

"A Tale of Three Cities"

an analysis by Mark Ling

Ipswich versus its two main regional competitors: Norwich
and Cambridge

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Even as champions of Ipswich, we perhaps find it bewildering that a town with so many assets just doesn't enjoy the same feel-good factor as other regional centres. The ingredients are all here, but somehow the recipe for success has been lost. The study of fifty-plus key performance indicators (overleaf) aims to identify disparities, whilst the summary page makes conclusions and what we can do about them.

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A Tale of Three Cities *[continued]*

As a conurbation and centre, Ipswich is equal in size to Cambridge or Norwich. All three centres are vital to the prosperity of around 250,000 people who are reliant on these centres to compete at regional and national level to win regional government jobs, public and private sector jobs, investment and infrastructure.

Ipswich has no national prominence, no royal patronage and no city status. Its regional clout is being eroded within Suffolk and constantly attacked by regional competitors that have priceless, status advantages.

Cambridge and Norwich's historic key industries have survived less affected or intact; they also have prestigious universities, aspects of regional government and regional headquarters jobs as well as burgeoning new industries. Central Ipswich's industries have been hit hard, but Ipswich's post war engineering and logistics expertise have been the foundation for new industries coming to Suffolk: technological engineering expertise at BT in Martlesham, whilst our capability in port and transport infrastructure have sustained the Port of Felixstowe.

Ipswich's significance, skills and workforce attracted and grew these two new dynamic economic hubs. However, Ipswich's investment now mainly benefits Suffolk County Council and rural Suffolk Coastal District Council. Ipswich loses out on the tax revenues, regional status and presence. Ipswich's growth fuelled new suburbs with newer, larger C, D & E tax band properties, producing surplus local tax revenues. Yet, outside our twentieth century boundaries the precious tax surpluses benefit SCDC and Babergh, leaving Ipswich's coffers ring-fenced and our revenues limited by smaller, older, lower contributing A & B tax band properties.

Loss of its 750-year unitary status in 1974 has cost Ipswich dearly. The current two tier local government means that Ipswich (as a politically diverse urban area) is at odds with generally rural conservative Suffolk. Different needs, different outlook, but with Ipswich firmly a junior partner and "Suffolkated". Ipswich has just 13 of 75 Suffolk County Councillors, its voice and power is completely diminished: not a single SCC cabinet member currently resides in Ipswich: happy to rule and collect Ipswich taxes, but no vested interest. There is little distinct focus, direction or ambition for Suffolk's capital town and powerhouse, while rural districts and SCC are happy to benefit from a Greater Ipswich, just not to acknowledge or empower it.

Media for Ipswich is largely controlled from Norwich, which also retains a disproportionate representation level on the all-powerful New Anglia LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership driving Norfolk and Suffolk). This no doubt provides our principal competitor with direct influence over economic and business strategy, third party investment; along with vital central government spending on roads, rail and infrastructure across our region.

We, the citizens politicians & business folk, of Ipswich have allowed the prize asset – our town – to become a junior and subordinate partner in our region, in local government, in media and in our business forums. I believe that we need to collectively strive to achieve the following goals if we are to turn around the fortunes of our town:

1. We must demand equal representation for Ipswich (and Suffolk) on the New Anglia LEP.
2. Our business community must promote a "Greater Ipswich" GVA (Gross Value Added or size of our economy) as our key selling point. Were "Greater Ipswich" to be an entity, our GVA would eclipse Greater Norwich (Norwich plus Broadland) and Cambridge and Peterborough. We would have the greatest "city" economy in East Anglia! The Greater Ipswich area would (in any other circumstance) be deemed a major economic area, a beacon and a success. Furthermore, it should be heralded and aggressively promoted as such. This is the supreme selling point to attract new business, government investment to promote Ipswich and benefit Suffolk.
3. Our politicians and businesses must lobby for improved and fairer media coverage, and take greater care over how our town is projected.
4. We must all lobby for local government reform to consummate and promote "Greater Ipswich" - ideally as a unitary authority. Local business and New Anglia LEP should recommend that Ipswich should be backed fully in future bids for city status, and that our town should eventually return to having two dedicated MPs with a sole focus on urban Greater Ipswich.
5. Bringing Greater Ipswich together as an economic and political entity would allow us to out-muscle our competitors creating a heavyweight champion to be proud of. It would be a turning point, a renaissance for the town, to gain even more investment for Ipswich and for the county beyond.

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