

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION IN SUFFOLK**

**Interim Plan**



**MARCH 2025**

## 1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Suffolk is a unique county made up of a diverse and vibrant mix of market towns, coastal communities and rural villages. Each of these places drive their own economic contributions to a rich sector mix including energy, agri-food and drink, ports and logistics, digital technology, advanced manufacturing, horseracing, tourism and agriculture. Although different from each other, our places exist as part of a coherent and historic geographical area, with sector strengths spanning much of the county area.
- 1.2 Suffolk has so many different characteristics, but also a strength and pride in its single, binding, identity. This is epitomised in Suffolk Day, the Suffolk Show, the University of Suffolk, Suffolk-wide local media and the Suffolk Trinity (comprising the Suffolk Punch, Redpoll bull and Suffolk ram). There is even a Suffolk way of saying things that lives on through the ages. There is, without doubt, a spirit that is hard to describe that connects and unites our great and special county. The rich diversity of Suffolk as a place and economy is a huge strength. Suffolk's £21 billion economy has averaged 3.3%<sup>1</sup> annual growth over the past decade and epitomises the idea that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'.
- 1.3 This diversity, however, places a premium on underpinning our economic aspirations with a single, unified economic plan for jobs, growth, skills and infrastructure, together with a fully aligned and integrated model for local public service delivery. Without this alignment we risk not fulfilling our economic potential and denying the full benefits of sustainable growth to Suffolk's residents and businesses.
- 1.4 Devolution, coupled with Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), therefore presents a distinct opportunity to drive sustainable growth in Suffolk. We are in the process of analysing a broad range of potential unitary council configurations focused on a single, a two and three unitary option. Based on robust foundational analysis and initial engagement, we believe that a single unitary authority for Suffolk would deliver the best outcomes for Suffolk's residents and most strongly meets the criteria set by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution.

### **A unified plan for jobs, growth, skills and infrastructure**

- 1.5 Working with the Mayor and government, a single unitary authority will remove unnecessary (and often bureaucratic) competition between multiple authorities and identify clear and coherent investment priorities to maximise the benefits of devolution for all places across Suffolk. A single unitary authority will enable us to celebrate the diversity of place in order to attract investment; maximise connectivity between places, people and business; and exploit economies of scale.

## An aligned and integrated model for local public service delivery

- 1.6 A single unitary authority will provide resilience and sustainability across all services; enable better connections to and be reflective of the people and communities in Suffolk; and act as champion for the whole of Suffolk.

### Resilient and sustainable

- 1.7 Decisions on the future must be evidence-led. Initial financial analysis of Suffolk is already demonstrating that the financial savings of a single unitary authority are significantly greater than those from splitting Suffolk in two or three. Moreover, the forecast projected savings from the County Councils Network nationally conducted analysis (summarised in the table below) forecasts that the costs increase significantly with the addition of multiple new unitary authorities.

	1 Unitary (£m)	2 Unitaries (£m)	3 Unitaries (£m)
Total Annual Benefit <sup>2</sup>	25.7	21.0	17.7
One-off transition costs	(18.9)	(25.5)	(32.2)
Annual Disaggregation cost	0	(12.5)	(20.7)
One-year impact of disaggregation <sup>3</sup>	0	(22.7)	(40.0)
Five-year impact of disaggregation	0	(91.9)	(155.2)
Net Benefit after five years	103.6	11.7	(51.6)
Recurring benefit after five years	25.8	8.5	(3.0)

<sup>1</sup> Suffolk Economic Strategy and Growth Plan 2024

<sup>2</sup> Country Councils Network (CCN). The numbers in this table only reflect the national analysis, in section 6 & 7 we provide commentary around our local analysis.

<sup>3</sup> The ongoing annual cost from disaggregation as a result of duplicated effort

1.8 Our early local work has arrived at ranges for both costs and savings, and suggests that the County Councils Network (CCN) forecast savings and costs are reasonable. Our work is ongoing to validate and solidify the range of assumptions and detail needed to inform the calculation of savings, transition and disaggregation costs.

1.9 Suffolk is also a strong and sensible economic area and at the right scale (with a population of 776,442)<sup>4</sup> to establish a sustainable, viable and efficient single unitary authority. Suffolk County Council is committed to making LGR work, and firmly believe that when combined with a Mayoral Strategic Authority, a single unitary authority will:

- Facilitate economic growth so that Suffolk can capitalise on the most ambitious benefits of devolution and make strategic decisions around infrastructure, skills, employment and economic development.
- Build a more resilient public sector model, not just through more sustainable council services but by facilitating greater integration and alignment with the wider public (e.g. police, health, education), private, community and voluntary sectors to drive better outcomes. For example, a Suffolk wide strategy to improve population health and wellbeing.
- Create the ability to act strategically and make the best investment decisions for Suffolk by working closely with the Mayor and by enabling more effective and integrated strategic planning for growth, housing, and education by uniting responsibilities currently split between county, districts and borough councils. This joined-up approach will ensure that new housing developments are properly coordinated, with the delivery of schools, transport, and community infrastructure, creating well-designed neighbourhoods where people want to live and work.
- Create greater capacity and resilience. A single unitary authority provides the most financial resilience through economies of scales, reduced duplication, value for money and reinvestment of money saved into frontline services.
- Prevent unnecessary fragmentation and disruption of local services, particularly those delivered to some of the most vulnerable people in Suffolk. This disruption will create additional costs of transition (especially if there is a need to establish new alternative Suffolk-wide bodies that would sit above multiple unitary authorities in order to provide a strategic and joined up approach to delivery). It will also pose notable risks to the market operation of these services impacting issues around volumes, cost, competition and recruitment. The costs and complexity involved in this disaggregation therefore risks offsetting any efficiency and cost savings generated as a result of LGR.

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<sup>4</sup> ONS 2023 Mid-Year Estimates

## **Connected to and reflective of people**

- 1.10 Councils are all about people and what they can do to make lives better. A single unitary authority for Suffolk will be simpler and less confusing for all residents. Accountability will be clearer - with a single organisation for all services across Suffolk. It would also create a mechanism to better connect with and empower people in the decisions made - providing both the most straightforward and accountable democratic leadership of place as well as the opportunity to co-produce a better model to strengthen and enhance neighbourhood and community leadership.

## **Champion for Suffolk**

- 1.11 A single unitary authority for Suffolk would create a stronger safety-net to protect and assist those in our society who most need support and often have the quietest voice. It will ensure the delivery of critical services and a more effective prevention approach (e.g. early help to families) so that residents are supported earlier and protected (Children and Young People (CYP), Adult Social Care (ASC), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and safeguarding) while also enabling the alignment of services currently split across the county, districts and borough councils to maximise better outcomes for residents. For instance, joining up homelessness services, housing provision and disabled facilities grants (DFGs), with social care for children, families and adults. Or ensuring an accessible and strong leisure and community offering across Suffolk, based on the needs of children and young people and their families and tailored to local circumstances.
- 1.12 A single unitary authority would prevent the emergence of undue disadvantage/advantages in terms of equity and competition between places. It will avoid the perception, or reality of a 'postcode lottery' if Suffolk is split into two or three unitary authorities, providing a differential level and quality of service. Both the two and three unitary authority options result in differing geographical scale with notable variation in the levels of rurality and deprivation. If this is then coupled with levels of debt, projected funding gaps in 2028/29 and the scale of unallocated reserves available this makes one of the three suggested authorities financially vulnerable from the start.

- 1.13 A single unitary authority will provide the most transformative and robust platform for growth. It will give Suffolk a single, clear and coherent voice in making the case for investment. It will ensure we act strategically and make the best investment decisions for Suffolk as a whole. One council will not only remove unhelpful local competition for funding and investment, but it will enable more effective and integrated strategic planning for growth, housing and education. By uniting responsibilities currently split between county, districts and borough councils we will have a joined-up approach - avoiding duplication. This will ensure that new housing developments are properly coordinated, with the delivery of schools, transport, and community infrastructure, creating well-designed neighbourhoods where people want to live and work.
- 1.14 A core part of our delivery model will be joined up area-based teams (e.g. planning, housing, CYP and ASC), the creation of a single cohort of councillors, the consolidation of existing committees and the creation of new ones to ensure local access and effective local decision making (e.g. area-based planning committees). Alongside this we will co-produce, with the Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) and individual parish and town councils, an invigorated model to strengthen and supplement neighbourhood and community leadership, facilitating additional devolution where appropriate. A similar offer and approach will be undertaken with Suffolk's diverse and valued voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, building on the strong relationships and commissioning arrangements already in place with the county council and district and borough teams.
- 1.15 A single unitary authority for Suffolk would also be a better partner for the current Government in supporting and enhancing the delivery of its five missions locally and nationally (particularly in relation to making Britain a clean energy superpower).
- 1.16 Based on initial robust analysis and early engagement, drawing on established financial and economic metrics, the case for a single unitary authority in Suffolk is compelling. Over the coming months, we will undertake more detailed analysis, more stakeholder engagement, modelling and testing to develop the most compelling, pragmatic and robust business case proposal for submission to government on 26 September 2025.

## 2 Why Suffolk

- 2.1 Suffolk is a large and unique county, made up of a diverse and vibrant mix of market towns, coastal communities, and rural villages, all driving their own economic contributions to the area through a population of 776,442<sup>5</sup> and 31,020 businesses<sup>6</sup> across key sectors such as energy, agri-food and drink, ports and logistics, digital technology, advanced manufacturing, horseracing, tourism and agriculture. It is an economy that spreads across the whole county and does not divide neatly into place-specific specialisms. This diversity is reflected in the recently launched Economic Strategy and Growth Plan<sup>7</sup> for Suffolk, which provides a clear vision for sustainable growth. With 90% of working residents also working in Suffolk (according to the 2021 Census<sup>8</sup>) the County geography offers a highly self-contained, dynamic, functional economic area further enhanced by the University of Suffolk and our three further education colleges driving education and skills opportunities.
- 2.2 Suffolk's economy is shaped by a mix of industries, with tourism playing a central role and covering vast swathes of the geographic area. The visitor economy is Suffolk's largest sector, employing 45,600 people<sup>9</sup>. Our coastal towns are popular, drawing national visitors for their natural beauty and cultural events like the Aldeburgh and Latitude festivals. Constable Country and the Dedham Vale are renowned for inspiring artists John Constable and Gainsborough, enhancing its appeal to cultural tourists. The Waveney valley, southern Suffolk and all of Suffolk's coastal towns support a prosperous hospitality and retail sector, contributing significantly to the local economy. The Cathedral, Abbey ruins and Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds and horseracing at Newmarket add to the breadth and depth of Suffolk's visitor offer.
- 2.3 Ipswich is our thriving county town, serving as Suffolk's centre for business, technology and innovation. It hosts sectors such as finance, technology and creative industries. Ipswich has good transport links to both London and the port of Felixstowe. The town has recently renewed and regenerated itself as an urban centre including significant investment in the waterfront area. The New Wolsey and Ipswich Regent Theatre support a rich programme of events, including the Ipswich Arts festival. The town has immense pride in their football team based on a rich history and its recent promotion to the Premier league.

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<sup>5</sup> ONS 2023 Mid-Year Estimates

<sup>6</sup> ONS 2023 Mid-Year Estimates and ONS 2024 Business Counts

<sup>7</sup> Suffolk Economic Strategy and Growth Plan 2024

<sup>8</sup> Census 2021, Travel to workflows. Note whilst informative, this data should be treated with caution; lockdown restrictions and the furlough scheme that was in place in March 2021 had a significant impact on travel to work data and so the commuting patterns depicted are not necessarily reflective of current commuting.

<sup>9</sup> Suffolk Economic Strategy and Growth Plan 2024

- 2.4 The Sizewell nuclear power cluster, including the proposed Sizewell C, is a major economic and energy driver in East Suffolk. Sizewell is pivotal to the UK's energy landscape, providing low-carbon energy and contributing to national energy capacity and security. The development of Sizewell C will bring significant investment, job creation, and skills development, solidifying Suffolk's position as a leader in low carbon, sustainable energy. As part of the energy offering, Sizewell offers opportunities for local businesses and communities, stretching beyond the coastal geography and enhancing the region's reputation for renewable energy.
- 2.5 Further up the coast, Lowestoft, another seaside and port town has become a hub for renewable energy, particularly the continuing development of offshore wind farms (for example East Anglia ONE) and the important research centre Cefas<sup>10</sup>. It is also being home to the Lowestoft eastern energy facility which supports ScottishPower Renewables. As this industry develops it is creating jobs and boosting the local economy whilst also attracting skilled workers in engineering and technology. This growth has been further enabled, along with regeneration opportunities for the town, with Suffolk County Council completing the construction of the Gull Wing bridge. This £143 million investment with government and council funding opened in September 2024. This award-winning bridge has transformed the town to the benefit of its people and local businesses, opened up economic opportunities across Suffolk and helped to attract external investment.
- 2.6 Suffolk boasts a thriving agricultural and equine sector, with key towns like Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket at the heart of this economic activity which spreads across the county. Agriculture also plays a central role, with many rural villages supporting farmland dedicated to Suffolk's broad food and drink production and agri-business (for example Aspalls, Adnams, Greene King, Copella, Muntons and Baron Bigod cheese from Fen Farm Dairy) many of which are award winning. Newmarket is known as a global headquarters for horse racing and breeding. This sector employs around one in three people in the town and contributes over £256 million<sup>11</sup> annually for the local economy<sup>12</sup> and to the £1.47 billion<sup>13</sup> UK wide racing Industry. This success attracts leaders and innovators from the equine industry, significantly shaping the area's cultural identity and heritage.

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<sup>10</sup> Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science

<sup>11</sup> Newmarket's Horse Breeding and Racing Cluster 2022 Report featured in Suffolk News on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023

<sup>12</sup> Newmarket's Horse Breeding and Racing Cluster 2022 Report featured in Suffolk News on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023

<sup>13</sup> [The future of horseracing - House of Commons Library](#) Published Tuesday, 24 October 2023



- 2.7 With large rural areas, Suffolk is home to a flourishing agri-business supported by cutting-edge research in sustainable farming practices (for example the High Suffolk Farm Cluster) spread across large parts of the county. Over the past decade, Suffolk's agri-food sector has outpaced national job growth by 1.6% annually and is projected to grow to two and a half times its current size by 2050, reaching £4 billion<sup>14</sup>. This growth is enhanced through strong links to the Cambridge-Norwich Tech Corridor (CNTC), placing Suffolk at the forefront of precision agriculture, food innovation, and supply chain resilience. Suffolk's connections to research hubs like Cambridge and Norwich position it as a leader in national and international food markets. Enhanced transport links and joint investment initiatives have strengthened the economic ties between Suffolk and Cambridgeshire, but this could be enhanced further by better public transport links creating new opportunities for business, research, and skills development.
- 2.8 Additionally, there is a dynamic engineering and manufacturing sector that spans much of the county and is key in and around Haverhill and Sudbury. Supported by its proximity to Cambridge, Mildenhall plays a key role in the defence sector thanks to its strong RAF and US Air Force connections. While Adastral Park – on the former Royal Air Force Station site – is at the “heart of the UK's digital ecosystem”<sup>15</sup> and home to around 150 high-tech ICT companies and BT's innovation labs.
- 2.9 Felixstowe, home to the UK's largest container port and a component part of Freeport East (which spans a larger geography), handles 36% of the nation's container trade<sup>16</sup>. Its strategic location and advanced logistics infrastructure drives economic growth. However, the port requires expansion and investment to maintain its competitive edge and better connectivity to Suffolk's key road and rail corridors to link these ports to the rest of the UK. As part of the Freeport investment, Gateway 14, a business, innovation, and logistics park located outside Stowmarket, provides a base for manufacturing, logistics, and R&D businesses boosting the local economy and attracting investment into the region.
- 2.10 This economic base means that Suffolk is a net contributor to the UK economy, with international strengths. Its £21 billion GVA (Gross Value Added) economy has averaged 3.3% annual growth over the past decade, comparable to Cambridgeshire (£23.8 billion), Buckinghamshire (£18.1 billion), and Tyneside (£23.2bn)<sup>17</sup>. Suffolk is one of a few UK areas which is a net financial contributor to national wealth.

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<sup>14</sup> Suffolk Economic Strategy and Growth Plan 2024

<sup>15</sup> See <https://atadastral.co.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> Suffolk Economic Strategy and Growth Plan 2024

<sup>17</sup> ONS UK Small Area Gross Value Added Estimates [Nomis 12 November 2024]

## **Making the whole greater than the sum of its parts**

- 2.11 The rich diversity of Suffolk as a place, geography and economy is a huge strength. This unique diversity, however, places a premium on underpinning our economic aspirations with a single, unified economic plan for jobs, growth, skills and infrastructure, together with a fully aligned and integrated model for local public service delivery. Without this alignment we risk not fulfilling our economic potential and denying the full benefits of sustainable growth to Suffolk’s residents and businesses.
- 2.12 Devolution, coupled with LGR, presents a distinct opportunity to drive Suffolk’s sustainable growth.
- 2.13 Working with the Mayor, Suffolk as a single unitary authority will remove competition between places and enable the identification of clear and coherent investment priorities to maximise the benefits of devolution. A single unitary authority will enable us to celebrate the diversity of place to attract investment; maximise connectivity between places, people and business; and exploit economies of scale to ensure that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”.
- 2.14 However, to fully meet our ambitions for sustainable growth we need LGR and public service reform to create an aligned and integrated authority with the capacity and resilience to deliver. This will: make it simpler and easier to work with our partners across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors; enhance and strengthen the delivery of a range of critical services including social care, SEND and waste; avoid the risk of complex and costly disaggregation of county-wide services; and create a mechanism to better connect with and empower people in the decisions we make.
- 2.15 Therefore, we believe local government reorganisation to a single unitary authority for Suffolk, particularly when combined with a Mayoral Strategic Authority, will drive:
- 2.16 **Better outcomes for individuals and communities across Suffolk** through a new model of local government that will make people’s journey to and through council services simpler and smoother in a way that delivers better outcomes for them as individuals and has a greater impact on Suffolk. It will ensure consistency in the quality and cost of services across the diverse range of communities Suffolk is renowned for. It will also ensure that the benefits of innovation are maximised for everyone, such as our work around digital care.

- 2.17 **A means of facilitating growth so that Suffolk can access the most ambitious model of devolution.** Local government reorganisation provides an opportunity to adopt a Suffolk-wide focus through which to make strategic decisions around house building, infrastructure, skills and employment and economic development. A single unitary authority removes artificial boundaries and unhelpful competition, accelerates decisions and actions and means we can make the best decisions for our businesses and our economy.
- 2.18 **A stronger safety-net,** building on existing foundations for social care – maximising integration while minimising risks associated with disaggregation (which could negate any savings made from reorganisation). This will protect and support those in our society and across our rural, urban and coastal communities who most need support and often have the quietest voice. LGR provides an opportunity to bring together the delivery of key services that can make a genuine impact on people’s lives, enhancing their safety, health and wellbeing and making opportunities available to all, across Suffolk.
- 2.19 **A more resilient public sector model,** not just through more sustainable council services but by facilitating greater integration and alignment with the wider public sector. Through maintaining the alignment of geographic boundaries and simplifying engagement (across the public, private and voluntary and community sectors) this provides the greatest opportunity to: build on existing strengths; reflect our diverse and varied geography; innovate to be more efficient; establish a more sustainable financial footing; and mitigate the risks to our most critical services.
- 2.20 **A mechanism to better connect with and empower people in the decisions we make.** LGR provides the most straightforward and accountable democratic leadership of place. It is, however, not just about local authority leadership. LGR provides Suffolk the opportunity to co-produce, with the Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) and individual parish and town councils, an invigorated model to strengthen and supplement neighbourhood and community leadership. This model will create complementary mechanisms, tailored to the individual places in which they operate that empower residents, offer training and support, facilitate and support engagement (particularly with the Mayor and devolution) and provide clarity around decisions.

- 2.21 A better partner for Government.** The Government has set out clear and ambitious long-term goals for the country in terms of economic growth, the delivery of net zero, addressing crime, reforming childcare and education and improving the NHS. For all five of the Government’s Missions Suffolk has an important role to play. LGR has the potential to significantly enhance the delivery of these missions locally and nationally. This includes: capitalising on and learning from Suffolk’s long-term economic growth trajectory as a model for other more rural parts of the county; putting Suffolk at the head of the ambition to make Britain a clean energy superpower; and using reorganisation as a means to help break down barriers to opportunity through the joining up of services such as social care and housing or through the creation of better integrated, Suffolk-wide initiatives around population health and wellbeing.
- 2.22 The risk of distraction and disruption is however very real. There is also a danger that multiple unitary authorities exacerbate the challenges and work contrary to the missions. For example, a two unitary option for Suffolk would see all of Suffolk’s most deprived areas in one authority which would notably impact on the equality of opportunity. Or the need to disaggregate social care and education would pose risks to the market operation of these services, affecting volumes, competition, costs and recruitment. Therefore, a key consideration of any option must be how LGR can maximise the value of Suffolk’s diversity to make Suffolk a better partner with Government.
- 2.23 Together, these ambitions translate into critical success factors for us as we consider LGR. Alongside the government’s criteria, they will provide the decision-making framework against which we will assess each of the potential configuration options.

### 3 Why Now

- 3.1 In its current form, local government is facing unprecedented and urgent challenges. Suffolk has an aging population, with those aged over 65 currently making up 24.1% of residents - a figure projected to rise to 30.7% by 2040<sup>18</sup> higher than the England average. This demographic shift brings increased pressure on health and social care services, as age-related conditions such as dementia and mobility issues become more prevalent. At the same time, a shrinking working-age population, reduces the tax base, and intensifies recruitment challenges in key sectors.
- 3.2 Such local demographic, social and economic challenges are compounded by increasing amounts and complexity of demand, particularly in key services such as SEND, adult social care and homelessness. The combination of constrained funding, increasing demand and complexity are placing even well run, competent and innovative councils in challenging financial situations. Critically, this limits their ability to deliver the improved outcomes, support and ambition that local communities deserve.

- 3.3 Whilst a well governed and efficient council, the culmination of this higher and more complex demand coupled with systemic under funding (and short-term funding), means that for Suffolk County Council (like many unitary and county councils across England) budgets are increasingly strained. The Council's forecast budget gap is £33.1 million for 2026-27, increasing to £66.1 million in 2027-28<sup>19</sup> with significant additional pressure arising as a result of shortfalls in the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). Not only does this impede support for Suffolk's most vulnerable residents but also reduces the ability to invest in early help and other preventative measures that help people live independently and well for as long as possible.
- 3.4 To provide a sustainable and transformational solution to the existential challenges facing councils, fundamental change is needed. The combination of local government reorganisation and powerful cross county devolution would deliver such a step change.
- 3.5 Having played a leading role in previous reorganisation (2008) and recent devolution models (2015 mayoral combined authority with Norfolk and 2024 County Deal arrangements) our ambition to deliver the best outcomes for local communities and our economy through transformational change and devolution is evident. The combination of devolution and unitary local government offers the most effective way to realise that ambition and help our businesses and residents fulfil their potential.
- 3.6 We are committed to securing the maximum benefits of devolution and local government reorganisation for Suffolk's residents, businesses and communities. At its meeting on March 2025, Suffolk County Council agreed a motion stating that "the council believes that a single unitary authority for Suffolk would deliver the best outcomes for Suffolk's residents and best meet the criteria set by the Minister, by offering:
- **Simplicity for residents**
  - **Clearer accountability**
  - **Better use of funding**
  - **Better alignment of services**
  - **More effective decision-making**
  - **The greatest financial savings, efficiencies and economies of scale**
  - **Stronger leadership**
  - **More opportunities for local communities to engage and have a voice"**

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<sup>18</sup> ONS Population Projections

<sup>19</sup> Suffolk County Council Revenue Budget 2025-26 and Capital Programme 2025-29 Report 13 February 2025

- 3.7 As part of a bigger devolution vision, a single unitary authority for Suffolk would mean simpler, accountable strategic leadership and vision; simpler local structures that are more locally visible and easier to engage with and simpler regional leadership as part of a combined Mayoral Strategic Authority. It is the only unitary option for Suffolk that meets the 500,000 plus population element of government's LGR criteria, whilst also providing: simplicity as the county boundary encompasses existing districts and borough council boundaries; and equity by not creating any undue advantage or disadvantage that would result from splitting the area.
- 3.8 There has been limited time and opportunity to undertake detailed analysis, modelling or engagement for this interim plan. However, robust initial analysis and early engagement has been done – drawing on established financial and economic metrics and engagement with a range of stakeholders both in the past weeks as well as during the proposed county deal in 2024. In the forthcoming months, Suffolk County Council will undertake more detailed analysis, stakeholder engagement, modelling and testing to develop the most compelling, pragmatic and robust business case proposal for submission to government for 26 September 2025. This will include an evidence-based option appraisal so that the principles and initial preferences outlined here will be thoroughly tested. We are expecting that option appraisal to consider the benefits and risks associated with models for a single unitary authority for Suffolk (our preferred option from initial work); two unitary authorities and three unitary authorities within Suffolk.
- 3.9 We are very clear that in assessing those options for unitary government in Suffolk the model proposed in September's full business case must:
- Be simpler for residents –providing clarity about where to go for all local government functions.
  - Provide a single strong strategic voice for Suffolk and visible, accountable leadership.
  - Be simpler for public sector partners, businesses and Government.
  - Deliver in a more sustainable, efficient and effective way.
  - Offer greater accountability through simpler, clearer decision making and democratic processes.
  - Amplify the voice of local communities and enhance existing community representatives in shaping and improving outcomes for Suffolk.
  - Maximise the benefits of significant devolution for the County and a strong Suffolk voice with Government.
  - Be financially sustainable and deliver safe and legal services from day one.
  - Unlock opportunities for wider public sector reform and collaboration, for example, simpler delivery, easier access and clear ways to engage with local government in Suffolk.

## 4 What have we done to prepare for the Interim Plan

- 4.1 Since the 5 February 2025 letter from the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution inviting Suffolk to develop proposals for LGR, our focus has been on an initial programme of analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to enable us to begin to robustly consider the full range of potential configuration options. This is important to ensure that decisions – even at this early stage – are guided and underpinned by evidence. To do this we have focused on publicly available data to analyse the different configurations through two key lenses:
- I. A review looking across over 25 different socio-economic measures covering the area, demographics, deprivation, labour market, economy and housing. This analysis has provided a snapshot of each proposed new unitary configuration. This has enabled us to: compare the scale and nature of each unitary authority within a given configuration; benchmark the new unitaries against existing unitaries in England; and understand the scale of variation between different unitaries within each configuration.
  - II. A financial review based on a consideration of financial resilience, unit costs and spending variation and levels of indebtedness of each of the new unitary configurations. This work has been based on Revenue Outturn data alongside data published by the individual councils to deepen the analysis.
- 4.2 For unitary configurations where districts are being split, Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level data has been used and aggregated where available. Otherwise, disaggregation has been applied using the most relevant measure (e.g. population, households, businesses). Alongside this baseline analysis we have also begun to analyse:
- III. The direct financial implications of reorganisation. At this stage, we have focused on: (i) the transition costs in terms of people, IT, engagement and the establishment of a new council; and (ii) the costs associated with the disaggregation of services currently delivered by one authority.
  - IV. The efficiency and cashable savings that arise from the consolidation of services and operations such as senior management, back office and assets, services delivery and governance.

- 4.3 For the county, districts and borough councils our analysis to date draws on a combination of national statistics and local authority financial data through accounts, Revenue Outturn ('RO') and Medium Term Financial Strategies (MTFS). This has been supplemented by analysis using Grant Thornton's Financial Foresights tool, which assesses financial resilience by taking Revenue Outturn ('RO') data submitted by local authorities and projects forward income and expenditure based on macro-level demand and inflation assumptions, and data lifted directly from the council's MTFS to assess the financial resilience of the different options.
- 4.4 This analysis has been supplemented by a broad range of different engagement activities, which are detailed in response to question 'f' below.
- 4.5 Together, this analysis has provided a robust platform to both inform discussions and decisions to date while also providing a strong foundation on which to build the detailed analysis required for the full business case. To support this, we have also started building the programme infrastructure and delivery plans required to successfully implement the next phase of work.
- 4.6 The remainder of this documents sets out our responses to the eight questions set by Government as part of their request for Interim Plans.

**5 a) Identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful**







- 5.1 **Feedback:** It would be helpful to understand the timing, format and status of feedback on the Interim Plans. It is imperative that the feedback is timely, publicly available and in written form to avoid any misinterpretation and encourage transparency.
- 5.2 **Resourcing:** Funding and capacity support to develop robust business cases and facilitate effective transition will be needed to overcome the challenge of delivering throughout the LGR process in addition to the challenges of maintaining council business as usual. This is acknowledged in the Minister's invitation letter along with the intention to provide some funds for preparing to take forward any proposal. Dedicated funding and support have also been mentioned in discussion with officials. Further clarity on the scale and timing of this would be invaluable in programme planning the development of business cases and subsequent transition and transformation plans.



- 5.3 **Advice on local policy activity:** Specific advice will be needed on how to incorporate policy areas, for example, preparation of local plans and the future of the statutory override of Dedicated Schools Grant in LGR business cases and transition plans.
- 5.4 **Government policy:** It would be beneficial if the complexity of implementing LGR whilst continuing to deliver the best possible service outcomes and value for money could be considered by all departments in the application of new government policy. Significant policy reform, such as the new 10-year NHS plan, children’s services reforms, the new industrial strategy and forthcoming spending review is expected; therefore, working with areas undertaking LGR would help to maximise opportunities and mitigate associated risks.
- 5.5 As part of this further clarity around future local government funding settlements, funding formulae and the retention of savings locally would also help inform and shape the financial analysis undertaken.
- 5.6 **Timeline:** Whilst LGR is an opportunity to deliver better, more streamlined, efficient local government, implementing it is a complex task. Therefore, as well as timely support from government departments (including but not exclusively, MHCLG), a realistic timeline for transition will be critical. We commit to working with government to develop these.
- 5.7 **Budget setting:** To support the process of 2026-7 budget setting, we would welcome a series of principles and guiderails for all authorities involved in reorganisation. This will be important to ensure a consistent approach in terms of expenditure and the use of reserves. It will also support the establishment of the new unitary authority and provide clarity around shadow operation and decision making.
- 5.8 **Ministerial criteria:** The criteria in the Ministerial invitation letter are clear that “new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more” as a guiding principle. We believe that this minimum guideline offers the best chance of creating new unitary authorities across England that are financially sustainable and able to deliver the best outcomes for their communities. Therefore, clear assurance that any exceptions from the 500,000 minimum population will be minimal in government’s application of the criteria would be welcome.
- 5.9 Alongside this, guidance on the format and structure of the submissions will be welcomed. This will help ensure consistency of analysis, facilitate the sharing of data and ultimately reduce the burden in completing the submission.
- 5.10 **Civic arrangements:** A proud and historic county, Suffolk has a strong and coherent identity. Part of this history includes civic and ceremonial arrangements that we would ask are protected for example, the historic mayoralty in and civic status of the county town Ipswich.


**6 b) Identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils that will offer the best structures for delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services across the area, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities**

6.1 At this early stage in the process, our long list of possible structures has included seven different configurations:

Configuration	Districts/Borough	Population (2023) <sup>20</sup>	Area (HA) <sup>21</sup>
<b>ONE UNITARY OPTION</b>			
1	 1 Suffolk wide geography	776,442	379,997
<b>TWO UNITARY OPTIONS</b>			
2	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 West Suffolk, Mid Suffolk, Babergh</li> <li>2 Ipswich, East Suffolk</li> </ul>	389,964	249,947
3	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 West Suffolk, Babergh</li> <li>2 Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk, Ipswich</li> </ul>	281,935	162,840
4	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 West Suffolk, Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk</li> <li>2 Ipswich, Babergh</li> </ul>	541,192	316,674
<b>THREE UNITARY OPTIONS</b>			
5	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 East Suffolk</li> <li>2 Babergh, Ipswich</li> <li>3 Mid Suffolk, West Suffolk</li> </ul>	247,100	126,099
6	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Mid Suffolk, Babergh</li> <li>2 Ipswich, East Suffolk</li> <li>3 West Suffolk</li> </ul>	203,901	146,479
		386,478	130,050
		186,063	103,468

<sup>20</sup> ONS 2023 Mid-Year Estimates

<sup>21</sup> ONS: Standard Area Measurements for Administrative Areas (December 2022) in the UK

7		1 Splits Babergh, Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk to create an enlarged area around West Suffolk	253,340	142,305
		2 A larger area around Ipswich covering parts of Babergh, Mid Suffolk and East Suffolk.	262,222	47,710
		3 Majority of Mid and East Suffolk	260,880	189,982

6.2 Our expectation is that the detailed business case will focus the analysis on a short list of one unitary, one of the two unitary configurations (most likely configuration 2), and one three unitary configuration (most likely configuration 7 or a variation of this). This short list has been selected for two main reasons, First, it provides alternative options; and second, it includes options that are being actively considered (and promoted) by the districts and borough councils within Suffolk. Early analysis also suggests that there is limited variation in the headline socio-economic and financial analysis between the different two and three unitary configurations.

6.3 In headline terms, regardless of how the Suffolk geographic area is split, the two unitary models result in areas of differing geographical scale with notable variation in the levels of rurality and deprivation. For example, if configuration 2 in the table above was implemented, 53% of unitary 1 would be rural and sparse rural compared to only 22% in unitary 2<sup>22</sup>; while unitary 1 would have no areas in the most deprived decile, but 9.5% of unitary 2 would fall in this category<sup>23</sup>). These two unitary authorities would also have differing economic structures (particularly in terms of their business base and productivity). Given the desire to achieve equity as far as possible between any new configurations, it is this variation that has raised concerns around the extent to which these configurations could result in undue disadvantage between any two possible new authorities.

<sup>22</sup>ONS Rural Urban Classification 2011, Note: percentages are representative of the proportion of Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) classified as ‘rural’ or ‘sparse rural’.

<sup>23</sup>English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, DHCLG Note: percentages are representative of the proportion of Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs).

- 6.4 For the three unitary models there were similar concerns around undue disadvantage and equity in terms of levels of rurality and deprivation. This alongside a nervousness around the economic scale of these options with both the working age population (which is shrinking) and the economic scale in terms of GVA (Gross Value Added) below the current national unitary average. This creates a potential risk in terms of providing an appropriate tax base to generate income.
- 6.5 From a financial perspective, the early analysis shows limited variability between the two unitary configurations in terms of core spending power and the council tax base. There is however more notable variability with the levels of debt, the projected funding gap in 2028/29 and the scale of unallocated reserves available. It was a similar, if not even starker position in terms of the analysis of the three unitary configurations with one of the potential new unitaries carrying nearly twice as much debt and all three having far smaller unallocated reserves given their scale.
- 6.6 Another area of variability was in the indicative efficiency savings of each of the options. Alongside the forecast projected savings for Suffolk, from the County Councils Network most recent national study on LGR, we have begun the process of developing a locally driven savings model which adopts a robust “bottom up” approach to the analysis by looking at the data and specific characteristics of each of the authorities involved. The first iteration of this more granular analysis, suggests that savings resulting from consolidation show that one unitary authority could generate notably greater recurrent savings, than the other options, with a range from:
- £16.0 million to £25.8 million for one unitary authority;
  - £10.8 million to £21.0 million for two unitary authorities; and
  - £7.2 million to £17.7 million for three unitary authorities.
- 6.7 As part of this analysis, we have used the forecast projected savings from the County Councils Network study for Suffolk as the top end of the range, reflecting an aspiration to ensure that local government reorganisation is as efficient as possible.
- 6.8 It is also important to note that with additional unitary authorities there is a significant risk of additional costs from disaggregation of services and duplication of leadership roles. The cost range for the additional costs of disaggregation in Suffolk, provided by the CCN national analysis, is £12.5 million for two unitaries or £20.7 million for three unitaries. These recurrent costs therefore significantly reduce or even outweigh in the case of the three unitary options, the level of savings that can be realised. A summary of the national analysis provided by the County Councils Network can be seen in the table below.

	1 Unitary (£m)	2 Unitaries (£m)	3 Unitaries (£m)
Total Annual Benefit <sup>24</sup>	25.8	21.0	17.7
Annual Disaggregation cost	0	(12.5)	(20.7)

6.9 As well as developing the detail around the savings from consolidation there are three additional factors that we will build into this analysis as part of the full business case:

- (i) consideration of the timing over which savings will materialise, and which ones can be reasonably expected to be realised in year 1;
- (ii) appropriately reflecting the costs and risks of disaggregation both in terms of the direct costs of splitting county services (and/or the creation of alternative delivery models) and the risk of failure in terms of these critical services; and
- (iii) estimating the potential savings that could arise from further service transformation and the introduction of new delivery models.

6.10 The variability between the different configurations, alongside the initial financial considerations will form a central tenet of our continued analysis and detailed work as we seek to ensure that the best possible evidence is available to support decision making.

6.11 Alongside the initial data analysis, the emerging preference for a single unitary authority for Suffolk was supported by a strong sense from both officers and members that, for example:

- Moving to a single unitary authority for Suffolk for waste collection and disposal will remove duplication and create a more integrated, efficient, and forward-thinking waste service, building on the exemplary work already delivered across the county. Suffolk County Council has a proven track record in waste disposal, with nationally recognised facilities like the Energy from Waste (EfW) plant near Great Blakenham. This diverts thousands of tonnes of waste from landfill while generating renewable energy, providing income generation opportunities for the council and achieving award winning status for its environmental performance. The current two-tier system where districts and borough councils handle collection, and the county manages disposal creates inefficiencies, duplication, and inconsistent services for residents. By bringing these responsibilities under one organisation it would be possible to deliver a seamless, area-wide waste strategy – not possible under a two or three unitary configuration. This will unlock further innovation, reduce costs, improve recycling rates, and make it easier for people to understand and use their local waste services – setting the standard for sustainable waste management nationally.

<sup>24</sup> County Councils Network (CCN). The numbers in this table only reflect the national analysis, in the text above the table we provide commentary around our local analysis.

- A single unitary authority for Suffolk will enable CYP services and housing services to work seamlessly together, providing more coordinated and effective support for vulnerable groups. This will strengthen early help to prevent children and families becoming homeless, which can have a detrimental effect on the life outcomes of those children and young people, particularly care leavers. A single unitary authority could help align housing strategies with the needs of young people leaving care, ensuring smoother transitions into safe, stable accommodation. This will reduce the risk associated with those aged 16 and 17-years-old presenting as homeless, and improve long-term outcomes. Joined-up planning across the whole of Suffolk, shared budgets, and integrated teams would also facilitate tailored support, wraparound services, and early intervention, creating a clearer, simpler system that puts young people at the centre of decision-making and gives them the best start into their journey of independence. The same opportunities apply to ASC around supported living and extra care.
- A single unitary authority for Suffolk will also be able to deliver a more effective early help and integrated approach to preventative public health by aligning local services, resources, and strategies across the area. This will enable tailored services focused on need and reduce pressure on the NHS and mental health services. A single unitary approach will strengthen the ability of local government to work with Integrated Neighbourhood Teams on health and social care. As reflected in the recent NHS Confederation paper on neighbourhood health, the best way to address growing demands on health and care services, improve health and wellbeing, reduce health inequalities, and deliver on our wider socio-economic priorities is by engaging directly and locally with neighbourhoods and communities. By bringing together key functions such as housing, social care, leisure, parks, libraries, and cultural services under one council, Suffolk could create a seamless and cohesive strategy to improve population health. Working closely with both Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB) and Suffolk and North East Essex ICB, we could more effectively deliver initiatives like Feel Good Suffolk, which aims to support residents in leading healthier lives through increased access to physical activity, mental health services, and healthy lifestyle support.
- Equally, a single unitary authority for Suffolk would best align with the Constabulary and PCC's (Police and Crime Commissioner) countywide remit enabling more preventative work to ensure that Suffolk's communities are safer, stronger and resilient. The unitary model would remove the fragmentation seen in the current two-tier system, making it easier to coordinate and scale these initiatives across the entire county.
- Award-winning public health data, like the CoronaWatch Dashboard and Suffolk InfoLink, would play a crucial role in identifying local health needs, tracking progress, and ensuring that interventions are targeted where they are needed most. For example, data insights could help identify areas with high

levels of inactivity or poor mental health, enabling the council and ICB to target Feel Good Suffolk activities such as exercise programmes, social prescribing, and wellbeing events more effectively. Furthermore, libraries, parks, leisure centres, and museums could serve as key hubs for delivering these services, offering spaces for physical activities, mental health support, and community engagement. These venues could host health-related events, fitness classes, and social support networks, all designed to encourage more people to take part in healthy activities and engage with wellbeing services. By consolidating all these services and using real-time, evidence-driven insights, a single unitary authority could create a more coordinated, efficient, and impactful preventative health system. This would not only improve individual health outcomes but also reduce pressure on the NHS by addressing health issues before they require more intensive medical intervention, leading to healthier, more resilient communities.

- A single unitary authority for Suffolk will also enable more effective and integrated planning for growth, housing, infrastructure, and education by uniting responsibilities currently split between county, districts and borough councils. This joined-up approach will ensure that new housing developments are strategically located and properly coordinated with the delivery of schools, transport, and community infrastructure, creating well-designed neighbourhoods where people want to live, raise families and work. Managing school place planning and catchment areas under one council would also help balance demand, ensuring families have access to high-quality education within their local communities. Suffolk is one of the poorest funded by government for education for children, and a multi-unitary Suffolk solution risks further disparity, with the potential for uneven funding. Today Suffolk ranks 138th out of 151 councils for high needs block funding per pupil, and 145th out of 151 councils for DSG (Dedicated Schools Grant) funding per mainstream pupil.
- Crucially, while operating at a countywide strategic level, the efficiencies of a single unitary authority for Suffolk will allow strong local communication and representation through area-based teams, neighbourhood forums, and dedicated local engagement officers. This would ensure that the specific needs and priorities of individual towns, villages, and neighbourhoods continue to shape development, giving residents a clear voice in how their communities grow, while delivering a more efficient, joined-up system to support sustainable, thriving places across Suffolk.

6.12 While some of these alignment opportunities and indicative efficiency saving opportunities may offer benefits under the two and three unitary configurations, the potential to realise these benefits will be significantly hindered by the need to first disaggregate services such as adult social care and waste (or at least the establishment of alternative delivery and operating models). The costs and

complexity involved in this disaggregation therefore risks offsetting any efficiency and cost savings generated.

- 6.13 The risk of unnecessary fragmentation is a significant concern, especially for critical services like social care, SEND, trading standards and waste. Disaggregation of these services would create additional transition costs, particularly if new Suffolk-wide bodies need to be established (that would sit above multiple unitary authorities in order to provide a strategic and joined up approach to delivery), or through operating in parallel and duplicating efforts.
- 6.14 This fragmentation poses significant risks to the market operation of these services, affecting volumes, competition, and recruitment. This would have a destabilising effect on the care market, in particular, and could create a “postcode lottery” in terms of the care provision available. A fragmented social care service also significantly hinders the ability to act strategically over a wider geography to deliver the best outcomes for residents. For example, in the two and three unitary models, one area might see higher unmet demand for foster care because the children needing care predominantly live in that area while most foster parents live in a different authority area. A single unitary authority would remove this artificial boundary.
- 6.15 Disaggregation also raises a number of concerns about the ability to recruit and retain a sustainable workforce, particularly within social care and SEND. There would not only be a requirement to recruit to additional senior roles (at the same time as a number of neighbouring authorities) but there will also be unnecessary competition and potentially inequitable pay scales as authorities seek to recruit hard to fill vacancies.
- 6.16 For other services, such as trading standards, disaggregation would remove the critical mass required to ensure that there is the capacity and capability required to cover the multiple duties and responsibilities. Disaggregation will also significantly weaken the resilience and flexibility of the service and limit its ability to shift resources to deal with new and emerging priorities such as animal livestock disease outbreaks.
- 6.17 Again, and as noted above, these areas will be analysed in significantly more detail as part of the development of the detailed business case.



6.18 The establishment of a single unitary authority also offers by far the best opportunity to maximise place-based governance, delivery and operations. By establishing an authority with greater capacity and resilience there is an opportunity to deepen and broaden locality-based teams for example CYP, planning and housing. From a governance perspective, a single authority enables a parish and town model that is focused on the places and neighbourhoods that the people living in them recognise. It creates a link between strategic decisions and local implications. It provides a mechanism to empower and equip communities. It is an opportunity to enhance civic responsibility and develop the next generation of local leaders. Through the development of the business case, we will be co-producing with the Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) and individual parish and town councils an invigorated model to strengthen and supplement neighbourhood and community leadership.

**7 c) Include indicative costs and arrangements in relation to any options including planning for future service transformation opportunities**

- 7.1 Estimating the costs of transition is inherently complex and will vary – in some cases significantly – depending on the ultimate option chosen.
- 7.2 To begin the process of modelling the likely costs we have looked across five core areas of people, programme management, public engagement, ICT (Information and Communication Technology) systems and the establishment of a new council. In addition to this and based on experience from previous rounds of LGR, there is a need for a contingency budget.
- 7.3 Early stage analysis suggests that the one-off transition costs could be in the range of:
- £14.9 million to £24.0 million for 1 Unitary Authority
  - £19.4 million to £28.4 million for 2 Unitary Authorities
  - £24.0 million to £33.0 million for 3 Unitary Authorities

- 7.4 The biggest single variable within this range is the potential redundancy costs which cannot be accurately calculated until later in the process and even then, will only be estimates. As part of the calculation of these costs, a very important consideration will be the timing and the point at which they are realised. To successfully deliver the transition – alongside business-as-usual operation – both pre- and post- vesting day there will be a need to retain a certain level of capacity. This will be particularly true if disaggregation of county wide services was required and therefore significantly increasing the costs of the two and three unitary options. Retention of key people will also be more pertinent for certain roles and functions. For example an experienced finance team will be important in ensuring that the financial position of the new authority is well understood, and that accurate and timely numbers are available to officers, members and central government, with an element of independent assurance.
- 7.5 Again, the Council has received forecast transition costs for Suffolk from the County Councils Network. As can be seen from the forecasts below, the assumptions used in the national analysis do not appear unreasonable when compared with work undertaken locally. Further work is ongoing to validate and solidify the range of assumptions and detail needed to inform the calculation of transition costs. Regardless of source, the numbers show that the level of transition costs do increase markedly as the number of authorities do.
- 7.6 Using the national analysis to bring together the savings and disaggregation costs set out in answer b and the numbers presented above, show the potential net benefits after five years.

	1 Unitary (£m)	2 Unitaries (£m)	3 Unitaries (£m)
Total Annual Benefit <sup>25</sup>	25.7	21.0	17.7
One-off transition costs	(18.9)	(25.5)	(32.2)
Annual Disaggregation cost	0	(12.5)	(20.7)
One-year impact of disaggregation	0	(22.7)	(40.0)
Five-year impact of disaggregation	0	(91.9)	(155.2)
Net Benefit after five years	103.6	11.7	(51.6)
Recurring benefit after five years	25.8	8.5	(3.0)

7.7 The issue of timing is also relevant to the planning of transformation opportunities and both the costs and savings associated with these. As part of the preparation of this interim plan we have begun the process of developing a long list of potential transformation opportunities a sample of which have been identified in question b. Some of these opportunities relate to the integration of services, others to the economies of scale from a larger authority and others will build on existing transformation plans (although the realism and scale of some of the existing opportunities may need to change depending on the final configuration and option chosen). The detailed costs and potential savings of these transformation opportunities will be set out in detail in the final submission.

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<sup>25</sup> County Councils Network (CCN). The numbers in this table only reflect the national analysis, in the text above the table we provide commentary around our local analysis.

**8 d) Include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance**

- 8.1 Suffolk currently has 308 elected councillors, excluding town and parish councillors, representing over 200 wards and divisions of varying geographic sizes<sup>26</sup>. These councillors collectively serve on over 70 council committees and sub-committees, many of which perform similar functions across different parts of the county. Subject to the involvement of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE), the proposal for a new unitary council of either one, two or three unitaries will consolidate the number of councillors.
- 8.2 Wards for councillors vary due to their distinct geographic and community characteristics. For example some are significantly larger. Understanding these differences is essential for enabling strong local representation, ensuring that the specific needs and characteristics of each area are addressed whilst also taking into consideration the envisaged caseload for councillors. By tailoring services to the unique aspects of each ward, we can achieve greater service efficiency and contribute to broader public sector reform.
- 8.3 Until further work is done, we suggest a range of 90 to 140 councillors. This would be just under the mid-point between the current district and county electoral averages in Suffolk and would be broadly consistent with other new unitaries of a comparable size. A council of this size would:
- Create a single cohort of councillors, all elected every four years. This will support long-term development of strategic leadership and make best use of democratic support and resources for member development.
  - Ensure effective governance and decision-making by consolidating the number of councillors and committees, supporting a more efficient governance model.
  - Create time and space for councillors across the county to effectively carry out their community leadership and representative role, in turn supporting the development of proposed neighbourhood working arrangements. This will strengthen local engagement and enhance local accountability and leadership.
  - Work with town and parish councils to develop an invigorated model to strengthen and supplement neighbourhood and community leadership, facilitating additional devolution where appropriate
  - A reduction in councillors will lead to a decrease in the total amount spent on members' allowances, resulting in savings for the public purse.

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<sup>26</sup> Local Government Boundary Commission for England, Electoral Data 2023/24

- 8.4 As part of the detailed analysis it will be important to test the strengths and weaknesses of this range, particularly in terms of learning from others who have higher and lower numbers of councillors per elector. As part of this review, it will be important to also consider other forms of representation through the parishes and towns and how these can complement and strengthen local representation and decision making.

**9 e) Include early views on how new structures will support devolution ambitions**

- 9.1 Suffolk County Council is committed to securing the maximum benefits of devolution and LGR for Suffolk's residents, businesses and communities. Membership in the Devolution Priority Programme, enables us to build on the work in 2015-16 and 2022-24 to establish the most appropriate model of devolution and maximise opportunities for our communities.
- 9.2 The English Devolution White Paper sets out a very clear vision for devolved local governance. LGR will provide simpler structures to support the Mayoral Strategic Authority and enhance the convening power of local elected representatives described in the White Paper. Its vision also includes contiguity and alignment of public sector boundaries as a means for wider public service collaboration and reform to improve outcomes for Suffolk and Norfolk (for example the Norfolk & Waveney ICB and Health and Wellbeing Board). This is also consistent with government's LGR criteria and particularly, the guiding principle of unitary authorities of 500,000 plus population. It also meets the preferred population size for a Mayoral Strategic Authority stated in the White Paper as 1.5 million.
- 9.3 A single unitary authority for Suffolk will connect the Mayor and the Mayoral Strategic Authority to Suffolk's diverse communities (not simply geographically) through robust community engagement and empowerment. It will enhance existing community representation and engagement, for example, Town and Parish Councils and Suffolk's 14 Integrated Neighbourhood Teams. It will also explore new ways for the voices of local people to be heard. Learning from other unitary and combined authority areas, this could include citizens' panels, area boards/forums (for example based around areas of natural local interest).

- 9.4 Suffolk County Council’s September business case will propose a model of LGR designed to provide the most ambitious, sustainable, innovative and locally anchored council. We want LGR to secure the greatest benefits from devolution and wider policy reform that best meets our diverse population’s needs, enhances Suffolk’s significant economic potential and protects its natural capital. This will also help deliver the Government’s plan for change and growth and help strengthen the Eastern Region’s position.
- 9.5 Devolution to Norfolk and Suffolk via a Strategic Authority will enhance local governance and bolster community support as well as complement local government reorganisation and our ambitions for that. Key areas where this will happen include:
- Adult education and skills will help people get back to work, boost economic growth and productivity by partnering with business boards.
  - Improved rural and public transport will enhance accessibility and connectivity through infrastructure improvements.
  - Health improvement will be achieved with coherent planning and housing development alongside strategic public health programmes and close working with the ICBs.
  - Housing and planning will adopt a strategic approach with local understanding.
  - Flood and coastal management with a joined-up approach to flood and coastal erosion risk management will protect businesses and communities from significant risk.
- 9.6 All of these initiatives, and others, will provide greater local autonomy and help create a more resilient and self-sufficient local government.

**10 f) Include a summary of local engagement that has been undertaken, and any views express, along with your further plans for wide local engagement to help shape your developing proposals**

- 10.1 In developing this interim plan, Suffolk County Council has undertaken local engagement in three ways:
- (i) As part of an online survey, delivered collaboratively with Suffolk’s district and borough councils and responded to by local stakeholders. At this initial stage, those selected were from county-wide organisations and were a diverse group, including health, police, association of local councils, education providers, Community Action Suffolk and business groups. We gathered initial feedback to understand their priorities for local government reorganisation. Ten responses were received by the deadline
  - (ii) Through direct informal engagement with local stakeholders through existing relationships and meetings; and

- (iii) Cross-party briefings and drop-in sessions for Suffolk County Councillors.

10.2 A high-level summary of the main themes that emerged from the engagement is set out below.

An opportunity for efficiency savings, becoming financially and operationally sustainable and also reducing duplication	A 'one-stop-shop' for all council services creating less confusion for the public about who delivers what in Suffolk	The same level of service wherever you live (especially for social care/safeguarding)	Throughout the process there is a need to communicate with all stakeholders involved
An opportunity to streamline decision-making, remove 'red tape' and create fewer layers of bureaucracy	A chance to focus on the needs of local communities and ensure supported access to services wherever you live	It could create better joined-up services and collaboration with other organisations particularly those who work cross county borders and don't have the same borders as unitary council(s) (eg NHS and Broads Authority)	There is a need to learn from other areas who have already been through LGR regarding the best practice/pitfalls etc

### Further plans for wider local engagement to help shape the developing proposals

10.3 As demonstrated by Suffolk County Council's public and stakeholder engagement on the proposed county deal in 2024, we are committed to, and experienced at, engaging around big change propositions such as those proposed under the devolution priority programme. In 2024, we engaged more than 1,500 people before the consultation launched, and during the consultation received 1,787 responses to the open survey and 1,024 responses to the independent representative telephone survey.

- 10.4 We intend to replicate and build on this engagement approach to deliver our biggest and best ever programme of community and stakeholder engagement. This programme will include, but not exhaustively, sample survey work, a Suffolk-wide programme of face-to-face and online engagement events, working with stakeholders to involve residents that are typically harder to reach and an integrated multimedia information and education campaign.
- 10.5 The above will be coordinated by a dedicated in-house engagement team, culminating in a comprehensive engagement report. This report will demonstrate the full extent of the engagement that will take place, provide a detailed account of the views expressed, draw out key themes, and show how engagement will influence the proposals in the full business case. Where possible, we will collaborate with the district councils. Additionally, a peer-led analysis of the quality of the engagement, including its inclusivity and accessibility, will be included.

**11 g) Set out indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any arrangements proposed to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area**

- 11.1 The indicative costs of preparing a proposal and establishing an implementation team will be worked through as part of the business case and the costs will ultimately depend on which options are chosen. In preparation, a new role of Executive Director of Organisational Change for Devolution and LGR has been created to oversee the LGR process, development of the business case and ultimately implementation of major change to unitary local government. This role will further support the county council's aim of strong engagement with MHCLG, councillors, staff and partners. Recruitment to this post is imminent.
- 11.2 A weekly meeting format has also been established to address LGR. Where possible, we will manage broader leadership and council governance by utilising existing structures. Additionally, we will leverage the information governance board, corporate performance board, capital strategy board, and transformation board to further develop our initiatives. Officers and councillors will provide input in the design and development of how services will be delivered.



11.3 The establishment of the chosen unitary structure will shape the future council, necessitating the integration of skills from both county, districts and borough council colleagues. Regardless of the model selected by the government, we will collaborate closely with the districts and borough councils to ensure their expertise, skills, and resources transition smoothly into the new organisational form. This collaboration will be crucial for scenario planning and ensuring a seamless transition and effective implementation of services. The goal is to guarantee the delivery of critical services, such as those for CYP, ASC, SEND, and safeguarding, so that residents are protected in the event of service disaggregation.

11.4 All decisions will be signed off through the relevant governance processes within the council, ensuring that each decision is thoroughly reviewed and approved by the appropriate committees and boards. This process guarantees transparency, accountability, and adherence to established protocols, fostering trust and confidence in the council's operations.

**12 h) Set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions as this work moves forward and to help balance the decisions needed now to maintain service delivery and ensure value for money for council taxpayers, with those key decisions that will affect the future success of any new councils in the area**

12.1 Suffolk's public sector leaders have a long history of collaborative working. The Suffolk Public Sector Leaders (SPSL) group, whose membership includes all councils' Leaders (supported by Chief Executives), the PCC, Constabulary and NHS (National Health Service), has a track record of effective partnership working, where Suffolk leaders have worked dynamically and at pace. This includes a longstanding commitment to devolution to achieve better outcomes for Suffolk communities. Specifically, all the Leaders of Suffolk's councils have begun bespoke devolution discussions since Suffolk became part of the Devolution Priority Programme. There are also regular dedicated meetings between individual districts and borough Leaders and Chief Executives and those of County Council, focusing on current service delivery issues.

12.2 This leadership is supported by regular meetings of Suffolk's councils Chief Executives and meetings of the wider public sector officer leadership. In addition, since becoming part of the DPP, councils' Chief Executives are meeting weekly. Beneath these leadership arrangements, there are several collaborative officer and councillor (Executive/Cabinet members) groups for shared priority policy themes. These include the collaborative communities board, climate change environment and energy board, housing board and safer stronger communities' board.

- 12.3 All of this is underpinned by comprehensive and well-established shared data insight and analysis which includes Suffolk's Office of Data Analytics (jointly funded). Publicly available data resource has underpinned the development of Suffolk councils' interim plan approaches. These include: the data warehouse [Suffolk Observatory – Welcome to the Suffolk Observatory](#), various analyses on [Healthy Suffolk JSNA - Healthy Suffolk](#) (Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Annual Public Health Report, data dashboards, Suffolk in 20 years).
- 12.4 Thus far, these collaborative arrangements have provided data to inform councils' interim plans and led to a joint approach to initial stakeholder engagement where a single letter was sent to key countywide stakeholders on behalf of all Suffolk councils. While it is unlikely that Suffolk councils will coalesce around a single business case proposal for the September submission, there is consensus that all councils will need to be pragmatic in working collaboratively to implement whatever unitary model is decided for Suffolk, so that it is best placed to deliver the optimum benefits for local communities, residents, councillors and staff and provide the most resilient and effective model for local public service delivery in Suffolk.

**END**