

EMPOWERING SUFFOLK'S FUTURE

**Public consultation
on the proposed
Suffolk Devolution Deal**



Have your say

18 MARCH - 26 MAY 2024

EMPOWERING SUFFOLK'S FUTURE

In December 2022, the Government and Suffolk County Council signed a proposed, in principle, devolution deal which would transfer certain powers and funding from the Government to Suffolk. It would mean more decisions about Suffolk's future being made in Suffolk, rather than nationally. This type of county-level devolution deal is new, and Suffolk is one of the first areas to explore it.





WHAT IS A DEVOLUTION DEAL?

Councils make many decisions about public services. Much of the country, including Suffolk, has two tiers of local government: district and borough councils, which provide more local services; and county councils, which generally provide more strategic functions and services that cover the whole county, such as adult and children's social care, household waste sites, transport, environment, economic development, skills, registrars and trading standards.

Local authorities have three main sources of income: council tax, business rates, and direct funding from the Government. In some cases, although councils may be responsible for delivering the services, the Government still makes some of the decisions about how and where funding is spent locally, e.g. in areas such as adult education, transport and the environment.

A devolution deal is an agreement whereby the Government passes control of decisions over some of this funding and areas of policy to local councils. This has already happened in some other areas, including Greater London, Liverpool, West Midlands and Greater Manchester.

A DEVOLUTION DEAL FOR SUFFOLK

If the proposed deal is finalised, Suffolk would receive new decision-making powers and greater local control of funding in areas including adult education, regeneration and transport, as well as control of a new investment fund worth £480 million over the next thirty years. This could help us to create new jobs, offer local business support and invest in infrastructure.

The proposed deal would also mean that, for the first time, the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk. Once every four years, residents would be given two votes and empowered to elect their local county councillor AND the leader of the county council. The first election would take place on 1 May 2025.

This consultation is an important part of the process. This document contains information about the proposed deal to help you complete the consultation. The results of the survey will be analysed and presented to county councillors and the Secretary of State when they come to make a final decision on how to proceed. This is your opportunity to have your say.

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE TO A DEAL?

Suffolk's proposed, in principle, devolution deal was agreed following months of discussions between Suffolk County Council and the Government. The agreement reached was for a 'Level 3' devolution deal, which involves the maximum possible devolution of powers and funding currently available as defined in the Levelling Up white paper. There is currently no other offer on the table, so the alternative is to reject the proposed deal. If we wanted a different deal, we would have to restart discussions, and there is no guarantee this would be possible.



What are the key points from Suffolk's proposed devolution deal?

£480M INVESTMENT FUND

Under this deal, Suffolk County Council would be given control over an investment fund worth £16 million per year over thirty years - a total of £480 million.

This is money we would not otherwise receive. It would be for Suffolk County Council, working with local partners, to decide how best to invest this money but, by way of example, other areas with a devolution deal have used their investment funds on:

- local business support
- regeneration, e.g. by clearing up brownfield sites to make them available for development
- housing infrastructure (for example, providing funding for supported housing for people with learning disabilities and mental health conditions)
- helping young people access free bus travel
- supporting victims of domestic violence
- investing in transport infrastructure.

It would also be possible to borrow larger sums of money and use this funding to pay the interest on it. This could mean that larger infrastructure projects could be developed and started, secure in the knowledge that we have the money to pay for them. This is very common in local government.

The fund is not 'index-linked', which means that its value would decline over time if inflation went up. This is the same for all devolution deals. Government funding arrangements over longer periods of time are usually not index-linked.

In addition to the investment fund, the deal would transfer budgets and decision-making in key areas which will be explored in the following pages.



ADULT EDUCATION BUDGET

The 'Adult Education Budget' funds learning and training courses for adults over the age of 19 and is managed at a national level by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. In simple terms, the agency decides what types of courses should be made available and allocates funding to provide them based on a set financial formula.

Suffolk receives a percentage of the national pot of money available for adult education. Most of this funding is allocated directly to training providers (including our main Further Education colleges) who are restricted on how they can use this by the national formula. There is no direct link between any local skills strategy and the allocation of money to education providers. This means there can be a mismatch between what is needed and what is on offer locally.

Under the proposed deal, Suffolk County Council would become responsible for commissioning adult education in Suffolk and would work with local businesses and adult education providers to understand the skills needed for Suffolk people and deliver the necessary courses.

The county council would be given the money that the Government currently allocates to the county – so that it can invest in skills training more closely aligned with local employment and community needs. Based on the current arrangement, this would be **£9.4 million in 2025/26**. This amount could change over time based on the Government's approach to funding adult education. The funding is not index-linked.

Regardless of the amount, this money would be coming to Suffolk anyway. But under the deal, local partners in Suffolk would have control over how it is spent.

As is the case with other areas with devolved control of adult education, Suffolk County Council will need to use a small percentage of the funding to administer the programme. In other areas, this is between 4% and 5%.

Suffolk County Council will look to build on national good practice and ensure that key stakeholders are actively engaged in deciding what training is most needed in Suffolk. Meeting the needs of local businesses and local people would be the key to success.



REGENERATION

There are currently more than 200 brownfield sites across Suffolk which could be appropriate for development. This includes many derelict industrial sites standing empty. These sites have been identified in partnership with Suffolk's five district and borough councils. Sometimes, all it takes is for a brownfield site to be cleared up and prepared for development in order for it to become financially-viable for potential developers. This includes confirming ownership, demolition and decontamination. As it stands, Suffolk County Council or district and borough councils must bid for funding from the Government to clean up brownfield land.

Instead of bidding for funding on a case-by-case basis, under devolution Suffolk County Council would get a one-off lump sum. In 2024/25, this would be **£5.8 million** which could help unlock the building of new homes on some of that otherwise redundant brownfield land.

Under devolution, Suffolk County Council would work with local council partners, through their Local Plans, to decide which sites are supported for development. Making more brownfield sites available for development can mean that less development is proposed on greenfield sites.

This would help create the right locations to increase affordable housing. Decisions would be made in consultation with district and borough councils, as they are responsible for planning decisions and housing.

The deal would also mean that the county council, working closely with district and borough councils and other relevant partners, would get new powers to buy land to support development, regeneration and infrastructure projects that are in the public interest. These compulsory purchase powers would be transferred from the Government's housing and regeneration agency 'Homes England' to Suffolk County Council. With the consent of the local planning authority, Suffolk County Council could also create 'Development Corporations' - legal bodies that support the regeneration of a defined area by using a wide range of powers to acquire, hold, dispose of and develop land and property and develop infrastructure.

TRANSPORT

As the Local Transport Authority, Suffolk County Council already has transport planning and delivery powers. Suffolk Highways is responsible for Suffolk's roads, and Suffolk's 'Enhanced Partnership' (which also represents local bus operators) makes decisions about how to deliver and improve local bus services. This would continue under devolution. Currently, the Government offers transport funding to Suffolk County Council on an annual basis. This funds a variety of services including pothole repairs and drain clearing. There is also sometimes one-off funding offered on a case-by-case basis, but this is not guaranteed.

Under devolution, Suffolk County Council would begin to receive multi-year transport funding from Government, which would provide greater certainty for longer-term planning.

It is not yet clear how much money would be available as part of the multi-year funding. However, this guaranteed investment could help us to

- better plan road improvement schemes
- reduce congestion and carbon emissions by making public transport more attractive
- introduce Oyster card-style smart ticketing
- improve the bus offer in rural areas.

In addition to the multi-year funding, the county council would receive **£250,000** each year for two years to support the development of Suffolk's Local Transport Plan, which sets the strategy for the management, maintenance and development of the county's transport system. This funding could be used to pay for research, consultation and developing business cases.

Finally, evidence from other devolved areas suggests that they are more successful in securing Government financial support for locally important projects. One of the reasons for this may be because devolved areas seem to have a higher profile with Government and are therefore in a stronger position to start negotiations.

LOCAL DECISION-MAKING

If the proposed devolution deal is approved, Suffolk County Council's governance structure would change.

Currently, all elected county councillors vote on who should be the leader of the council. The leader is usually from the party with the most elected members. The leader then appoints other councillors to the Cabinet and together they make key decisions within the policy framework set by the Full Council. The leader and cabinet members are held accountable by the rest of the elected councillors via the county council's various committees, which scrutinise the cabinet's decisions and make recommendations. This is how it works in most parts of the country.

Under devolution, the leader of Suffolk County Council would be directly elected by the people of Suffolk. Once every four years, residents would be given two votes and empowered to elect their local county councillor AND the leader of the county council.

The first election would take place in May 2025, under a 'first past the post' system, meaning that whoever receives the highest number of votes wins.

There would be no new layer of local government or additional offices – the directly elected leader would remain part of Suffolk County Council, and they would not be able to set their own council tax demand. Any extra costs would mainly be around running the election once every four years – alongside the election of county councillors that is already taking place.

This change would create the possibility of new dynamics surrounding the council's leadership. For example, it could be the case that a leader is elected from a different political party than the majority of councillors on the council, or from no political party at all. As now, the directly elected leader would be free to choose any elected members to serve in their cabinet, whether from the majority party, a minority party, or no party.

The Government has a clear preference for directly elected council leaders, and evidence from places like Manchester and the West Midlands suggests that people in similar roles have a higher profile and greater influence with the Government and have been able to negotiate additional devolution for their areas. For example, in March 2024 the Government announced £160 million of funding to create a new Tees Valley Investment Zone to increase productivity and create jobs in that region's digital and creative industries. This investment was secured by the directly-elected Mayor of Tees Valley, the Tees Valley Combined Authority and Teesside University.

In reality, the current decision-making arrangements would continue under a directly-elected leader model. The main difference in Suffolk's case would be how the leader is elected.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND COOPERATION

Councillors work to reflect the views of their local communities. Residents can contact their local representative in writing, by phone or by email to make their voice heard.

To make important decisions about how public services are delivered and money is used, Suffolk County Council consults and engages with residents, service users, businesses, partners and staff. This would continue under devolution.

Whilst the powers and funding would be devolved to the county council specifically, Suffolk's strong history of collaboration is already written into the text of the proposed deal. The deal's implementation would therefore be a collaborative endeavour with local partners, including the district and borough councils, town and parish councils, business, education partners and others. For example, the county council would work with the district and borough councils, as the local planning authorities, to decide which brownfield sites to clear up; with local transport operators to identify and develop opportunities for new transport projects; and with business partners to develop a local skills strategy.

Directly Elected and Indirectly Elected Council Leader: Key Differences and Similarities

HOW IT WORKS NOW

Appointed by Full Council

Represents a particular electoral division

WHAT WOULD STAY THE SAME

Responsible for executive functions

Appoints a cabinet of between 2 and 9 other councillors

Decides and allocates cabinet portfolios; delegates executive functions to cabinet members

Appoints deputy leader

Recommends the strategic and budgetary framework to Full Council for approval

Subject to the council's scrutiny arrangements

Subject to the Elected Member Code of Conduct

Receives an allowance in accordance with the Elected Member Scheme of Allowances

THE PROPOSED CHANGES

Directly elected by Suffolk voters

Does not represent a particular electoral division

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUFFOLK

Devolution is a journey, not a one-off event. Evidence from other areas shows that devolution opens the door to greater powers and funding over time. For example, Greater Manchester has now negotiated seven devolution deals, covering areas such as planning, transport, and health and social care. The West Midlands has recently agreed a Deeper Devolution Deal with a budget windfall in excess of £1.5 billion to level up the region.

The Government has already announced a fourth level of devolution which would grant even more powers and funding around skills, transport, housing, net zero and other policy areas.

This first deal would pave the way for deeper devolution in the future.

SUFFOLK'S PROPOSED DEVOLUTION DEAL TEXT IN FULL

The full text of Suffolk's proposed devolution deal with Government can be found at www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution

This in-principle deal was signed by Suffolk County Council and the Government on 8 December 2022 at the home of Claas UK in Little Saxham, near Bury St Edmunds. This proposed deal is now being consulted on publicly.

The deal in numbers

£480 MILLION INVESTMENT FUND

New Investment Fund worth £16 million per year for 30 years (£480 million in total)

£9.4 MILLION* ADULT EDUCATION BUDGET

Local control of the Adult Education Budget each year

*This is the expected allocation for 2024/25

£5.8 MILLION REGENERATION FUND

One-off funding to prepare brownfield sites for use

MULTI-YEAR TRANSPORT FUNDING

£500,000 over two year to develop proposals for the Local Transport Plan



MORE INFORMATION

More information about Suffolk's proposed devolution deal, including answers to frequently asked questions and a three-minute video explaining the deal, is available at www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution

Equalities Impact Assessment screenings have been completed for this consultation and the impacts of the deal itself. Both are available on our devolution webpage.

A consultation on a previous devolution proposal for Norfolk and Suffolk was held in 2016. This deal was not progressed. An analysis of responses to that consultation has however informed the current consultation.

GETTING SUFFOLK READY FOR THIS CONSULTATION

Throughout February and early March 2024, Suffolk County Council spoke to more than 1,500 people to tell them about the proposed deal and that the consultation will be launched on 18 March 2024.

This included sharing information and holding online and face to face meetings with representatives from a wide range of organisations and sectors, including:

- Businesses and business federations
- Community organisations and other public bodies
- Town and parish council elected members and staff
- District and borough council elected members and staff
- Suffolk County Council elected members and staff
- Suffolk's MPs.

Feedback from the discussions have further informed the design of the consultation. Key points included the need to:

- Not assume knowledge and explain clearly how things work now and would work under a deal
- Explain that the investment fund is not index-linked and so it could decrease in value over time if inflation rises
- Explain the possibility that a directly elected leader could be from a different political party to the majority of elected councillors, or no political party at all
- Explain the important role that working with partners would play in delivering the deal
- Confirm that the governance changes would not require any new layer of local government and nor would the directly elected leader be able to set their own council tax demand
- Explain that this type of county-level devolution deal is new and that Suffolk one of the first to explore it.

Suffolk County Council also published information about the proposed deal on its website and made available a three-minute video explaining the deal and the consultation. At the time of going to consultation, more than 43,000 people had viewed the video for 15 seconds or more and more than 800 people had accessed the webpage www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution

IMPARTIAL CONSULTATION PROCESS

Holding an impartial and independent consultation is very important, so we have enlisted the help of the Consultation Institute and Ipsos. We are following the Consultation Institute's rigorous Quality Assurance programme which ultimately determines whether our consultation approach meets their high standards.

The Institute has confirmed that it is content that the council's approach to the planning of this consultation and its documentation is consistent with industry good practice standards.

We have also commissioned Ipsos to conduct an independent sample survey of 1,000 Suffolk residents and three focus groups. The work to complete this survey and focus groups will take place during the 10-week consultation period. This survey will complement our wider public survey.

The results of all parts of the consultation will be analysed by Suffolk County Council staff and presented as part of a report on the consultation. Suffolk county councillors and Government ministers will consider the consultation responses as part of the decision-making process on whether or not to proceed with Suffolk's devolution deal.

HOW TO RESPOND

The consultation will run from 18 March to 26 May (10 weeks) and is open to anyone who lives or works in Suffolk. You can either complete the survey online, via www.suffolk.gov.uk/devolution, or in hard copy. Copies of the consultation are available in all Suffolk library buildings or can be requested by contacting Suffolk County Council's customer services team. If you need assistance completing the survey, please phone our customer services team.

You can also send comments via letter and email, and these will be analysed for the final report. Although we will be using the media and social media to promote awareness of the consultation, comments received via these channels will not be considered as consultation responses. We will be running online drop-in sessions during the consultation where you can ask further questions. Details are available on our website, on social media or by contacting Suffolk County Council.

This consultation document is available in other languages and formats and these are available on request.



What happens next?

18 MARCH 2024

Consultation opens

26 MAY 2024

Consultation closes

JULY 2024

Suffolk County Council Cabinet considers the outcome of the public consultation. Full Council considers whether to change Suffolk County Council's governance structure and submit consultation result to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

1 MAY 2025

Election of Leader of Suffolk County Council (if approved) and all County Councillors (guaranteed)

How to contact Suffolk County Council

Phone: **0345 603 1842**.

Lines are open Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5:30pm (excluding Bank Holidays).

0345 numbers are charged at the same rate as standard landline numbers that start with 01 or 02. If your phone tariff offers inclusive calls to landlines, calls to 0345 numbers will also be included on the same basis.

Email: **devolution@suffolk.gov.uk**

Post: Consultation Team, Suffolk County Council, Endeavour House, 8 Russell Road, Ipswich, IP1 2BX