

## **Agenda Item 5: Devolution and Future Business Board Structure**

### **The future of our Business Board structure, as Norfolk and Suffolk progress towards forming a joint Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) 2026**

#### **Background**

The Norfolk and Suffolk Business Boards held their second joint Business Board on 11th November 2025 to consider strategic priorities for 2026 considering the forthcoming Mayoral Combined Authority. Discussion topics included combining Local Growth Plans, investment fund alignment, Board integration, engagement with mayoral candidates, and continuity of existing programmes.

Both Norfolk and Suffolk currently operate independent Business Boards, established following the integration of the former New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). These Business Boards have the same goals, to provide strategic advice, support and input to the County Councils on economic development, business support, skills, and sector growth. They play a central role in supporting the delivery of Local Growth Plans as well as acting as conduits between the public and private sectors.

With the anticipated creation of the Norfolk and Suffolk Combined Authority and the election of a Mayor will bring together powers across economic development, infrastructure, transport, skills, and innovation, and with it, the need for a coherent and unified business voice within the new governance framework.

This report will present the outcomes from the discussions held at the joint Business Board and seek agreement on priorities, integration options, and engagement approach for the transition to a Mayoral Combined Authority.

#### **Discussion Summary from joint Business Board**

- Strong consensus on creating a joint executive summary of Norfolk and Suffolk Local Growth Plans for the Mayor's 'red box'.
- Skills identified as a golden thread across all sectors, with emphasis on homegrown talent.
- Joint engagement with mayoral candidates recommended, including roadshows and Q&A sessions.

- Mixed views on Business Board integration: phased approach vs. early merger, with retention of local distinctiveness.
- Need to merge intervention lists and prioritise short-term projects alongside strategic priorities.
- Clear desire to maintain political neutrality and keep business priorities central.
- Address funding gap during transition and provide context of other regional inputs (e.g., Transport East).

It is vital to build a strong case for ensuring business is formally represented at the decision-making table alongside the Mayor and Combined Authority leadership. The success of regional growth strategies depends not only on political leadership, but on deep engagement with the businesses that drive innovation, investment, and employment. Establishing a clear governance role for business, whether through formal advisory status, representation on key panels, or participation in economic strategy boards will help anchor private sector insight at the heart of regional policymaking and this is not just good governance; it is essential to making devolution deliver in practice.

It should also be considered that any structure is formally recognised in the constitution of the new Combined Authority. Without this, there is a risk that business input becomes informal or peripheral.

There are several structural models worth considering, and a number of principles that should guide the future approach. The structure must allow for balanced representation across geographies, sectors, and business types. It should build on the institutional knowledge and networks of both existing boards and be properly resourced to support engagement, communications, and delivery.

Ultimately, the goal must be to ensure that the voice of business is not only preserved, but amplified, in the governance of the Norfolk–Suffolk Mayoral Combined Authority. There is also a critical opportunity to generate stronger external recognition for Norfolk and Suffolk.

### Options for consideration

Options	Pros	Cons
<p><b>Option 1</b></p> <p><b>Merge Boards Before Mayoral Election</b></p> <p>A single, Combined Business Board covering Norfolk and Suffolk.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents unified voice to the Mayor at a regional level and would streamline engagement with the Mayor</li> <li>• Simplified governance</li> <li>• Aligns with the approach taken in other combined authorities, such as Greater Manchester and Cambridgeshire &amp; Peterborough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk of losing local nuance, particularly around place-based challenges, sectoral strengths, and the diverse needs of our business communities</li> <li>• Requires rapid changes</li> <li>• Risk loss of momentum of current projects and comms</li> </ul>

Options	Pros	Cons
<p><b>Option 2</b></p> <p><b>Tiered Model with (specialist) Sub-Groups</b></p> <p>A tiered structure with a central Norfolk–Suffolk Business Board supported by two local panels, one for each county.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combines unified leadership with sector expertise</li> <li>• Panels could retain strong links to local business networks and feed intelligence and priorities directly into the regional board</li> <li>• Preserves local insight while maintaining a coordinated voice at the combined authority level</li> <li>• Lower boards could be organised around priority sectors identified in Local Growth Plans, or structured by theme to reflect strategic challenges such as skills, investment and innovation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complexity in coordination</li> <li>• May require additional resources</li> <li>• Second tier Board might be less attractive for business</li> </ul>
<p><b>Option 3</b></p> <p><b>Maintain separate Boards for FY26/27</b></p> <p>Retain the Norfolk and Suffolk Business Boards as independent bodies, with a Mayor’s Business Council (with just the two Business Board Chairs) representing the business voice to the Mayor and Combined Authority.</p> <p>With this option there is the expectation that future arrangements will further evolve through 26/27 via discussions between the Mayor and Business Board Chairs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retains local distinctiveness with an ability to focus on specific needs of their local economies</li> <li>• A good hedge, should the Mayor be challenging to deal with</li> <li>• Mayor’s Business Council acts as a streamlined channel for joint input on regional strategy</li> <li>• Allows phased transition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential duplication of effort</li> </ul>

The preferred Option 3, i.e. a transition period, maintaining two separate Boards in 2026/27, with a clear timetable and process for forming a joint board by 2027/28 – can then be detailed in the Local Assurance Framework.

Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils continue to make preparatory work for the new Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA), in order that an organisation is ready to stand up by March 2026, ahead of Mayoral elections. As part of this process, the councils must produce a Local Assurance Framework for Government, which sets out how the Mayoral Combined Authority will ensure public money is managed effectively and transparently, providing accountability to residents and businesses. The Local Assurance Framework helps Government and the MCA assess to performance, governance, and risk management, ensuring the MCA is achieving their objectives and providing value for money.

The Local Assurance Framework for the new Norfolk and Suffolk MCA has a section outlining 'advisory boards' to the MCA board itself. One of these advisory boards is defined as the 'Business Board', who will have strategic input into the MCA Board, providing the 'Business Voice' for Norfolk and Suffolk, and will also have influence for how the Investment fund is allocated. The detail of the 'Business Board' can be defined as fit for purpose locally, in line with the 3 options set out above.

Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils will need to agree the Local Assurance Framework with Government by February 2026, in order to maintain timelines for the setup of the new Norfolk and Suffolk Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA). It is therefore proposed that a small working group, consisting of the Norfolk Business Board and Suffolk Business Board Chairs, plus 1 other member from each board, is assembled during December 2025, to review and finalise the proposals and transition plans for the Business Board; so that this can be set out in the Local Assurance Framework by February 2026.

## Recommendations

1. Agree to Option 3 to maintain separate Boards for FY26/27 and appoint a small advisory group represented by members of both Business Boards, to input further into the transition plan, to be included in the MCA Local Assurance Framework by February 26.
2. Develop and implement engagement plans between Business Boards for all mayoral candidates.
3. Compile and prioritise Mayoral investments list for quick wins and strategic projects.
4. Plan for Stakeholder engagement across both counties to confirm the approach set out above.

The Board is invited to:

Approve these recommendations and nominate Board members to advisory group to build out precise details.