Leiston CABs is a lower-risk option that would still deliver benefits.** These two CABs are quite similar in the ways that they work and in the projects that they work on, and if merged they would be more or less equal in size to CANES. Our view, based on one brief consultancy project, is that the potential rewards from a merger of all three CABs would offset the risks and potential difficulties of the merger process. However, a merger between Felixstowe and Leiston CABs would be a reasonable alternative step that would offer some transformation of services.

In parallel with our review, NCA have been carrying out a review of CABs across Suffolk, which should provide an overall context for our recommendations to be considered. NCA are also (separately) conducting some research into CAB mergers and we understand that this report should be published in November.

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### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank all the people involved throughout the review process, from the three CABs concerned (including the Chief Officers, Trustees, staff and volunteers), East Suffolk Council (ESC) and all other stakeholders, who gave us their time, input and support. We also express our thanks to the four merged CABs that we interviewed regarding their experiences and lessons they have learned.

### **Covering statement**

This report and its contents have been prepared for ESC and the three CABs as part of the East Suffolk Citizens Advice Service Review project. Statements throughout this work are made in good faith based on the information provided by those involved in the review or otherwise made available or disclosed during the period of the project.

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