

## **ONE Haverhill Partnership Board**

Thursday, 13 November 2025 commencing at **10.30am**

### **Meeting by Teams**

#### **Board Members**

Henry Wilson, MBE	HW	Chair, and Chief Executive, REACH
Alex Till	AT	Vice Chair, and CEO, MENTA
Cllr Bruce Davidson	BD	HTC Councillor
Karen Dennis	KD	DWP, Employer Advisor for Haverhill
Helen Earl	HE	Epicentre Manger
Clare Morgan	CM	Regional Head of Personal and Professional Learning Centres, Eastern Education Group (EEG)
Karen Points	KP	Abbeycroft Leisure
Cllr David Roach	DR	Suffolk County Councillor
Cllr David Smith	DS	Haverhill Town Councillor

#### **In Attendance**

Ian Gallin	IG	CEO, West Suffolk Council
Rachael Mann	RM	Chief Financial Officer, West Suffolk Council
Jon Eaton	JE	Families and Communities, West Suffolk Council
Colin Poole	CP	Town Clerk, Haverhill Town Council
Vicky Phillips	VP	Deputy Town Clerk

#### **Apologies**

Cllr Nadia Cenci	Suffolk County Councillor
Deborah Barton	Assistant Principal and Professional Learning, Eastern Education Group (EEG)
Dr David Brandon	Clinical Lead GP, Unity Healthcare
Rev'd Max Drinkwater	Priest-in-Charge, Haverhill and Withersfield
Vicky Hogg	Headteacher, Clements Primary Academy
Cllr Patrick Hanlon	West Suffolk Councillor
Anne Johnson	Business Development Manager, Citizens Advice West Suffolk

Julia Nix OBE DL,	East Anglia District Manager for Department for Work and Pensions
Dr Firas Watfeh	Haverhill Family Practice
Vanessa Whitcombe	Headteacher, Castle Manor Academy

**Item** **ACTION**

1. **Welcome**

Henry Wilson opened the meeting by welcoming Ian Gallin and his colleague Rachael Mann, explaining that Ian would be speaking to the Board about the three county unitary model.

IG and RM had been invited as council officers to present and explain the business case approved by West Suffolk councillors for submission to the government. The views he and RM expressed at the meeting on the merits of that case therefore reflected the adopted position of the Council, and were not his own (unless specifically indicated otherwise). The business case for three unitaries also needed to be considered alongside the case for a single unitary prepared by Suffolk County Council.

2. **Apologies**

CP read out the apologies given

3. IG introduced Rachael Mann, who would be explaining the finance section of the presentation.

IG outlined what the government was trying to achieve:

1. Audit, which had by in large been resolved
2. Funding reform and multi-year settlements
3. Devolution, which is very closely linked in terms of the statutory progress going through government. From the government's perspective devolution and LGR is hand in hand.
4. LGR

IG explained the details of boundaries and number of councillors. It is an opportunity for wider public sector reform, regardless of whether there is one or three unitary councils, all residents will ultimately be served by unitary authorities that combine county, district, and borough responsibilities. This will create opportunities for more integrated services and fewer gaps in delivery.

Public sector reform is essential, especially in areas like adult social care and children's services. IG believes the government is committed to this process, largely because it is tied to devolution, and that Suffolk is progressing quickly toward establishing an elected Mayor and launching the Mayoral County Combined Authority next May.

IG emphasised that the role of Town and Parish councils have not been forgotten and the new unitary will continue to have a relationship with them. IG will be showing a presentation which highlights that local government reorganisation inevitably involves differing perspectives. Despite debate and alternative

proposals, collaboration across the system remains strong, particularly in relation to devolution. As the process enters the consultation period, the proposal and case for change are being shared more widely. District and Borough leaders initially considered two or three councils and, following engagement, financial analysis, and examination of local needs, identified three unitary councils as the preferred model. This approach is intended to support economic, employment, and housing growth, and to reflect the distinct opportunities and challenges within different areas.

Extensive engagement has been undertaken, including discussions with town and parish councils and various organisations. Financial modelling has involved both external work by KPMG, drawing on national experience, and additional internal modelling to ensure robustness.

The case for change is structured around seven principles aligned with government criteria. The proposal would merge the existing county and five district/borough councils into three unitary authorities, generating an estimated £34 million in annual savings, enabling £20 million of investment, and becoming self-funding within five years. Council tax harmonisation is a key component of the financial plan.

The Social Care Institute for Excellence assessed how adult social care and children's services could operate under a three-unitary model. This indicates potential opportunities to release £67.5 million, though this is not presented as a saving due to uncertainties in demand and national policy decisions, particularly regarding SEN provision. Instead, it is positioned as an opportunity to improve outcomes and service delivery.

Engagement feedback highlighted the importance of maintaining strong local representation. The proposal therefore emphasises retaining councillors with deep community knowledge to ensure services reflect local needs rather than relying on uniform models across a larger area.

IG emphasised that the proposed three-model approach will allow much closer, better-informed support for local partners, including the voluntary and community sector. The model focuses on understanding local needs, recognising existing capacity, and developing and supporting that capacity rather than replacing it. IG stressed the importance of political and leadership readiness to seize opportunities that improve outcomes, noting evidence that locally delivered adult social care and children's services perform better, as shown in comparable unitary councils.

The approach rejects a one-size-fits-all model, instead building on existing public and voluntary sector practices. It also supports local democracy by retaining councillor numbers and strengthening relationships with town and parish councils. Overall, the case for change is to continue working with what already works locally, tailoring organisational forms to local functions, acknowledging that different areas (e.g., Haverhill vs. other West Suffolk towns) need different models of engagement.

Smaller unitary organisations make it easier to provide strong leadership, maintain oversight, drive service transformation, and deliver high-quality, preventive services with greater flexibility.

Suffolk's economic geography varies significantly across the county. West Suffolk is closely linked to Cambridgeshire's economy and housing market; the east focuses on the energy coast, and Ipswich prioritises growth as the county town. Because of these differing opportunities and challenges, retaining the capacity to focus on local economic priorities is essential.

The proposed three-unitary model would strengthen democratic representation by having three council leaders supported by more councillors, providing a louder voice both locally and within the Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral Combined Authority. Council tax harmonisation is feasible within a year and is expected to result in equal or lower levels, with smaller differences than previous district mergers. Finally, the model does not eliminate shared services; successful joint arrangements such as the Anglia Revenues Partnership would continue and evolve where they deliver efficiency and good service.

The three-unitary proposal maintains and builds on shared services rather than dismantling them. In areas like adult social care and safeguarding, each unitary would have its own directors, but safeguarding would still be coordinated at a Suffolk-wide level to ensure effective cooperation with key partners like health and police, recognising that people and risks move across boundaries.

IG stressed that the proposal meets the government's requirement for a model that works for the whole of Suffolk, using sensible and coherent geographies that reflect real economic patterns, housing markets, and community identities. Each unitary would still deliver all council services as a single point of contact for residents and partners. The proposed boundaries align closely with those already used by police and health services, and each area includes its own further education provision, reinforcing the logic and practicality of the three-unitary structure.

IG explained that boundaries should be based on where population levels are heading rather than where they currently stand. While each proposed unitary area has a present population of roughly 250–255k, planned and expected housing growth means that by 2045 these populations will reach the levels needed to justify the model. Although the government has suggested around 500k as a guideline for unitary size, they now allow flexibility if a strong case is made, this proposal relies on forward population projections to meet that test. Combined, the three future populations would equal the size of a single unitary, reinforcing the long-term validity of the approach.

RM went through the presentation slides, explaining the figures:

The financial figures were developed combining KPMG's national modelling with a bottom-up Suffolk-specific analysis that reflects past reorganisations and local circumstances. RM acknowledged that the three-unitary model is not the cheapest option overall, but she emphasised that the key test is whether it is financially viable, sustainable, and appropriate for Suffolk's needs. The modelling shows that three unitaries could generate £34 million in annual savings after five years, though savings would phase in gradually and require £39 million in one-off implementation costs.

Because adult and children's services make up most of Suffolk's budget, additional investment in local leadership and management capacity is built into the model, around £20 million reinvested back into these services, supporting long-term sustainability and demand reduction. This results in a net saving of £14 million per year. Council tax harmonisation has been tested and does not undermine the figures, with any short-term cash-flow impact resolved by year two.

IG went on to say that a key strength of the three-unitary model is maintaining local decision-making and service delivery. Local management allows services to be responsive and manageable, recognising that any organisation has practical limits on leadership bandwidth and span of control.

The proposed Western Suffolk unitary is designed to balance scale with local responsiveness, avoiding unnecessary layers of management while maintaining strong engagement with towns and parishes. Planning and service delivery can be streamlined with a single planning committee, allowing tailored approaches for different local areas like Newmarket, Haverhill, and Ipswich. The model is financially and operationally sustainable for the long term, while shared services and mutual aid can support specialist areas and high-cost, low-demand services.

Local leadership and political focus enable better management of complex issues, from social care to infrastructure projects. Data analysis, including work by SCI, supports the view that smaller unitary councils are more effective at assessing local needs, improving outcomes, and fostering community partnerships.

All Suffolk district and borough councils have collaborated rigorously and formally agreed on the three-unitary proposal, demonstrating cohesion, shared understanding, and local engagement. Overall, the model emphasises local solutions, simplicity, and a sense of belonging while retaining the ability to address both local and county-wide challenges.

The three-unitary model in Suffolk offers stronger local advocacy, democratic accountability, and capacity for delivery compared to a single-unitary model. At the Mayoral Authority, with six leaders (three per county) plus the mayor, this structure provides a louder, more proportional voice around the table while enabling councils to work alongside the mayor in commissioning and delivering services. In contrast, consolidating 14 councils down to only two or three would be a much more drastic change.

The model also supports strong community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment. Suffolk's approach builds on existing partnerships and local initiatives, emphasizing local solutions, relationships, and shared risk-taking rather than imposing top-down solutions. It prioritizes practical, functional governance aligned with local needs and ongoing evolution.

Suffolk currently has 308 councillors across six councils. Under Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBCE) guidelines, a council should have 30–99 councillors. Analysis shows a unitary council requires a minimum of around 60 councillors to function effectively. The three-unitary proposal would have 60–66 councillors per council, reducing the total to roughly 190 (compared to the county council's proposal, which would create one councillor per ~8,000 people). This

model maintains democratic representation, allows for future growth, and provides flexibility for boundary reviews.

The proposal also reorganizes district boundaries using town and parish lines to balance population and community connections, supporting local relationships and future growth. It preserves capacity for regional collaboration with neighbouring counties and supports long-term political leadership and engagement.

The government (MHCLG) will launch a consultation on the three-unitary proposal from November to January. Statutory partners like health and police will be specifically consulted, but the public can also respond. AI may be used to summarize responses. Political discussions are happening alongside the consultation. The government plans to announce its decision around mid-March, ideally before mayoral elections. After that, if approved, secondary legislation will formally set council boundaries. Preparatory work for the new councils will follow, including staff, assets, and contracts. Elections for the new unitary councils are scheduled for 6 May, with the councils operating in shadow form until they officially start on 1 April 2028 (Vesting Day). The process is expected to become increasingly complex as it progresses.

RM gave a summary on the implications on Council Tax:

Council tax for the new unitary authorities will be determined by the new councils, not the current ones. The current councils' role in the case for change was to model the potential impact of council tax harmonisation across Suffolk. Most areas already have town and parish councils, and Ipswich would likely have one under the new model. Modelling suggests that harmonisation is feasible, with only about a £60 difference across the county (predicted at April 2028 allowing for an Ipswich Town Council precept), and could be achieved in the first year without changing current rules or exceeding the 4.99% maximum annual council tax increase. Different areas may experience varying increases, but overall financial savings would not be undermined. Council tax harmonisation across Suffolk is achievable within the first year. Projected increases range up to 4.79%, which aligns with normal expected rises, and in some areas are even lower. Overall, harmonisation can be implemented without unexpected or excessive increases.

There was a question-and-answer session on the following:

- **Debt:** Suffolk local authority debt levels are relatively low, mainly tied to housing revenue accounts. Debt generally follows the assets it funded, so splitting it across new unitary councils is manageable. Unlike some areas no large government bailouts are anticipated.
- **Jobs and staffing impact:** Some senior roles will be reduced (e.g., five chief executives down to three), but compulsory redundancies are expected to be minimal. Day-to-day roles tied to service demand (planning, social care, inspections) remain unchanged at the start. Staff will transition under existing protections and new councils will manage structures over time. The Boundary Commission has confirmed it has capacity to handle boundary work, and Suffolk councils will support them by doing as much preparatory work as possible to minimize risk.
- **Presenting conflicting financial models:** The county and district councils will not reconcile their differing financial models for the consultation, as

assumptions differ despite using the same data. The government consultation will present both sets of figures, leaving the public to draw their own conclusions, while councils continue explaining their positions and assumptions.

- **Transition:** The new unitary authority takes over on 1st April 2028. Until then, the current district, borough, and county councils will continue operating as usual, managing budgets, grants, and key partnerships. Transitional arrangements are being planned, including multi-year budget assumptions and reserves to cover potential funding gaps. The shadow authority will set its budget for the new council, and some functions—like Suffolk Business Board and skills initiatives—will transfer gradually. Ongoing services and programs, such as community safety and growth work, will continue during this transition, providing reassurance to staff and stakeholders.
- **Roles and responsibilities of Town and Parish Councils and their relationship with a unitary authority:** There are no assumptions about transferring services or assets automatically, any transfers will be based on willing partnerships. Local decisions, such as car parking charges or development control, will continue with local input through existing structures. The focus is on strengthening collaboration, supporting neighbourhood plans, and improving consultation and shared outcomes, rather than shifting statutory responsibilities.

HW thanks IG and RM for their presentation. IG will share the slides with the board members to accompany these notes.

- 4 The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance.

Meeting closed at 12.15pm