

Suffolk Business Board

Wednesday 10th December 2025

Agenda Item 3: Investments Supporting 'Talent Development' in Suffolk

Purpose:

This paper sets out three investment proposals for the consideration of the Suffolk Business Board that, if agreed, would support the development of talent for the workforce in Suffolk. A presentation will be provided to the board to accompany the paper to provide additional context and information.

Background:

The availability of people with the right skills to drive forward economic growth, and the ability of local residents to benefit from the employment and other opportunities that growth can provide, is reliant on a wide range of interdependent factors (e.g. transport, connectivity, aspiration levels, availability of training, health etc.) and the actions and decisions of a range of stakeholder organisations across the work, health and skills system, including employers.

This means that there is a long list of potential actions that could be taken, and investments that could be made to help address specific aspects of the skills and employment agenda.

Years of declining investment levels across the skills system (e.g. from Government in Further Education and Adult Learning, from employers in investment in training and from alternative external funding sources such as the European Structural Investment Funds) as well as regular policy announcements and changes at a national level adds to the complexity of prioritising action and interventions.

The proposed investments outlined in this paper and the priorities that they address have been identified during engagement with a large range of stakeholders. This includes engagement via the development of the Economic Strategy, and Get Suffolk Working Local Plan during 2025, through Local Skills Improvement Plan events and Chamber forums, sector skills groups, and, more recently, discussions held at the first in-person Skills, Employment and Lifelong Development Advisory (SELD) Board.

Each proposal seeks to continue, or build on, current or previous activity that has proven to have impact and previously been funded through opportunities that no longer exist or are due to come to an end in March 2026.

While all three proposals may be identified as future priorities for investment by the Mayoral County Combined Authority (MCCA); the role of the Suffolk Business Board in approving early investment in these interventions will help ensure that Suffolk residents, businesses and the economy are not adversely impacted by the loss of such activity in the intervening period (as would otherwise be the case) between the closure of current funding opportunities and potential longer term investment from the MCCA.

All proposals presented in this paper will support our growth ambitions across multiple areas of the economy.

The three priority areas are:

- **Youth Employment Support (Annex A)** - creating the ‘next-gen workforce’ is identified within the Suffolk Economic Strategy as a key requirement for developing the talent needed to drive growth in Suffolk. However, at present, Suffolk is seeing an increasing number of our young people not progressing through education and training into the workforce from where they can look to develop further. Suffolk’s proportion of young people at academic age 16 and 17 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or ‘unknown’ was 5.60% in March 2025 (compared to 5.05% in the East of England and 5.25% nationally) with numbers increasing over time as cohort sizes increase. At the same time, the availability of youth employment support across the county has declined following the loss of various external pots previously utilised for this purpose. At the end of March 2026 the only cross-county youth employment support, delivered through the ‘Thrive’ partnership, is set to come to an end.
- **Maximising the Benefits of Apprenticeships (Annex B)** – Apprenticeships are a proven means for businesses to build their pipeline of talent and upskill existing staff to meet emerging skills needs and as an entry point for those starting careers. It is a policy area that has been subject to significant changes over recent years (e.g. the move to standards over frameworks, responsibility shifting to IFATE and now to Skills England and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy funding model) and these reforms have continued under the current Government. Employers regularly cite the apprenticeship system as being too complex and prospective apprentices (of all ages) struggle to find and secure opportunities. Whilst support is offered from a range of local organisations, including the FE colleges and the University of Suffolk, the independent support on offer at both a national (ASK apprenticeships) and local level (Apprenticeships Suffolk) has reduced in resource and focus as per the requirements of the funding available. We now have an opportunity to generate significant value and capitalise on the roll-out of new Growth and Skills Levy for apprenticeships by increasing the support available for employers in line with the levels of support on offer in surrounding counties (Norfolk and Essex).
- **Preparing the workforce to increase local supply chain involvement in energy-related developments and drive innovation in the local energy sector (Annex C)** – The Economic Strategy highlights the wide range of energy-related Nationally Strategic Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) that are, or due to be, in development in Suffolk, as well as the significant investments and opportunities for innovation in the clean energy sector. Ensuring that local employers are at the forefront of these opportunities is important if we are to fully realise the potential local benefits and much of this will be contingent on having the right skills and competencies in the local workforce. At the same time, over recent years the availability of support to businesses to identify training needs and subsidies to enable and incentivise training have reduced with projects such as the Supply Chain Skills Development Fund closing.

Additional (more cluster and mission specific) proposals for investment in activity related to workforce development are being worked up as part of the Suffolk Cluster Development Plan and additional ideas to address key challenges (such as support for lecturer recruitment and retention) will be considered for potential inclusion in an MCCA pipeline of interventions.

Recommendations – the Board is invited to:

- agree in principle to:
 - **contribute up to £385,000 for ‘phase 3’ of the THRIVE programme (Annex A),** providing a 12-month extension from April 2026 of the employment support on offer to young people and opening dialogue for additional investment, including any additional contributions from District and Borough Authorities and the MCCA once established.
 - **contribute £111,102 to increase the capacity of the Apprenticeships Suffolk service over a 12-month period to increase employer and education engagement (Annex B),** provide strategic advice on apprenticeship standards, support businesses to navigate the national system, signpost to local apprenticeship providers and maximise levy benefits
 - **contribute an initial £130,000 for an initial 12 months of delivery for a phase 2 of the ‘Energy Readiness Programme’ (Annex C),** to strengthen the local skills base in clean energy, enabling local businesses to secure contracts and obtain the skills necessary to drive innovation in the sector. Commit to reviewing our position ahead of the end of this period with additional funding for a further two years (up to £350,000 in total across all 3 years) dependant on performance, need and the position of the MCCA

Annex A – Youth Employment Support

Intervention Proposal: Phase 3 of the ‘Thrive’ Programme

Funds Required: £385,000

Thrive ‘Phase 3’ is a 12-month continuation, commencing from April 2026, of targeted support for young people aged 16 to 24 years old across Suffolk to progress them in to training and employment ensuring looming gaps in youth employment support in Suffolk are addressed.

Strategic Fit

Creating the ‘next-gen workforce’ is identified within the Suffolk Economic Strategy as a key requirement for developing the talent needed to drive growth in Suffolk. However, at present Suffolk is seeing an increasing number of our young people not progressing through education and training into the workforce from where they can look to develop further.

The recently published ‘Get Suffolk Working’ plan also identifies the major long-term impact that economic inactivity of young people can have on the communities and businesses of Suffolk, and includes reducing the ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEET) rate as one of the key ambitions for the county.

Harnessing the talent of all of young people in Suffolk is an essential driver of the ambitions in the Economic strategy, especially those ambitions to:

- to have 45,000 more local people qualified to level 3 or above
- expand our local talent pool by growing our Economically Active population by 35,000
- to have 40,000 more local people in higher qualified roles

The availability of youth employment support across the county has declined following the loss of the Greater Ipswich City Deal, Employer Ownership Pilot, European Social Funds and now UK 'Shared Prosperity Funding'.

Although the Mayoral County Combined Authority (MCCA) may choose to prioritise funding for this activity and support in the future (especially once details become clear regarding Government's intention to 'share' the duties and responsibilities for NEET support and participation between local and strategic authorities) there is no other funding identified that could support this activity for the interim period of April 2026 to March 2027.

This lack of funding means that the support on offer through Thrive will begin to wind down from January and close at the end of March 2026. A large number of NEET young people across Suffolk will therefore not have access to the tailored support and interventions they deserve; and similar services and support will be more challenging and expensive to restart and embed if, and when, the MCCA decides this is a priority for investment (as per many other 'Combined Authority' areas and in line with the Government's 'Youth Guarantee' policy).

The Programme

The Thrive Youth Programme brings together the county's community colleges and voluntary sector specialist organisations to provide bespoke support to help NEET young people access education, employment and training opportunities.

The Thrive programme is unique in the region in offering a single point of entry to in-depth support (Inspire), accessible skills programmes with additional support (Lofty Heights) and comprehensive employability support bridging the gap into education and employment (Colleges). Due to the delivery partnership, Thrive can offer a flexible range of interventions. This enables it to be tailored to complement any other support being offered in different areas such as East Suffolk where young people can also benefit from the short, focused intervention offered by the Inspire Suffolk YES programme.

Since April 2024 'Thrive' has supported over 1000 participants and delivered over 3,500 individual interventions in year 1 and 1500 individual interventions so far in year 2 including people being provided with basic skills, employment support or a qualification and, as a result, participating in education or gaining employment.

The programme for 26/27 will aim to engage with at least 700 local young people (so an estimated average cost per participant of £550) to increase employment rates amongst those aged 16-24, to close skills gaps and ensure broader participation in economic opportunities.

Expected outcomes include improved employment, reduce burden on welfare system, enhanced long-term prospects for Suffolk residents and widening the talent pool for local employers.

Timeframe: Notification of continuation of service will be provided to the delivery partnership as soon as possible following agreement by the Suffolk Business Board. This will be dependant on confirming plans with District and Borough authorities who are the current funders through the UKSPF and arrangements with both our internal procurement and legal teams. Delivery will commence from April 2026 until March 2027 with flexibilities built in during that period to enable the MCCA to assume responsibility for funding this activity at the earliest opportunity that they may wish to do so.

EPIC Score – 13/16

Intervention	Profile [sectors, type, status, EPIC score]	Strategic Fit [why]	Deliverability [How]	Additionality [what]	Economic Impact [Return on Investment]	Cost & Risk					
Thrive Young People – Phase 3 Enabler: TD	Board Sponsor Cllr Richard Smith Lead Officer: Michael Gray	Partners: Suffolk New College, East Coast College, West Suffolk College, Loft Heights, Inspire Suffolk	E3 P3 I4 C3 = 13/16	<p>Thrive Young People – Phase 3. A 12-month continuation of targeted support for young people aged 16 to 24 years old to progress them in to training and employment ensuring looming gaps in youth employment support in Suffolk are addressed.</p> <p>The trusted Thrive Youth Programme brings together the county's community colleges and voluntary sector specialist organisations to provide bespoke support to help NEET young people access education, employment and training opportunities.</p>	<p>The Suffolk Economic Strategy identifies creating a next-generation workforce as critical to growth, The Get Suffolk Working plan warns that economic inactivity among young people has serious long-term consequences.</p> <p>The reduction of NEET rates is essential to achieving Suffolk's ambitions for higher qualifications, a larger economically active population, and building the skilled workforce to drive growth.</p> <p>Youth employment support has declined following the loss of major funding streams, and no funding is identified beyond March 2026. Without intervention, services will close by March 2026, leaving many NEET young people without support and risking a costly setback to the Suffolk Economic Strategy.</p>	<p>Proven model - third phase of a project with a successful track record.</p> <p>Previous funded by UKSPF in partnership with the districts and borough. This is no longer available, and this project is time dependant.</p> <p>Builds on investments already made in Family and Youth Services and other projects which would provide progression routes like Skills Bootcamps and Apprenticeship Suffolk</p> <p>Collaborative partnership delivery involving all three FE Colleges and two specialist voluntary sector organisations, Loft Heights and Inspire Suffolk.</p> <p>This is vital to provide accessible and countywide support for disengaged young people aged from 16 to 24 years old.</p>	<p>Funding Thrive Youth NEET engagement will deliver vital additionality by keeping tailored support in place at a time when Suffolk faces rising youth disengagement.</p> <p>Thrive, services will close by March 2026 due to the loss of major funding streams.</p> <p>This would leave many young people without help and risk reversing progress toward Suffolk's goals for higher qualifications, a larger active workforce, and more skilled roles.</p> <p>Investment now avoids a costly gap, prevents long-term economic inactivity, and ensures Suffolk can harness the potential of its young people.</p>	<p>On current KPIs Thrive has delivered nearly 3,000 interventions to over 600 young people in 2025 to date.</p> <p>Early intervention for NEET young people provides value for money because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment reduces reliance on benefits, reduces costs related to crime prevention and health issues linked to joblessness. Research suggests that each NEET young person costs the economy over £100,000 over their lifetime due to lost productivity, welfare dependency, and increased public service costs (Policy Connect) Investment now avoids a costly gap, prevents long-term economic inactivity, and ensures Suffolk can harness the potential of its young people. 	<p>£385,000</p> <p>Risks - Tight timescale to extend the current delivery to ensure continuity</p> <p>Loss of staff ahead of phase 3 Thrive project start.</p> <p>Loss of existing networks and referral routes for young people and complimentary services</p> <p>Duplication with any other services offering similar support</p>	<p>Participants not registering for support</p> <p>Mitigation</p> <p>Early decision making on extension of service, clear communication with all partners and development of a proposal for early engagement with MCC</p>	<p>If the UK reduced NEET rates to the lowest OECD level, it is estimated it could add £69 billion to GDP.</p>

Annex B: Maximising the Benefits of Apprenticeships

Intervention Proposal: Apprenticeships Suffolk 'Amplify'

Funds Required: £111,102

Apprenticeships Suffolk Amplify is a 12-month enhancement of the existing service, designed to transform its capacity and impact as a strategic driver of skills and growth, with a strong focus on employers and levy share as well as prospective apprentices.

Strategic Fit

Apprenticeships are identified within the Suffolk Economic Strategy as a key requirement for developing the talent needed to power Suffolk's future economy. They provide a direct route for individuals to gain skills and qualifications while meeting the needs of local employers. This is critical to addressing current challenges, where Suffolk is seeing too many young people and adults not progressing into skilled employment pathways.

The Get Suffolk Working plan reinforces the importance of creating sustainable routes into employment and skills development.

To achieve these goals, Suffolk needs a strong, coordinated approach to apprenticeship delivery. The introduction of the Growth and Skills Levy offers a significant opportunity to accelerate progress. By reinvesting levy funds locally, we can support employers to create more apprenticeship opportunities aligned with priority sectors, enable participants to access high-quality training that meets Suffolk's future workforce needs and drive innovation in apprenticeship delivery, ensuring strategic fit with growth sectors identified in the Economic Strategy.

However, the availability of funding for skills interventions has declined following the loss of major programmes such as the Greater Ipswich City Deal, Employer Ownership Pilot, European Social Fund, and UK Shared Prosperity Funding.

Without additional investment, Apprenticeships Suffolk will be unable to deliver a comparable level of support during 26/27 to employers to that available in neighbouring areas such as Norfolk who have already extended their Apprenticeship Norfolk service. This risks slowing progress toward Suffolk's economic ambitions and making it harder and more costly to rebuild capacity later.

The Service

Apprenticeships Suffolk is a service that has been operating for over 10 years, seeking to increase the number of quality apprenticeships in Suffolk by working with individuals, employers, education, apprenticeship training providers and Government. It has aimed to raise awareness, increase accessibility, and ensure alignment between opportunities and economic need.

Over the last two years it has primarily focused on supporting participants with barriers to accessing apprenticeships as a result of the requirements of the UKSPF (UK Shared Prosperity Funding) funding used to support the service, but in previous years has provided a more rounded offer for employers and participants and stakeholders.

Since April 2025 Apprenticeships Suffolk has supported 312 participants, of which 211 were unemployed resulting in a number of UKSPF outcomes including increased employability, gaining employment and moving into education. It has provided a limited service to business 'on-request'.

This 'Amplify' proposal would allow the team to increase presence and visibility across Suffolk leading to greater employer engagement with designated leads for employers, participants and the Apprenticeship Levy. This will include:

- **portfolio managing a range of employers** and provide guidance on national policy changes and flexibilities around the Growth and Skills Levy (formerly Apprenticeship Levy)
- **piloting a Suffolk Levy Transfer Scheme** working in conjunction with the University of Suffolk, Suffolk Chamber of Commerce, and local Further Education Colleges, using pledged unspent levy funds from anchor organisations (including SCC), identifying additional local levy employers and encourage them to transfer unallocated levy to support new SME apprenticeship creation
- **providing a service** for employers to receive a tailored offer that supports them to determine how apprenticeships can support their workforce recruitment and development requirements, navigate through the apprenticeship system, broker connections with interested applicants, link to relevant training providers and, if applicable, transfer or receive levy funding to enable the development of opportunities
- **learning from successful models** like Apprenticeships Norfolk, which between April 2023 to end of March 2025, successfully transferred over £2.8m of funding (which would have otherwise been likely to have returned to the Treasury) to over 160 businesses, supporting almost 300 apprentices
- **provide activity, resources and engagement for schools and other educational institutions**, including colleges, to support the raising of understanding and awareness of apprenticeship pathways with young people and work directly with interested students to help broker opportunities
- provide **pre-apprenticeship coaching** for disadvantaged groups, i.e. Care Leavers and prison leavers etc.
- widen the **support offered for economically inactive individuals** linking in to Connect to Work, Get Suffolk Working, Adult Skills Funding, Skills Bootcamps etc.

Expected outcomes includes more employers, especially SMEs, in Suffolk understanding and utilising apprenticeships to recruit and develop their workforce, individuals moving from unemployment into apprenticeship opportunities and additional apprenticeship opportunity creation.

Timeframe: Following agreement by the Business Board, plans will be developed for implementation and delivery of the 'amplified' Apprenticeship Suffolk service from April 2026. It is expected that discussions will take place during 2026 to determine if the MCCA wishes to provide an Apprenticeship service on a regional Norfolk and Suffolk basis from April 2027.

EPIC Score – 15/16

Intervention	Profile sectors, type, status, EPIC score	Strategic Fit [why]	Deliverability [How]	Additionality [what]	Economic Impact [Return on Investment]	Cost & Risk				
Apprenticeships Suffolk Amplify TD015 Enabler: TD	Apprenticeships Suffolk Amplify is a 12-month initiative to transform the existing service into a strategic driver of skills and growth. By expanding capacity and introducing dedicated leads for employers, participants, and levy management, Amplify will deliver proactive engagement and tailored support. A key feature is the Suffolk Levy Transfer Scheme, which will redirect unspent levy funds from large employers to SMEs, creating new apprenticeships in priority sectors and ensuring unused contributions benefit the local economy. Amplify will strengthen employer engagement through portfolio-style management and strategic advice, while providing impartial guidance to participants via schools, colleges, and Jobcentre Plus. It will fill the gap left by the withdrawal of DfE-funded school support, linkin education to employer visits and work inspiration activities. Working with providers, the University of Suffolk, and employer bodies, Amplify will align provision with demand and create inclusive pathways, accelerating delivery against Suffolk's Economic Strategy.	Board Sponsor Marek Hornak Lead Officer Michael Gray Partners: SCC Teams, DWP, Providers.	Sector - Universal Type - Talent Development Status - Seeking Funding EPIC Score - E4 P4 I4 C3 = 15/16	Proven model enhancing the existing Apprenticeship Suffolk Service and Get Suffolk Working plan. Apprenticeships are central to achieving Suffolk's ambitions for a skilled workforce, including increasing Level 3 qualifications, expanding the economically active population, and moving people into higher-skilled roles.	Additional investment would deliver significant additionality by expanding capacity, leveraging the Skills and Growth Levy, and unlocking unspent levy funds to create new opportunities for SMEs and priority sectors.	Apprenticeships deliver strong economic impact for Suffolk. Moving economically inactive residents into work reduces unemployment and boosts productivity, while supporting employees to gain new skills strengthens business performance.	£111,102.00	Risks - Tight timescales to enhance the current delivery to ensure continuity and growth Loss of staff ahead of April start date and unable to recruit new Amplify staff.	Mitigation Participants contribute through higher earnings, income tax, and National Insurance, improving public finances and reducing welfare costs. Apprenticeships directly address skills gaps in priority sectors, driving growth. Long-term benefits are significant: completing an apprenticeship can increase annual earnings by £1,900-£2,900 at Levels 2-3, delivering strong lifetime wage premiums.	Early decision making on service enhancement, clear communication to existing team and timely recruitment. Maintain engagement with all stakeholders and early engagement with MCCA.

Annex C: Preparing the workforce to increase local supply chain involvement in energy-related developments and drive innovation in the local energy sector

Intervention proposal: Phase 2 of the ‘Energy Readiness Programme’

Funds Required: £130,000 (initial 12 months)

Following a successful first phase of delivery, a second phase of the ‘Energy Readiness Programme’ (ERP) will involve a suite of support and training for Suffolk businesses that will aim to increase local supply chain involvement in energy sector developments, facilitate innovation in the energy sector itself and ready communities for the shift to net-zero and climate adaptation. Through this initiative, participants will have access to expert guidance, training, and financial assistance to improve skills, quality and readiness for key opportunities.

Strategic Fit

The Suffolk Economic Strategy emphasises becoming a national leader in sustainable growth and clean technology, with a target of contributing an additional £14 billion to the economy by 2045. The ERP directly supports this by strengthening the local skills base for renewable energy and clean-tech industries.

Both Suffolk and Norfolk are developing joint energy plans to ensure resilience and decarbonisation. The project complements this by preparing the workforce of local firms to deliver on, and maximise the benefits from, major infrastructure developments.

The programme directly aligns to the proposed mission in the draft Cluster Development Plan to power clean growth by capitalising on Suffolk’s strengths in nuclear and offshore wind alongside helping to accelerate our growing potential in hydrogen, bioenergy and solar.

The Programme

The ERP provides employers with an assessment, including a Training Needs Analysis to support their organisation’s potential to work on a significant energy-related project or drive innovation within the clean energy sector. Following the analysis, employers and their staff are provided with a bespoke package of training solutions such as quality management, welding, electrical installation and procurement and supply. The project covers 60% of the costs, with the employer investing the remaining 40%. Phase 2 will include a broader range of more advanced modules than were available in phase 1 including renewable energy technologies, energy storage solutions and smart grid technologies. Phase 2 will also include community outreach programmes to raise levels of understanding regarding energy efficiency to help drive the shift needed to increase demand related to net zero ambitions and link where relevant to the Suffolk Apprenticeship Levy pilot (if both projects move forward) to ensure levy funds are redirected and spent in line with our ambitions related to energy.

Phase 1 of the ERP supported over 60 employers resulting in an additional £86,632 of private investment in training, over 120 additional learners and apprentices for a cost of £118,800.

Within 12 months phase 2 will be expected to support 60 businesses, result in over 110 additional L3 and L4 learner starts as well as 15 additional advanced and higher-level apprenticeships.

Expected outcomes include the creation of higher-value jobs, increased retention of value in the local economy, increased productivity, a more highly skilled and adaptable workforce, innovation linked to regional sustainability goals and adoption of energy-efficient practices and technologies in the workplace.

Timeframe: If approved for funding the programme will commence delivery in January 2026 with quarterly monitoring reports required and a review of ongoing demand and performance before the end of 2026 at which point the programme will either close, be supported for a further period with agreement from the Business Board (with costs of £350,000 for a three year period) or potentially funded through the MCCA.

Epic Score – 16/16

Intervention	Profile [sectors, type, status, EPIC score]	Strategic Fit [why]	Deliverability [How]	Additionality [what]	Economic Impact [Return on Investment]	Cost & Risk
Energy Readiness Programme TD014 Enabler: TD & BI&C Board Sponsor: Mark Pendlington Lead Officer: Michael Gray EPIC Score - E4 P4 I4 C4 = 16/16	Energy Readiness Programme: Building on the success of an initial phase, the second phase of the Energy Readiness Programme aims to further enhance engagement in the energy sector within the region. It is designed to ensure the business community of Suffolk and Norfolk are prepared to be able to engage and capture opportunities which exist throughout the Energy Sector in Suffolk, the Eastern Region and beyond. Through this initiative, participants have access to expert guidance, training, and financial assistance to improve skills, quality and readiness for opportunities that are made available. This second phase will focus on expanding the scope of training, increasing community engagement, and fostering innovation in energy solutions such as hydrogen production and battery storage.	Directly supports Suffolk and Norfolk's Economic Strategies by strengthening the local skills base in renewable energy and clean-tech industries.	Proven model - Second phase of a project with a successful track record. Previous funded by the LEP through the innovative projects fund. This is no longer available, and this project is time dependent. Combines East Suffolk Council and Suffolk Economy funds alongside co-investment from employers and education partners.	Will deliver new economic opportunities through higher-value jobs, increased productivity and inward investment. SMEs will be better positioned to compete for procurement opportunities, increasing turnover and exports. Reduces reliance on external contractors, keeping more value within the local economy.	Supports at least 150 Suffolk businesses (SMEs?) and 300 additional learners. Leverages funding and investment in skills from local businesses. Education provider resources to be utilised. A skilled workforce attracts energy companies to base operations in Suffolk/Norfolk, strengthening the region's reputation as a clean energy hub. Public funding helps ensure inclusive, region-wide impact (rather than investment only led by large companies).	Risks Delivery – change level of demand from employers. To be mitigated by regular reviews and breakpoints in the grant funding.