

Suffolk Business Board: Meeting 10 December 2025

Minutes & Actions

Business Board Members

Name	Role & Organisation
Mark Pendlington	Chair
Cllr Matthew Hicks	Leader, Suffolk County Council, and Business Board Vice-Chair
Paul Ager	Divisional Port Manager, ABP
Tom Ball	CFO, Ipswich Town FC
Hannah Bloom	Chief Executive, Suffolk Community Foundation
Kelly Boosey	Commercial Manager, Oxford Innovation
Peter Brady	CEO, Orbital Group
John Dugmore	CEO, Suffolk Chamber of Commerce
Doug Field	Founder, Beacon Advantage
Leanne Gittins	Managing Director, LME Recruitment
Marek Hornak	UoS Pro Vice-Chancellor - Commercial and Academic Partnerships
Cllr Neil MacDonald	Leader, Ipswich Borough Council
Oliver Paul	Director, Suffolk Food Hall
Alan Pease	Principal and Chief Executive Officer, Suffolk New College
Lisa Perkins	Chair, Tech East
Cllr Richard Smith MVO	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance, Economic Development and Skills, Suffolk County Council
Cllr Caroline Topping	Leader, East Suffolk District Council

Apologies

Name	Role & Organisation
Cllr Matthew Hicks	Leader, Suffolk County Council, and Business Board Vice-Chair
Paul Ager	Divisional Port Manager, ABP
Peter Brady	CEO, Orbital Group
John Dugmore	CEO, Suffolk Chamber of Commerce
Andrew Cook	Executive Director Growth, Highways and Infrastructure, Suffolk County Council

Guests

Name	Role & Organisation
Paul Putland	Innovation Consultant, Tech East
Tim Robinson	Chief Operating Officer, Tech East
Francesca Castelo	Innovation Consultant – Clusters, Plexal
Ben Edginton-Thomas	Innovation Lead, Plexal

Officer team

Name	Role & Organisation
Andrew Cook	Executive Director Growth, Highways and Infrastructure, Suffolk County Council
Ian Gallin	Chief Executive, West Suffolk Council
Julian Munson	Head of Enterprise and Innovation, Suffolk County Council
Michael Gray	Head of Skills, Suffolk County Council
Rob Hancock	Assistant Director, Suffolk County Council
Eunice Edwards	Senior Programme Manager, Suffolk County Council
Cleo Chalk	Communications and Engagement Executive, Suffolk County Council

Agenda

Item	Time	Topic	Lead	Paper / Verbal
1.	13:00	Agenda, apologies, conflicts of interest and last meeting minutes	Mark Pendlington	Verbal
2.	13:05	Welcome to Suffolk New College <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Outlook for FE 	Alan Pease	Verbal
3.	13:15	Talent Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Skills Activity Key Challenges and Opportunities Investment Proposals Further role for SBB 	Michael Gray, Marek Hornak and Leanne Gittens	Presentation & Paper
4.	14:15	Cluster Growth Plans	Lisa Perkins	Presentation & Paper
5.	14.50	AOB and Forward Plan	Mark Pendlington	Verbal
6.	15.00 onwards	Tour of SNC Facilities (optional)	Alan Pease	n/a

Actions
ACTION 1.1: RH/AC to update the Board as regards Ipswich Northern Route / Orwell Bridge action group progress. Rob Hancock / Andrew Cook
ACTION 1: Work with NCC colleagues to prepare joint Business Board letter from Chairs to Minister Fahnbulleh as regards Devolution delays. Mark Pendlington and Rob Hancock
ACTION 3.1: Provide data as regards level of funding committed and available as part of the regular Intervention Reporting. Officer Team (Eunice Edwards)
ACTION 5.1: Board members to revert to Rob Hancock with proposals for chair or new members for 2026. Board Members
ACTION 5.2: Officers to draft letter from Chair in support of Ipswich City of Culture bid. Officer Team

Decisions
DECISION 1: Decision to draft and send a joint letter from the Business Board chairs to the minister, expressing support for the mayoral authority and requesting clarity and urgency.
DECISION 3.1: The Board agreed in principle to approve the three funding streams for Thrive, Apprenticeships Employer Support, and Energy Readiness, recognising these are necessary to maintain current service levels. There was consensus to track the legacy of the LEP funding and to focus future discussions on measurable outcomes and further strategic action.
DECISION 3.2: Commitment to review and align with other Business Boards' responses and to integrate new funding information into future Board discussions.
DECISION 3.3: Plan to monitor the outcome of the ministerial meeting and update the Board, with further decisions on skills strategy to follow as funding clarity improves.
DECISION 4.1: The Board expressed strong support for the approach and agreed to proceed with the next steps and the £80k budget for mobilisation, as outlined in the plan.
DECISION 5.1: Approved proposal to retain separate Norfolk and Suffolk Business Boards for 26/27 but with continued joint working.

	Item Description, Notes of Discussion and Actions Agreed	Action Lead
1	<p>Agenda, apologies, conflicts of interest and last meeting minutes – Mark Pendlington</p> <p>Welcome and Introductions:</p> <p>Mark Pendlington (MP) opened the meeting, thanked attendees, and gave special thanks to Alan Pease (AP) and colleagues for their hospitality.</p> <p>MP outlined the agenda, mentioning a 10-minute update from AP on the current outlook, an added item for an update on devolution and government announcements, and a review of outcomes from a recent Joint Board meeting with Norfolk.</p> <p>MP noted a busy period since the last meeting, referencing ministerial teams, high awards, and ongoing work.</p> <p>Apologies:</p> <p>MP listed apologies from Paul Ager, Peter Brady, John Dugmore, Andrew Cook, and Tom Ball due to the Football match.</p> <p>Conflicts of interest:</p> <p>MP asked if there were any conflicts of interest related to the agenda, referencing the rolling update document. A conflict of interest was noted from AP and therefore AP was omitted from any decision making relating to agenda item 3.</p> <p>Minutes Approval:</p>	

	<p>MP confirmed that the minutes from the last meeting, held on 18th September, were included in the meeting pack and asked if everyone was happy with them as a true and accurate record.</p> <p>MP referenced an action for Rob Hancock (RH) to arrange an introduction to Business Board chairs, noting that the original meeting was cancelled due to a government reshuffle, but a subsequent meeting was organised by MP, with Nick Steven-Jones representing the group.</p> <p>MP queried progress on action 1.1 from 18th September meeting – RH confirmed the meeting had taken place.</p> <p>MP queried progress on previous action 1.2 from 18th September – Cleo Chalk (CC) confirmed that Board members have been participating in talking heads.</p> <p>MP queried action 4.2 from 18th September meeting – CC confirmed that the stakeholder mapping exercise has been completed and will be circulated to Board members for input.</p> <p>MP asked for an update on decision 2.1 – Lisa Perkins (LP) confirmed that contact has been made with Halo and is awaiting follow up.</p> <p>Oliver Paul (OP) raised a question regarding the Orwell Bridge action 1.3 from 18th September meeting.</p> <p>ACTION 1.1: RH/AC to update the Board as regards Ipswich Northern Route / Orwell Bridge action group progress.</p>	<p>Rob Hancock / Andrew Cook</p>
2	<p>Welcome to Suffolk New College – Alan Pease</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AP welcomed attendees to Suffolk New College, expressing gratitude for the opportunity to address the Board and highlighting the college's growth and journey over the past seven years. AP invited members to tour the college and meet the leadership team. • AP noted that when they joined in 2017 as Deputy Principal, the college had only one campus in Ipswich but now operates four campuses across the eastern strip of the county, reflecting significant expansion and foresight in provision. • AP mentioned the opening of new provision in Leiston in 2017 and ongoing efforts to further develop the college's reach and impact. • The current FE outlook is positive, with 5700 learners, broad vocational and technical provision, strong employer partnerships, and a 96% positive destination rate for graduates. Challenges include staff retention, pay, and adapting to post-COVID learner needs, but opportunities arise from government investment, regional infrastructure projects, and evolving skills requirements. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The college is collaborating with major employers (e.g., Sizewell) and investing in new facilities, such as a £30 million campus in Leiston to support construction workforce needs. • AP highlighted the college's inclusive approach, supporting learners with special educational needs and low social mobility, and maintaining a strong Ofsted rating. • AP highlighted the importance of English and maths GCSE resits, with 80% of learners required to retake these subjects. • The college's industry partner programme involves 188 employers, with professionals supporting curriculum delivery and filling skills gaps. • AP discussed the E Pass employability skills programme, validated by the Chamber, and the Thrive employment service for young people and adults. • Recent investments include purchasing Suffolk Rural and plans to acquire Halesworth Skills Centre, plus green initiatives like PV panels to reduce energy costs. • The college is on a rapid growth trajectory, nearly doubling learner numbers since 2017, and hosts community events such as the Big Day Out and Suffolk Future Skills Fair. • Staff benefits include free access to a new gym and sports centre, and discounted rail travel for learners to address transport challenges. • AP explained the Sizewell campus project: Sizewell will build and fund the campus, which the college will operate, with curriculum tailored to project needs and a planned opening for curriculum delivery in September 2027. <p>Questions and Answers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cllr Richard Smith (RS) asked about staff pay and retention; AP responded that industry professionals support curriculum delivery to fill gaps, and the college offers non-pay benefits to attract staff. • Cllr Caroline Topping (CT) asked about transport for students in public transport deserts; AP described partnerships with rail providers, college-run bus services, and contracted buses, funded from the college's own budget. • Hannah Bloom (HB) asked about plans for the Sizewell campus; AP confirmed the college will deliver education at the new campus, with Sizewell building and funding it, and curriculum focused on project workforce needs. 	
	<p>Special Item on Devolution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RS reported that the government unexpectedly postponed the planned mayoral elections for Norfolk and Suffolk by 	

	<p>two years, reducing the annual investment fund from the expected £37.5 million to £12.5 million per year until the election.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The announcement caused uncertainty about the transfer of responsibilities, including the Adult Skills Fund and Fire and Rescue Service, and the structure and governance of the new strategic authority. • Cllr Matthew Hicks (MH) was invited to meet the local government minister for further details - this meeting is due in the days following the Business Board. • Cllr Neil MacDonald (NM) added that the delay was intended to align mayoral and unitary authority elections, but this creates funding and logistical challenges, including the cost of a standalone mayoral election and shortfall in funding for the mayor's office. • CT shared her perspective that receiving a third of the money is disappointing, new election will be standalone, shortfall of funding to set up mayor's office. • MP emphasised the importance of maintaining support for the mayoral authority and its benefits for business and economic growth. • The Board discussed sending a joint letter from the Norfolk and Suffolk Business Board chairs to the minister, urging continued commitment to the mayoral authority and requesting clarity and a speedy resolution. MP asked for the Board's approval for this action. – Agreed • LP raised a technical question about the impact of devolution delays on local innovation partnership funding; RH clarified that their funding comes from a competed strand and is not directly affected by the devolution timeline. • Doug Field (DF) queried when the Board would vote on the Business Board option paper and requested further information on funding impact before the vote takes place. <p>DECISION 1: Decision to draft and send a joint letter from the Business Board chairs to the Minister, expressing support for the mayoral authority and requesting clarity and urgency.</p> <p>ACTION 1: Work with NCC colleagues to prepare joint Business Board letter to Minister Fahnbulleh as regards Devolution delays.</p> <p>Additional Information on Devolution Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board members expressed frustration that Suffolk and Norfolk, after fast-tracking the devolution process with the promise of additional benefits, are now receiving only a third of the expected funding and face delays, potentially falling behind other regions. 	<p>Rob Hancock & Mark Pendlington</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board agreed that the letter to the minister should not only express support for the mayoral authority but also clearly state their frustration and request the full funding allocation, not just the reduced amount. • RH suggested waiting for the outcome of Matthew's meeting with the minister before finalising and sending the letter, and to coordinate with Norfolk's Business Board for a joint response. • The Board discussed the importance of not appearing to passively accept the government's decision, as this could risk further delays or reductions in support. • There was interest in understanding how other Business Boards in potential mayoral areas are responding, with a plan to gather and review their approaches for possible alignment. • The Board requested timely updates on the outcome of the ministerial meeting and emphasised the need for clear internal communication before information is released to the media. 	
3	<p>Talent Development - Michael Gray, Marek Hornak and Leanne Gittens</p> <p>Current Skills Activity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Gray (MG) outlined a broad range of ongoing skills initiatives in Suffolk, involving multiple partners such as colleges, providers, DWP, job centres, and the voluntary sector. • There is a recent dip in job vacancies (7% decrease over 12 months), but persistent shortages remain in sectors like adult social care, nursing, and customer service. Demand for higher-level skills is rising, with a gap between current workforce qualifications and job requirements. • Key programmes include the Careers Hub (over 90 employers involved in schools), sector skills groups, bootcamps (over 1,500 participants), adult learning, and the "Get Suffolk Working" initiative. <p>Key Challenges and Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing numbers of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), with Suffolk's rate above national and regional averages and rising. • Growing health-related economic inactivity (now 30% of inactive population), high disability employment gap (especially for those with learning disabilities/autism), and a persistent gender gap in economic activity. 	

- Lower than average achievement in qualification levels, worsening in recent statistics.
- Rural accessibility and connectivity issues and increasing in-work poverty.
- Uncertainty over future funding for bootcamps and adult skills due to changes in national allocation methods and the devolution delay.
- Suffolk has a high-quality skills infrastructure, with three good/outstanding FE colleges and a growing university.
- Devolution could allow local control over adult skills funding, enabling tailored support for priority sectors, bursaries, and targeted upskilling, though this is now delayed.
- New DWP-funded “Connect to Work” programme (£9.4m) will support over 2,700 participants, focusing on supported employment for priority groups.
- Industry partnerships and bootcamps have been successful, but future funding is uncertain.

Investment Proposals:

- Emphasis on aligning adult skills funding and bootcamp provision to local needs, should devolution powers be granted.
- Continued investment in sector-specific skills groups, employer engagement, and targeted support for NEETs and those with health barriers.

Further role for Suffolk Business Board:

- Board members are encouraged to stay informed about skills activity and help steer initiatives to align with Suffolk’s economic ambitions.
- The Board’s advocacy is needed to help secure resources, encourage employer involvement and investment and influence Government decisions on devolution and skills investment.

Board Paper Asks:

1. Thrive – Youth Employment

- Proposal to extend the Thrive project, which provides employment support for young people and adults, especially those at risk of being NEET, through a partnership model involving colleges, voluntary sector, and mentoring specialists.

- The ask is to secure funding to continue this service for 12 months, maintaining support for over 1,300 participants.

2. Apprenticeships – Employer Support

- Proposal to increase support during financial year 2026/27 for employers to take on apprentices, including helping them navigate the apprenticeship levy and transfer process, and strategically align apprenticeship opportunities with Suffolk’s economic priorities.
- The ask is to fund enhanced employer engagement and brokerage, aiming to address low conversion rates from engagement to actual apprenticeship starts, and to prevent Suffolk’s levy funds from being lost.

3. Energy Readiness

- Proposal to fund the next phase of the Energy Readiness programme, which prepares local employers and workforce for opportunities in the energy sector, including major projects like Sizewell.
- The ask is for one year of funding (with recognition that multi-year support is needed), to build momentum and meet demand from employers already on a waiting list.

Summary of Discussions

- Leanne Gittins (LG) emphasised and Board members agreed these asks are essential to maintain current activity (“standing still”) rather than advancing, due to funding uncertainty and economic challenges. The Board also needs to consider what more it can do.
- There was strong support for improving employer engagement and conversion, especially around apprenticeships, and for leveraging social value in contracts to drive local skills outcomes.
- Concerns were raised about the sustainability of funding, the need for better tracking of outcomes, and the importance of aligning interventions with broader training needs, not just apprenticeships.
- The Board discussed the need for more robust advocacy and strategic alignment, and for monitoring the impact of these interventions.
- AP responded that their approach has been to shift from engagement to impact, but that business caution following the budget has impacted growth.
- Marek Hornak (MH) commented on the skills and growth levy, and the challenge of local businesses not engaging the university.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LP noted that more work is needed to inspire the next generation of young people. • Kelly Boosey (KB) raised the question of ‘what does good look like for Suffolk?’ • CT shared some examples of East Suffolk Council work around health, funding for youth employment service, inclusion of social value in contracts • DF queried what funding is available and how much. • RH clarified that it is being taken from ex LEP funding. • AP highlighted concerns about social care. ASF – lowest per capita of anywhere in the country. AP suggested that members should be aware and highlight this where relevant. • OP queried whether the funding for the Energy Readiness Programme should cover more than a single year. MG clarified that we will be looking for other sources of income in the future. • CT raised a query about leveraging the funds from Sizewell. MG clarified that discussions are ongoing with East Suffolk about using SZC funding that has been provided to ESC to offset some of the costs of this project where the benefits meet certain criteria. <p>ACTION 3.1 Provide data as regards level of funding committed and available as part of the regular Intervention Reporting.</p> <p>DECISION 3.1: The Board agreed in principle to approve the three funding streams for Thrive, Apprenticeships Employer Support, and Energy Readiness, recognising these are necessary to maintain current service levels. There was consensus to track the legacy of the LEP funding and to focus future discussions on measurable outcomes and further strategic action.</p> <p>DECISION 3.2: Commitment to review and align with other Business Boards’ responses and to integrate new funding information into future Board discussions.</p> <p>DECISION 3.3: Plan to monitor the outcome of the ministerial meeting and update the Board, with further decisions on skills strategy to follow as funding clarity improves.</p>	Officer Team (Eunice Edwards)
4	<p>Cluster Growth Plans - Lisa Perkins</p> <p>Summary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development plan focuses on three mission-based clusters: Power Clean Growth (energy), Sustain the Nation (agri-food), and Smart Logistics, with Advanced Connectivity Technologies (ACT/digital/tech) as a cross-cutting enabler. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The approach emphasises leveraging Suffolk’s unique strengths, fostering collaboration across sectors, and establishing a “mission catalyst” governance function to connect clusters, coordinate funding, and drive delivery. • Eight priority interventions were identified, including raising Suffolk’s national digital profile, water resilience in agri-food, peer-to-peer farm learning, pan-sector boards for energy and logistics, and hydrogen innovation. • The plan proposes an initial investment of £80k to mobilise the mission catalyst and set up governance, with a longer-term goal to procure an organisation to deliver interventions and track KPIs. • Success will be measured by increased high-value jobs, new companies, innovation, inward investment, and improved visibility for Suffolk in national strategies. <p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board supported the cluster growth strategy and the establishment of the mission catalyst function. • Agreement to allocate initial funding for mobilisation and governance setup, with further procurement and delivery to follow. • Commitment to develop clear KPIs and outcome measures for each intervention, and to ensure broad representation and integration with existing innovation assets. • The Board discussed the £80k ask to fund the initial mobilisation of the mission catalyst, governance setup, and preparation for delivery of the cluster growth interventions as presented by Plexal. • Members emphasised the importance of having a clear, targeted strategy and the need for the catalyst to ensure coordination, avoid duplication, and connect all parts of the Suffolk ecosystem, including SMEs and innovation centres. • There was discussion about ensuring representation across the region, setting clear KPIs, and making Suffolk’s strengths visible nationally. <p>DECISION 4.1: The Board expressed strong support for the approach and agreed to proceed with the next steps and the £80k budget for mobilisation, as outlined in the plan.</p>	
5	<p>AOB and Forward Plan – Mark Pendlington</p> <p>Business Board Governance & Succession Planning</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board discussed upcoming vacancies, including the planned departure of the current chair and other members in the coming months. • Members were asked to consider succession planning for both Board members and the chair, with the goal to have a plan and shortlist ready for discussion at the January meeting. • The Board noted the need for broader sector representation, specifically mentioning the absence of a culture sector voice and the intention to engage with local cultural leaders for potential involvement. • There was discussion about whether to use an open recruitment process or targeted nominations for new members, with a preference for identifying and nominating candidates internally. <p>City of Culture Bid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board considered supporting Ipswich's City of Culture bid and Lowestoft's Town of Culture bid, agreeing in principle to provide stakeholder support and to coordinate with relevant local leaders on the best way to express this support. • No specific vote was recorded, but there was consensus to move forward with supportive actions and to be mindful of timelines for formal expressions of support. <p>ACTION 5.1: Board members to revert to Rob Hancock with proposals for chair or new members for 2026. Board Members</p> <p>ACTION 5.2: Officers to draft letter from Chair in support of Ipswich City of Culture bid.</p> <p>DECISION 5.1: Approved proposal to retain separate Norfolk and Suffolk Business Boards for 26/27 but with continued joint working.</p>	<p>Board Members</p> <p>Officer Team</p>
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