

# ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT

## 2024-25



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## **FOREWORD from Nicola Beach (Chief Executive)**

The County Council's governance arrangements have stood up well during a year where the UK's economic growth remains sluggish, and growing trade tensions and geopolitical uncertainties continue to create financial instability.

Across the country, councils' finances remain under strain from a combination of past and ongoing pressures. A slight uplift in Government funding for local authorities for 2025/26 does not counteract rising costs, growing demand, and more complex patterns of need. Suffolk County Council has approved a substantial savings programme of £28.4 million to enable setting a balanced budget for 2025/26. Despite the complexities and risks affecting the Council's budget, the outturn for 2024-25 has been a positive one, with the Council's budget coming in as an overall small underspend. This is down to the focus, care and commitment of teams across the organisation in managing their budgets responsibly. Such robust and good governance will remain pivotal to the Council continuing its effective delivery of services for its residents.

In early February 2025, it was announced that Suffolk has been accepted onto the Government's Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). This fast-tracks devolution and local government reorganisation, and runs them in parallel. Devolution will establish a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) with Norfolk County Council, with inaugural Mayoral elections due in May 2026. Powers and funding will be devolved by the Government to the MCCA, enabling more local decision-making. As a statutory authority the MCCA will have its own constitution and accountability, including a Scrutiny and Audit Committee. The Leader and a Cabinet Member from both county councils will be constituent members of the MCCA and, therefore, members of its decision-making Executive board. Before the MCCA can operate, both County Councils will need to agree the draft statutory instrument from government.

For local government reorganisation (LGR), the County Council will submit a business case proposal to Government by 26 September 2025. This is in response to an invitation from the Minister, received by all Suffolk councils on 5 February 2025. That invitation also set out the criteria that proposals will be judged against. The Minister's decision on the future form of unitary government in Suffolk is expected in the first quarter of 2026.

To facilitate change of this scale, and at this pace, the Government tabled legislation to postpone Suffolk County Council's May 2025 elections. This is also the case in other areas on the DPP.

To enhance the Council's leadership for the DPP, Councillor Richard Rout has been appointed into a new cabinet role responsible for devolution, local government reform and NSIPs. A new Executive Director for Organisational Change and Local Government Reorganisation, Mark Ash, has also been appointed.

An important change to the Council's governance set-up over the past year has been the new permanent Executive Director of Adult Social Care, Gareth Everton, joining us in January 2025. Gareth will work closely with colleagues, elected members and

partners to build on our CQC ‘Good’ rating and deliver the mission-critical change programmes already underway in Adult Social Care, as well as new change and improvement initiatives.

2024/25 has been a significant year for external assurances of some of our services. In May 2024, Ofsted reported the outcome of a full inspection of Suffolk County Council’s Adult Learning Service. The service, delivered by Suffolk County Council through a range of local providers, was rated as ‘Good’ across the board.

In August 2024, Ofsted published its report into Suffolk County Council’s Children’s Services. The report rated the service as ‘Requires improvement to be good’. An action plan was subsequently sent to Ofsted by the end of September 2024, and a new Strengthening Service for Children and Families in Suffolk Board has been set up to oversee improvements. Work also continues on wide-ranging improvement plans for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services, driven forward by the SEND Improvement Board. Sarah-Jane Smedmor Joined us in July 2024 as our new Executive Director of Children and Young People services. Sarah-Jane and her new senior team and cabinet members are driving the necessary changes and improvements to services, supported by additional funding.

Suffolk’s Fire and Rescue Service inspection took place in September 2024, with the outcome published in February 2025. The inspectors rated the service as good at preventing fires and risk, and protecting the public through fire regulation, and that it met requirements for responding to major incidents, plus managing and developing its leaders. However, the report rates six of the 11 areas as ‘Requires improvement’ and one as ‘Inadequate’. A targeted action plan has been developed, which includes ensuring that internal governance and assurance arrangements are effective. The Council will invest an additional £1.6 million to implement the plan.

Risk management, throughout the organisation, remains a priority. The strategic risk register is reviewed regularly at a senior political and officer level to ensure it is dynamic and relevant for a currently volatile external environment.

Where actions from the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement have been implemented, these are covered in this document in the assurance statements from officers relating to their areas of responsibility. The Action Plan at the end of this document sets out the ongoing and new actions we will be taking, alongside our ongoing stewardship of the Authority.

This year’s Annual Governance Statement conveys the continuing work of staff and Councillors to uphold the core principles of good governance for the Council. As we undertake generational change for local governance across Suffolk, by implementing devolution and LGR in parallel, good governance will be paramount. The assurance mechanisms and actions described in this year’s AGS are, therefore, vital in securing more effective, sustainable local governance and better outcomes for Suffolk’s communities.

## **APPROVAL OF THE ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT**

We have been advised on the result of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework by the Audit Committee, and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose in accordance with the governance framework.

To the best of our knowledge, the governance arrangements as defined within the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance have continued to operate effectively.

The Annual Governance Statement shows that our high standards have been maintained, and no significant issues are reported.

Specific opportunities for improvement in governance and internal controls are detailed within the action plan. We propose, over the coming year, to take steps to address these opportunities to further enhance our governance arrangements.

We are satisfied that these actions will deliver, over appropriate timescales, the improvements necessary and these will continue to be monitored, evaluated, and reported on as part of our next annual review.



**Councillor Matthew Hicks**  
**Leader of the Council**

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'M Hicks', with a horizontal line underneath.



**Nicola Beach**  
**Chief Executive**

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'Nicola', with a horizontal line underneath.

## SCOPE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Suffolk County Council is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised. It is also responsible for ensuring that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently, and effectively.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Council is responsible for putting in place proportionate and appropriate arrangements for the governance of its affairs and facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Council has approved and adopted a Code of Corporate Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy)/SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) framework '*Delivering Good Governance in Local Government Framework (2016 Edition)*'.

This document explains how the Council has complied with the Code and meets the requirements of the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control.

The governance arrangements over the Council's wholly owned companies (Concertus, Vertas, and Opus People Solutions - operating under the trading name 'Vertas Group'), and partially owned company (housing joint venture – Edmundham Developments), are incorporated within this Annual Governance Statement.

## WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?

Good governance is about *achieving the intended outcomes while acting in the public interest at all times*.

Governance is about how the Council ensures that it is doing the right things, in the right way, for the right people in a timely, inclusive, open, honest, and accountable manner.

Corporate governance generally refers to the processes by which an organisation is directed, controlled, led, and held to account.

The Council's governance framework aims to ensure that in conducting its business it:

- Operates in a lawful, open, inclusive, and honest manner.
- Makes sure public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and spent wisely.
- Has effective arrangements in place to manage risk.
- Meets the needs of Suffolk communities.
- Secures continuous improvements in the way it operates.

The Council concurs with the view that:

“Good governance leads to good management, good performance, good stewardship of public money, good public engagement and, ultimately, good outcomes for citizens and service users. Good governance enables an authority to pursue its vision effectively as well as underpinning that vision with mechanisms for control and management of risk ... and governance arrangements should not only be sound but also be seen to be sound.”



## THE PURPOSE OF THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The governance framework includes a set of legislative requirements, governance principles and management processes which the Council follows:

### Principles of corporate governance

#### Principle A: Integrity and Values

- Staying true to our strong ethical standards of conduct
- Respecting the rule of law
- Creating a culture where statutory officers and other key post holders are able to fulfil their responsibilities
- Ensuring fraud, corruption and abuse of position are dealt with effectively
- Ensuring a safe environment to raise concerns and learning from our mistakes

#### Principle B: Openness and Engagement

- Keeping relevant information open to the public and continuing their involvement
- Using consultation feedback from the public to support services and budget decisions
- Providing clear rationale for decision making – being explicit about risk, impact and benefits
- Having effective scrutiny to constructively challenge what we do and decisions made

#### Principle C: Working Together

- Staying true to our strong ethical standards of conduct
- Respecting the law
- Creating a culture where statutory officers and others key post holders are able to fulfil their responsibilities
- Ensuring fraud, corruption and abuse of positions are dealt with effectively
- Ensuring a safe environment to raise concerns and learn from our mistakes

#### Principle D: Making a Difference

- Having a clear vision and strategy setting out our intended outcomes for citizens and service users

#### Principle E: Capability

- Having clear roles and responsibilities for Council leadership
- Maintaining a development programme that allows Councillors and officers to gain the skills and knowledge they need to perform well in their roles
- Evaluating Councillor and officers' performance, compliments and complaints to enable results (outcomes) to be measured and enable learning

#### Principle F: Managing Risk and Performance

- Ensuring that effective risk management and performance systems are in place, and that these are integrated in our business systems/service units
- Having well developed assurance arrangements in place – including any commercial activities
- Having an effective Audit Committee
- Having effective counter fraud arrangements in place

#### Principle G: Transparency and Accountability

- Having rigorous and transparent decision making processes in place
- Maintaining an effective scrutiny process
- Publishing up-to-date and good quality information on our activities and decisions
- Maintaining an effective internal and external audit function

This framework is used to examine the services being provided and whether they are satisfying the objectives set. The governance framework has been in place at the Council for the year ended 31 March 2025 and up to the date of approval of the statement of accounts.



## THE GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

### HOW THE COUNCIL WORKS

- Elected Councillors set the Council's strategic direction by developing and keeping under review the corporate objectives of the Council. The objectives give a clear direction for what is important politically, and drive the work of Council services every day.

The objectives for 2024/25 were:

- I. Looking after our health and wellbeing** – maximising our ability to innovate, adapt and work in partnership with individuals, communities, and partners.
  - II. Strengthening our local economy** – maximising economic opportunities that benefit everyone, so that no one is left behind.
  - III. Protecting and enhancing our environment** – working to protect and enhance Suffolk's environment and biodiversity, while also reducing harmful carbon emissions.
  - IV. Providing value for money for the Suffolk taxpayer** – being bold and challenging in ensuring value for money and accountability to local people in everything that we do.
- There is an established, integrated planning process, which ensures Council services are delivered in accordance with the Council's objectives and represent the best use of resources. The 2024/25 Annual Plan was approved at the meeting of the County Council, alongside the budget, in February 2024.
  - Performance is measured against corporate objectives.
  - There is a written Constitution in place which specifies the roles and responsibilities of the executive, non-executive, scrutiny, and officer functions, setting clear delegation arrangements and protocols for effective communication.
  - Codes of Conduct have been developed, which define the standards of behaviour for Councillors and employees.
  - The Constitution, Schemes of Delegation to members and officers, Financial Procedure Rules and other supporting procedures clearly define how decisions are taken and highlight the processes and controls required to manage risks, with appropriate review procedures.
  - The County Council is the senior decision-making body and the principal forum for political debate. All County Council meetings take place in public and are webcast. The County Council sets the strategic aims that form the Policy Framework. It also determines the Council Plan and budget, following a well-developed process of member engagement and internal scrutiny.

- The Cabinet (Leader and Portfolio Holders) takes decisions on most matters of Council policy and service delivery. Collective Cabinet decisions are taken at a meeting held in public.
- The County Council appoints members to Scrutiny Committees, by which the Cabinet is held to account. Chairmen of the Scrutiny Committees are appointed by Council, and vice-chairmen are appointed by the relevant Scrutiny Committee. Scrutiny Committees are politically proportionate. They meet in public and are webcast.
- Other meetings of significant public interest are webcast, including the Development & Regulation Committee and the Suffolk Health and Wellbeing Board. Webcasts are available to view for up to six years.
- The Audit Committee promotes and maintains high standards in relation to the operation of the Council's Code of Corporate Governance, ensuring that the Council operates within the law, in accordance with the Council's internal procedures, and follows the framework and guidance issued by CIPFA/SOLACE. The Committee is also responsible for monitoring the risk management framework and control environment, to ensure the Council's financial and non-financial performance is properly monitored.
- Statutory officers support and monitor the Council's governance arrangements, ensuring expenditure is lawful and the Council continues to comply with relevant laws and regulations, internal policies, and procedures.
- There are mechanisms for whistleblowing and handling public complaints, which help measure service quality for users.
- The Council seeks to keep communities informed, giving local people the opportunity to get involved in the decision-making process, promoting local democracy, and supporting and shaping places and local communities. The Forward Plan describes all significant (key) decisions planned to be taken in the following four months and is published and updated at least monthly. The Forward Plan gives the public, press and elected members notice of forthcoming key decisions and is used by Scrutiny Committees to help plan their business.

## KEY ROLES

The key roles of those responsible for developing and maintaining the Governance Framework are:

The Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approves the Annual Plan.</li> <li>• Approves the Constitution, including the Financial Regulations.</li> <li>• Approves key policies and budgetary framework.</li> </ul>
Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The main decision-making body of the Council.</li> <li>• Made up of the Leader of the Council and Cabinet members with responsibility for different portfolios.</li> </ul>
Audit Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides independent assurance to the Council on the adequacy and effectiveness of the governance arrangements, risk management framework and internal control environment.</li> <li>• Promotes high standards of Member conduct and approves the Annual Statement of Accounts and Annual Governance Statement.</li> </ul>
Scrutiny Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support and challenge the Council in carrying out its responsibilities.</li> </ul>
Corporate Leadership Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chief Executive has overall accountability for the governance framework.</li> <li>• Implements the policy and budgetary framework set by the Council, provides advice to Cabinet and the Council on the development of future policy and budgetary issues, and oversees the implementation of Council policy.</li> <li>• Accountable for developing and maintaining the Council's governance and risk framework.</li> </ul>
Chief Financial Officer (s151)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leads and directs the financial strategy of the Council and ensures the Council controls and manages its money well. Is suitably qualified and experienced and ensures the Finance Team is fit for purpose.</li> <li>• Accountable for developing and maintaining the Council's internal control and counter fraud framework.</li> <li>• Contributes to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.</li> </ul>

Monitoring Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advises the Council on ethical issues, standards, and powers to ensure the Council operates within the law and statutory Codes of Practice.</li> <li>• Overall responsibility for the maintenance and operation of the Whistleblowing Policy and contributes to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.</li> </ul>
Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides independent assurance and opinion on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk management and control framework.</li> <li>• Delivers an annual programme of risk-based audit activity, including counter fraud and investigation activity.</li> <li>• Makes recommendations for improvements in the management of risk.</li> </ul>
External Audit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audits/reviews and reports on the Council's financial statements (including the Annual Governance Statement), providing an opinion on the accounts and use of resources, concluding on the arrangements in place for securing economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of resources (the value for money conclusion).</li> </ul>
Directors & Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsible for developing, maintaining, and implementing the Council's governance, risk, and control framework.</li> <li>• Contribute to the effective corporate management and governance of the Council.</li> </ul>

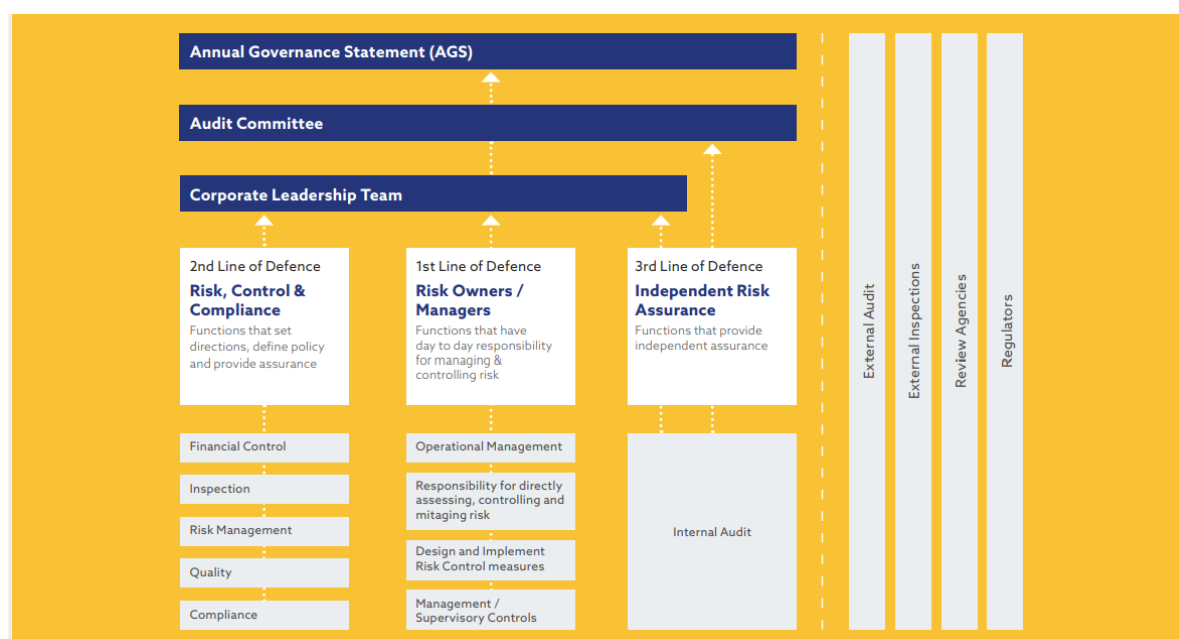
## REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS

In preparing the Annual Governance Statement the Council has:

- Reviewed the Council's existing governance arrangements against the revised CIPFA/SOLACE 'Delivering Good Governance in Local Government framework - 2016 Edition' good practice guidance.
- Reviewed the Council's Local Code of Corporate Governance to ensure it reflects this guidance, including the seven principles of good governance and associated required actions and behaviours taken by the Council that demonstrate good governance.
- Assessed the effectiveness of the Council's governance arrangements against the Local Code of Corporate Governance.
- Obtained assurance statements from Officers relating to their areas of responsibility, including actions from the 2023/24 Annual Governance Statement.

The review of effectiveness is informed by the three lines of defence (i.e., the relationship between managers responsible for the operational delivery; accountable managers who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment; and the Head of Internal Audit's independent risk assurance role) and inspections made by external auditors and other review agencies and inspectorates/regulators.

This is demonstrated here:



The roles and responsibilities are applied in a pragmatic real-world manner. A significant amount of policy, associated guidance, training, and tools are provided by the second line who operate a proportionate, risk-based application of assurance and compliance activity. Internal Audit use a risk-based methodology to determine their annual programme to support the application of the governance model within the organisation. This allows the second and third lines of defence to place emphasis in the right place and work effectively and efficiently to help management achieve organisational objectives through delivery, support, and challenge.



# GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK ASSURANCE

The key sources of assurance that inform this review and where it is obtained from are outlined below

WHERE DO WE NEED ASSURANCE?	WHERE CAN / DO WE GET ASSURANCE FROM?
 Compliance	 Constitution
 Democratic Engagement & Public Accountability	 Audit Committee, Council Executive & Scrutiny
 Management of Risk	 Internal & External Audit
 Financial Management	 Independent & External Sources
 Members & Officers Roles & Responsibilities	 Financial Strategy
 Standards of Conduct & Behaviour	 Complaints System, Counter Fraud & Whistle Blowing
 Action Plan Approved & Reported on	 HR Policies & Codes of Conduct
 Effectiveness of Internal Controls	 Risk Management Strategy & Framework
 Services Delivered	 Performance Management System

## ASSURANCE STATEMENTS

### **Governance**

**Nigel Inniss (Assistant Director Governance, Legal & Assurance, & Monitoring Officer)**



The Council has a Constitution made under Section 37 of the Local Government Act 2000. Its purpose is to enable the Council to set a strategic vision for the provision of local public services, and to function as a champion for Suffolk. The Constitution supports development of the Council's capacity, and the capability of the individuals within it, and ensures that decisions are taken while respecting the rule of law.

Through openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement, local people have every opportunity to know how decisions are made, and how to influence those decisions. The Council consults on major decisions, agendas and papers for meetings are published, Council and Cabinet meetings are webcast, and the public can participate in such meetings by asking questions or raising petitions.

### **Elections**

By-elections were held in July 2024 for Pakefield and in October 2024 for Hoxne and Eye.

Preparations for the May 2025 County Council elections were put on hold following the Government's decision to postpone local elections to support delivery of its Devolution Priority Programme and complementary local government reorganisation.

The English Devolution White Paper outlines the Secretary of State's vision and programme for the future of local government.

### **Council Scrutiny and Monitoring**

The Council, Cabinet, and other committee meetings continue to be held face-to-face, in line with legislative requirements.

The Council has undertaken prerequisite training with chairmen and committee members to ensure they have a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and how these contribute to the governance of the Council. The Councillor Development Training plan will provide for the mapping of Councillor training over the next 12 calendar months.

The Council faced numerous challenges in 2024/25, including ensuring its financial resilience, and improving the delivery of SEND services following OFSTED/CQC inspections.

Various committees ensure that the Council is subject to rigorous scrutiny and held to account in its work by robustly challenging the Council's plans and overarching decision-making for the people of Suffolk.

The main Scrutiny Committee consists of 12 Councillors from different political groups, who are not members of the Council's Cabinet. The Scrutiny Committee is part of the arrangements for making sure the Council carries out its responsibilities properly. During 2024/25 the Scrutiny Committee has considered various topics, including the outcomes of the CQC Pilot Inspection of Adult Social Care; the state of Suffolk's roads and the Council's response to the flooding of highways; and the progress of the Council's Major Programmes. It also plays a key governance role in the Council's annual budget setting and provides its recommendations to Cabinet.

The Audit Committee consists of seven Councillors, plus two independent co-opted members. The Audit Committee is responsible for reviewing the Council's corporate governance arrangements and critically analysing opportunities for improvement in governance, risk management and internal controls. The Committee has considered the Council's standard corporate risk items, for example, corporate performance and risk management processes; customer compliments, comments, and complaints (including the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's Annual Review Letter); and the wholly owned companies.

The Annual Standards Report for 2024/25 will be considered by the Audit Committee at their meeting in June 2025. During the 2024/25 municipal period, the Monitoring Officer received nine complaints about instances when a Councillor had allegedly breached the Code of Conduct. In all nine instances, no breach was found to have occurred. Counting the multiple complaints regarding a former Councillor in 2020/21 as one complaint, this gives a total of 86 complaints since the current arrangements prescribed by the Localism Act 2011 were introduced in July 2012.

***In conclusion, the Council continues to demonstrate sound decision-making. It is the opinion of the Monitoring Officer that the Council has complied with its Constitution, and its corporate governance arrangements continue to be sound and are subject to critical review, in accordance with good governance.***

## **Financial Governance - Value for Money**

**Louise Aynsley (Chief Financial (s151) Officer)**



The Chief Financial Officer (CFO) ensures the Council's financial resources are used wisely to secure positive results, and maintains financial discipline and strong public financial management. The Council has robust financial control arrangements, including accounting procedures, financial regulations and procedural responsibilities, key financial systems, and compliance with accounting and auditing standards. Effective management of the Council's budgets is delegated to designated managers within its directorates.

The Council's financial statements and value for money (VFM) arrangements are reviewed annually by the external auditor, Ernst & Young (EY). The draft, unaudited financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2024 were completed on time to meet the 31 May 2024 statutory deadline. The unaudited Statement of Accounts was published on the Council's website in early July, following the conclusion of the general election. However, due to national delays in local audit, the Council did not meet the 30 September deadline for publishing audited accounts.

At the time of publishing the unaudited 2023-24 financial statements, the Council was still awaiting proposals for the finalisation of the external audit work for 2022-23. The Government's July 2024 announcements to address the audit backlog required EY to mobilise significant resources to meet the new deadline of 13 December 2024. In August 2024, EY informed the Council that they would prioritise resources for a full audit of 2023-24, resulting in a disclaimer of opinion for 2022-23. The 2022-23 Statement of Accounts for both Suffolk County Council and the Suffolk Pension Fund, along with the Audit Results reports, were approved by the Audit Committee in November 2024. The disclaimer of opinion for Suffolk County Council was due to lack of external audit resources, which is a widespread issue and not solely the fault of the Council. This should not have a detrimental impact on the Council's functions.

On 30 January 2025, the Audit Committee received the Audit Results reports for 2023-24 (Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Pension Fund) and approved and signed the Statement of Accounts for Suffolk County Council (which incorporates the Pension Fund). Like 2022-23, the audit opinion for Suffolk County Council for 2023-24 has been disclaimed. This was expected and aligns with the plan to build assurance on opening balances over several years during the 'recovery phase' of the legislative arrangements. The value for money (VFM)

section of the Audit Results report reiterated the findings from the 2022-23 completion report. It identified a risk of significant weakness from the OFSTED inspection report on special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). After additional work, it was concluded this does not represent a significant weakness in the Council's overall governance arrangements. The full VFM narrative commentary forms part of the Annual Auditors' Report, which will be presented to the June 2025 Audit Committee.

The Council's 2024-25 budget, approved in February 2024, was set in a context of significant cost pressures exceeding funding increases, leading to a significant savings programme totalling £43.1 million. Rising costs for SEND provision resulted in a forecast negative Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) reserve of £101 million by the end of 2024-25. The statutory override permits a negative reserve until 31 March 2026. The Government has been informed of the Council's DSG situation and the need for sustainable SEND funding. The Council forecasts breaching its permitted borrowing limit in 2027-28 if no action is taken.

Quarterly financial reports have been provided to Cabinet, with spending forecast to align more closely with budgets compared to 2023-24, aided by additional Business Rates funding. Risks were acknowledged, particularly the substantial work required to deliver savings plans. The Corporate Leadership Team reviewed savings progress monthly, and forecast overspends were managed by directorates.

The affordability of the Council's capital programme remains under regular review, with effective cost management continuing to be essential, given that the Council has limited scope to increase its borrowing. To assist with this, the Capital Strategy Group has met regularly during 2024-25 to ensure accountability and visibility of all projects in the capital programme.

Capital resources are scarce, especially given that interest rates continue to be above levels experienced during the preceding decade. So, not all requests for investment by directorates can be accepted by the Capital Strategy Group for inclusion in the capital programme. Where there is a sound case for progressing with a scheme, but a lack of resources to finance it, the scheme is incorporated into the Council's capital pipeline. This pipeline contains schemes planned for up to ten years into the future, and is reviewed periodically to assess whether there is scope for transferring such schemes into the capital programme. During 2024-25, two business cases for additional investment were presented to Cabinet and approved, totalling £6.235 million.

The Council has continued to consolidate its use of Oracle Fusion, the integrated system for human resources and payroll, finance and purchasing. Over 2024-25, the Council has explored ways to develop the quality of its reporting, with a view to improving further the financial information available to support effective decision-making. In addition, it has progressed with a project to improve the way its systems support the management of its staffing establishment, with an expectation that this work will be completed in 2025-26.

Planning for 2025-26 began early in the 2024-25 financial year, recognising a forecast budget gap of £11.7 million for 2025-26. In May 2024, the Chief Executive, with the Corporate

Leadership Team, launched the “Fit for the Future” transformation programme to identify efficiencies and opportunities to support the 2025-26 budget. In close cooperation with Cabinet, work on the budget continued from May 2024 up to the Full Council meeting in February 2025, where the 2025-26 budget was approved.

The 2025-26 budget setting was challenging, and it is expected to remain so, with a forecast budget gap of £96.2 million for 2028-29. Ongoing savings, and lobbying the Government for adequate resources, will be required to enable the Council to meet its statutory duties. The budget estimates for 2025-26 are robust and represent an achievable plan for the financial year, but this may change due to the Council’s involvement in the Devolution Priority Programme. Progress on this as a Suffolk system will need to be kept under review and aligned to future year’s budgets.

The new savings plans for 2025-26 include £5 million of delivery from the “Fit for the Future” programme, which aims to transform the Council’s operations under a single governance approach. Effective financial management is essential, particularly in high-risk areas like adult care purchasing, children-in-care, SEND, and SEND home-to-school transport. Tighter controls on staffing and capital approval, introduced in 2024-25, will continue into 2025-26.

A key element of the budget strategy is maintaining adequate reserves to manage unexpected changes to spending and funding plans. The Council’s risk reserve is below the required level, but unallocated reserves are sufficient to cover assessed financial risks in 2025-26.

The CIPFA Financial Management Code (FM Code) provides guidance for good and sustainable financial management in local authorities, and provides assurance that authorities are managing their resources effectively. The Code sets out the principles local authorities should be guided by in managing their finances, and the specific standards that they should seek to achieve. Following a review assessing the Council’s compliance with the Code, an action plan was developed and presented to the Audit Committee in September 2024. Good progress has been made on delivering against the action plan during 2024-25, with all actions either completed or having made substantive progress.

***In my opinion, the Council continues to operate robust internal controls and good public financial management, but recognises this is becoming more of a challenge in the environment the Council is operating within. Further action is required to manage the continued financial pressures and develop strategies to meet the medium-term financial challenges that face the Council. There has been no need to exercise my statutory powers, and the Council complies with its financial regulations and procedures, together with relevant codes of practice and guidance.***



## **Internal Audit**

### **Peter Frost (Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud)**



The Internal Audit service operates independently and objectively, conducting all audit work in line with the Audit Charter (incorporating the mandate), ethical responsibilities (including the Nolan Principles), and Internal Audit Standards.

The Head of Internal Audit has a responsibility to provide an independent, annual internal audit opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk, and control framework (i.e., the control environment) and, therefore, the extent to which the Council can rely on it and inform its Annual Governance Statement.

No system of control can provide absolute assurance against material misstatement/loss or eliminate risk; nor can Internal Audit give that assurance. The work of Internal Audit is intended only to provide reasonable assurance on controls.

The Council's governance, risk management and control framework has, overall, stood up well in 2024/25.

An internal audit review of the Council's compliance with the seven core principles of good governance, underpinned by detailed risk, assurance and governance audits, has provided a good level of assurance that there are sound arrangements in place.

Audit reviews that have presented significant concern relate to specific parts of the Council, rather than an across-the-board breakdown in controls. These audits are in the minority (7% of internal audit work completed during 2024/25 yielded an unacceptable level of assurance over the design and operation of the services, systems and processes audited), and generally controls are sufficient to prevent or detect serious breakdowns in systems and procedures.

As a result of audit work, actions have been agreed to improve controls. These are closely monitored until such a time they are completed. Any outstanding weaknesses in the governance, risk and control framework will continue to be followed up by Internal Audit. There are areas of potentially higher risk that are being closely monitored by Internal Audit, via audit work and through the work of other assurance providers. These relate to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), Fire Service governance and management arrangements, compliance with the new Procurement Act, direct payments, and the number of data breaches occurring within the Council.

Common root causes arising from audit work during 2024/25, which also underpin these potentially greater risks, are staff understanding of required standards, the availability of supporting policies, the effectiveness and clarity of established processes and procedures, and a lack of mechanisms in place to monitor and assure service quality.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the internal audit work conducted during 2024/25 has been less extensive than initially planned. Despite this, and considering the assurance obtained from alternative sources, I am confident that there is sufficient evidence to form a reasonable conclusion regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, control, and risk management processes.

To arrive at my opinion, I have performed my duties in accordance with CIPFA's guidance on the role of the Head of Internal Audit. My annual report for 2024/25, which includes a summary of the work carried out and a review of effectiveness of the Internal Audit Service, has been presented to, and approved by, the Corporate Leadership Team and the Audit Committee.

From 01 April 2025, all work on work on public sector internal audit engagements must follow the requirements of the Global Internal Audit Standards (GIAS), CIPFA Application Note (which provides a framework for the practice of internal audit in the UK public sector when taken together with the GIAS), and CIPFA Code of Practice for the Governance of Internal Audit in UK Local Government (which complements the GIAS from the perspective of the Head of Internal Audit). Collectively, these documents are referred to as **GIAS in the UK Public Sector**.

Throughout 2024/25, the Internal Audit Service has undertaken work in readiness for compliance with GIAS in the UK Public Sector. This work has included an assessment of the requirements of the Standards; investment in staff training and development; a revised Internal Audit Charter (incorporating the Internal Audit Mandate) and new Internal Audit Strategy (2025 to 2028), which have both been approved by the Corporate Leadership Team and Audit Committee; and changes and improvements to working practice. The Head of Internal Audit has briefed the Corporate Leadership Team on the Standards and their responsibilities, and kept the Audit Committee informed about the new requirements throughout the year.

In October 2025, the Internal Audit Services will be assessed against the requirements of the new Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector, which become effective on 01 April 2025.

***In my opinion, Suffolk County Council's governance, risk management and internal control framework is 'Reasonable', and the results of audit work have demonstrated controls to be working in practice.***

***This is based on the findings of the managed audit and governance reviews carried out throughout 2024/25, and evidence from other assurance providers, as well as considering the current climate in which the Council is operating.***

***Where weaknesses have been identified, we have worked with management to agree appropriate corrective actions and a timescale for improvement.***

***Areas potentially at greater risk, and under review, are the financial challenge, SEND, Fire Service governance and management arrangements, compliance with the new Procurement Act, direct payments and data breaches.***

## **Counter Fraud**

### **Christos Constantinou (Counter Fraud Manager)**



The Corporate Leadership Team has committed to tackling fraud and corruption affecting the Council, aiming to adopt a culture in which all employees maintain a proactive attitude towards preventing fraud. The Council's Constitution states that the Chief Financial Officer is responsible for the development and maintenance of an anti-fraud and corruption policy, and that Directors are responsible for ensuring that this policy is implemented within their directorates. A number of policies that make up the Council's anti-fraud governance arrangements are in place and regularly reviewed.

The Audit Committee, through its terms of reference, has responsibility to monitor the counter fraud strategy, actions and resources, including reviewing the assessment of fraud risks and potential harm to the Council from fraud and corruption, and issuing guidance and best practice advice regarding probity and ethics. The Audit Committee receive progress reports and an annual report on the Council's anti-fraud and corruption arrangements.

As part of the Council's arrangements to tackle fraud, the Counter Fraud Service, working within the Internal Audit Team, works solely on fraud related matters, providing the capacity and capability to deal with such matters.

The Council has in place a Counter Fraud & Corruption Strategy, which was updated during the year and approved by the Corporate Leadership Team in March 2025. The updated Strategy covers the period 2025-27, and is in line with best practice and based on the National Fighting Fraud & Corruption Locally Strategy for the 2020s. The Strategy directs the work of the Counter Fraud Service under four workstreams:

1. Governance and strategy.
2. Fraud awareness and prevention.
3. Proactive exercises.
4. Investigation and redress.

The Counter Fraud Service develops annual action plans which are approved by the Corporate Leadership Team and the Audit Committee. An annual review is conducted

against the Fighting Fraud and Corruption Locally checklist and the Local Government Counter Fraud Standards, to ensure best practice is followed.

The 2024/25 action plan was delivered, with the exception of one action that will continue into 2025/26. This relates to ensuring the Council has adequate procedures in place following the introduction of a new corporate offence of ‘failure to prevent fraud’ through the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, which goes live in September 2025. Delivery of the 2024/25 action plan included mandatory training for all County Council staff, and a specific project undertaken to deliver more focused awareness with school staff of local authority maintained schools. The Counter Fraud Service coordinated the Council’s participation in the Cabinet Office’s National Fraud Initiative, collecting data, undertaking data quality checks and ensuring all relevant privacy notices were updated and compliant. Furthermore, internal data matching and data analysis was undertaken to proactively identify fraud or error. Investigations were carried out in line with the Council’s Fraud Response Plan, with a slight increase in the number of referrals received to be investigated - a trend that has been noted over the last few years. There was a significant increase in referrals received from members of the public, that were passed on to colleagues in Suffolk’s districts and borough councils to investigate, in relation to council tax and housing tenancy fraud.

Decisions on any action to be taken following an investigation are made in line with the Council’s Sanctions Policy. These can include criminal prosecution, disciplinary action, civil action, cautions or warning letters. Taking appropriate action shows that fraud against the public purse will not be tolerated, and perpetrators will be held to account.

The Counter Fraud Service continued to build strong working relationships with other local authorities; in particular through the Suffolk Fraud Group and the South East Fraud Hub, which share best practice and act as a support network.

## **Risk Management & Corporate Performance**

**Caroline Davison (Head of Corporate Strategy)**



### **Risk Management**

The Council follows an ‘Active Risk Management’ approach through a framework that aligns with the Chartered Institute of Internal Auditors ‘Three Lines Model.’ This model promotes the delegation of risk management to those with the appropriate responsibility and oversight. The model encourages managers to:

- Take ownership of their risks.
- Assess the likelihood and potential impact on service delivery and outcomes.
- Establish appropriate controls.

All risk owners are required to periodically review their risks and assess whether appropriate control (mitigation) actions are in place to reduce the likelihood and impact. The Council’s corporate risk management system (JCAD CORE 5, JC Applications Development) prompts risk managers when a review of their risk is due (approximately every three months). However, managers can access their risks and adjust risk controls at any point, as relevant. Risk management is embedded in regular governance, along with strategic planning, financial management, and performance management.

The organisation manages all its high-level risks using a corporate risk register (held on JCAD). This is reinforced by corporate guidance themed around good practice published by HM Government: The Orange Book. The JCAD system is a live, real-time platform that records, monitors, and reports risks in a structured and consistent way. It is a system that is used by similar local authorities, and is constantly evolving and adapting to service need.

The Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet Members have regular oversight of the corporate risk register on a quarterly reporting cycle. In addition to the quarterly reporting process, all corporate risks are reviewed annually and the Council’s approach to risk management is reviewed by the Audit Committee. Compliance is also regularly reviewed by Internal Audit. The annual review of corporate risks is an opportunity to consider each risk and moderate across themes, scores, and processes. Where appropriate, recommendations are made to the relevant director and risk owner for further review.



## **Corporate Performance**

The Council regularly monitors how its services are performing against agreed priorities and targets to assess the impact of decisions on resources, identify areas for improvement, and provide assurance that services are managed effectively. The corporate performance dashboard is a Power BI based tool used to report and manage performance information. The dashboard is discussed every quarter at Corporate Leadership Team and with Cabinet Members. The corporate performance reporting process is supported by a corporate performance and planning framework that is kept up to date and is published on the staff intranet. The framework sets out organisational expectations and describes the process for managing performance and effective reporting.

Directorate leadership teams report and review performance issues within their respective areas of responsibility. The directorate process aligns to the corporate model, but enables reporting frameworks to reflect business need and adjust as relevant. Performance information is also used to support benchmarking activity. The Scrutiny Committee uses the corporate performance dashboard to inform its forward work programme, and the Audit Committee receives a bi-annual report detailing the Council's corporate performance management arrangements.

In accordance with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, the Council publishes the corporate performance dashboard on its website. The Council also provides statutory data returns to Government that comply with Single Data List requirements. This process provides accountability, transparency, and evidence to support the regulatory and external inspection processes.

For the first time in 2024, all English councils were required by Government to publish a 'Productivity Plan'. These draw on existing Medium Term Financial Plans and transformation and service redesign work, and highlight existing activity to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. Plans were submitted to Government in July 2024 and are published on councils' websites.

## **Human Resources**

**Tim Jermyn (Interim Assistant Director, Human Resources & Organisational Development)**



The change of Government during 2024/25 and the introduction of the Employment Rights Bill 2024 will see the most widespread and significant reforms to employment law and practices in recent year years. In readiness for implementation, Human Resources (HR) have commenced a programme of work to raise awareness of the various reforms and the likely impact on Suffolk County Council’s employment policies and procedures. New or revised policies have already been introduced, like our new Sexual Harassment Policy. Further work to ensure full compliance will continue in 2025/26 as Government consultations end, and further clarity and specifics on the reforms are published.

Work related to the current Workforce Strategy has continued throughout 2024/25. A review of our performance and development review (PDR) process and guidance has concluded and will see a revised performance framework being introduced in the performance year 2025/26. The new framework will retain elements of the current arrangements, but will be simpler for managers to use and ensure a greater level of consistency and a more even distribution of performance outcomes.



Following extensive and rigorous market engagement and a robust procurement exercise, a provider has been identified to deliver our “Reimagine Leadership and Management” programme. This will see a package of face-to-face, core people management learning interventions being delivered to aspiring, first line and middle managers across the organisation. Training for early adopter cohorts was delivered in late 2024/25. Up to 800 managers are expected to participate in training being delivered throughout 2025 and into 2026 for future cohorts.



For the second year running, we had over 95% completion of our statutory and mandatory e-learning programme, which covered a varied range of topics including safeguarding; safety, health and wellbeing; information governance; and fraud, bribery and whistleblowing. The direct link between non-completion and pay progression has continued to drive compliance rates, alongside active reporting to services and line managers to ensure full visibility of completion rates throughout the year.

HR have continued to facilitate the effective delivery of staff changes and restructures linked to service improvement, transformation and/or achieving benefit realisation and budget savings.

Support from across different teams within HR has contributed to the service transformation across Children and Young People (CYP), and specifically SEND, following the successful recruitment of the new Executive Director of CYP services. Similar support is being provided to the new Executive Director of Adult Social Care following their appointment. HR Strategic Partners, sitting on Directorate Leadership Teams, have provided valued HR and OD intervention. They co-ordinate the wider HR team response to ensure effective and timely delivery of restructures, TUPE transfers, and recruitment and retention strategies, while working in an increasingly complicated and dynamic employee relations environment.

Specific initiatives linked to the emerging Fit for the Future programme workstreams, specifically workforce, are progressing. Notably the establishment control project has commenced, which will see a full cleanse of the data held on Oracle Fusion. Led by HR, with significant support from Finance, the project will enhance the accuracy, visibility and ease of establishment reporting, automate the existing offline process, and build the foundations to allow combined HR and Finance forecasting of establishment data within Oracle Fusion in the future.

The ongoing development and utilisation of new functionality within, or linked to, Oracle Fusion has continued in 2024/25. The HR Helpdesk module is now live, allowing HR service users to create their own service requests and track progress. This also saw an improved and enhanced knowledge base being introduced, to make accessing HR policies, guidance and frequently asked questions easier and simpler. Updates to the employee and line manager user interfaces have enhanced the usability of the system and simplified access to employee data for managers, while also allowing us to benefit from the broader enhancement delivered by Oracle Fusion and making us ready for wider AI and automation enhancements planned for 2025/26. Common HR datasets have been made available within the Microsoft Power Business Intelligence infrastructure, which has allowed an automated join up between HR and service data,

further enhancing service's ability to plan and make decisions using HR data. This development has also meant automated and dynamic HR dashboards are now available within HR and will be released more widely in 2025/26, significantly reducing the officer time required to produce quarterly reports and ensuring consistency in the data being provided by HR.

## **Information Technology**

**Mark Burgess (Assistant Director, Customer Experience & Digital)**



The Council's IT service continues to provide a modern, flexible and secure technology offer to the organisation. The service works closely with all directorates to enable the delivery of efficient and effective services, while maximising productivity and supporting transformation and continuous improvement.

Digital, data and technology are playing increasingly important roles in how the Council delivers its services. In a rapidly evolving landscape, the IT service ensures the Council keeps pace with technological advancements and is well positioned to leverage the transformative opportunities these bring.

Over the past year, automation tools are increasingly being used to improve the efficiency of business processes and data flows, supporting greater access to knowledge and intelligence and enabling more timely service delivery. Alongside this, the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) has started to be explored. For example, the benefits of using AI capabilities to help increase staff productivity and reduce administrative workloads, and to support customers to access information and resolve enquiries. Working alongside organisations such as SOCITM, LGA and neighbouring Councils, we continue to consider and develop approaches to ensure the Council can extract the most value from these cutting-edge technologies.

In an increasingly digital world, defending against cyber security threats and protecting the Council's systems and data are ever-present priorities. This year, investments have been made in strengthening the Council's cyber posture and mitigating IT security risks and vulnerabilities.

The migration of staff mobile devices to a new management platform has enhanced security and device management capabilities, while paving the way for new and advanced ways of securing access to systems and data. Some services have started to move across to modern, passwordless authentication methods, further strengthening the security posture. Investment in cyber security has included the implementation of an extended detection and response (XDR) platform, along with regular staff engagement activities, such as phishing exercises, to bolster defences against evolving threats.

The Cyber Resilience Plan 2024-2026 outlines the County Council's strategy to enhance its cyber security posture over the next 24 months. Grounded in best practice from the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and other industry bodies, the plan aims to further protect the Council's digital assets, ensure the continuity of services, and build resilience against cyber threats.

The Council has adopted the NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit (DSPT), ensuring compliance with necessary standards for handling NHS patient data and systems. The Public Services Network (PSN) accreditation has also been renewed, involving a thorough review of cyber security measures, including external annual IT health checks and ongoing, regular security audits. The council has also set in motion its plans to adopt the MHCLG Cyber Assessment Framework (CAF) for Local Government which will establish a whole-organisation approach to cyber security.

This year's focus has also been on supporting and securing the flexible ways in which the Council's staff work by introducing a new, more advanced multi-factor authentication (MFA) solution and continuing to support and develop Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) initiatives. The ongoing programme of work to refresh and upgrade devices to support the Microsoft Windows 11 rollout will ensure that the council's desktop estate remains up-to-date and secure.

Looking ahead, priorities include continuing to leverage and scale the use of AI and automation toolsets to improve efficiency and productivity. Broadening the rollout of tools such as Microsoft Copilot and testing other AI products to enhance service delivery are also being explored.

A commitment to modern systems architecture, industry best practice, and cyber resilience will remain at the forefront of governance activities as the Council's IT service supports the local government reorganisation (LGR) and devolution initiatives.



## **Information Governance**

### **Peter Knight (Head of Information Governance)**



Information governance in the County Council is overseen by the Corporate Information Governance Board, which is the lead body for ensuring the Council has effective information governance arrangements in place. The Corporate Board is supported by service-specific information governance boards or information governance leads. Matters of importance are escalated to the Corporate Leadership Team when required. The Council also has a network of Strategic Information Agents (SIAs) across the organisation, who promote and encourage information governance best practice within their service areas.

The Council has a number of key individuals with specific roles and responsibilities regarding elements of information governance, including Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO); Head of Information Governance; Data Protection Officer & Compliance Manager; IT Security Manager; and Caldicott Guardians in Adult Social Care and Children & Young People's Services.

The Council is subject to a number of external information and IT assurance regimes. This includes various mandatory inspections to facilitate access to various external networks and systems, such as the Public Service Network (PSN) Compliance and the Data Security & Protection Toolkit. All external assurance validations have been successfully achieved in 2024/25.

The Council has seen an increase in the overall number of information security incidents this year compared to the previous year (724 in 2024/25 compared to 670 in 2023/24). Of these, 338 resulted in a personal data breach in 2024/25 compared to 324 in 2023/24. Seven personal data breaches were serious enough to require notification to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) (five full notifications and two "make aware" notifications), compared to five in the previous year. The majority of security incidents are the result of human error, such as information being sent to the wrong person via email or in the post.

There has been a significant increase in the number of Subject Access Requests (SARs) submitted to the Council, with 382 received in 2024/25 compared to 323 in 2023/24 (an increase of 18%). Complying with statutory requirements for responding to SARs has proved a challenge for the Council in recent years; however, despite the increase in the volume of

requests the compliance rate has improved significantly to 91% in 2024/25 from 77% the previous year.

There has been a small reduction in the number of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests submitted to the Council this year, with 1,356 information requests in 2024/25 compared to 1,384 in 2023/24. Despite the continuing high volumes, the compliance rate for meeting statutory FOI/EIR deadlines has increased to 99.3%, an improvement on last year's 97.0%.

Responding to the large number of requests to the Council for personal or organisational information, combined with the management of a greater number of information security incidents and personal data breaches, continues to place considerable strain on the resources of the Information Governance Team as well as the wider organisation.

Some of the specific information governance activities undertaken in 2024/25 include:

- Producing updated mandatory e-learning training on information management and data security for all Council staff.
- Implementing measures to improve the Council's compliance rate for responding to Subject Access Requests (SARs).
- Implementing an online system for registering and managing Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs).
- Revising the Council's information risk assessment processes to accommodate requests for artificial intelligence (AI) systems and software.

The Head of Information Governance is satisfied that the information governance arrangements in place are effective in protecting the Council's information assets.

## **Procurement**

**Matt West (Assistant Director for Assets and Investment)**



The Assets and Investment Procurement Team deliver a professional service to help the Council procure goods and services commercially, legally and at minimal risk, while supporting the Council's policies, and in accordance with the Procurement Act 2023 and the Healthcare Services (Provider Selection Regime) Regulations 2023.

This has been a significant year for the Procurement Team with a new Procurement Act being introduced in February 2025.

The Council's internal procurement rules have been updated to reflect the change in legislation and are maintained in line with the national Procurement Policy Notices and guidance issued by the Cabinet Office.

The Procurement Team have completed Cabinet Office 'Deep Dive' training for the new Procurement Act and briefings have been given to directorates on the changes. A range of advice and support developed by the Procurement Team is available on the Council's internal Intranet. This includes comprehensive guidance on how to carry out lower value procurements. Further training on the new Act is in development, and will be available to the Council's staff during 2025/26.

The team has introduced a new process to help collect information from services wanting to spend more than £30,000. This is called the 'intend to spend' process. The data collected from services is being used by the Procurement Team to review purchasing intentions and ensure that the most effective approach is being taken, or identify where more support is required. Following this, a new 'Procurement Gateway Panel' process has been designed, effective from April 2025. This process puts in place assurance checks on our procurements at key stages of the process, to ensure additional oversight on process and compliance with the new Act.

The Procurement Team provides advice and guidance relating to how best to process payments and orders on the Council's electronic system, 'Oracle Fusion'. This helps ensure Council staff deal with their purchase orders promptly and that invoices are paid in good time. Quarterly updates have been made to procedures to reflect regular updates to the

system. All Oracle user guides, and additional supporting documents, are kept up to date and available for all staff to access. One significant improvement to the Oracle Fusion system has been the implementation of the 'Help desk' module. This module helps staff access the information that they need simply and efficiently.

Ten members of staff in the Council have been studying for the Contract Management Practitioner Accreditation, a qualification provided to staff at no cost by the Commercial Function at the Cabinet Office. The ten places are spread across all directorates and will ensure increased valuable skills for the organisation in this area. The Council's Contract Management Minimum Standards and supporting checklist are on the website and will be reviewed in 2025/26.

The use of Credit Safe (an online credit and business information service) has been promoted to service contract managers to help them carry out risk assessments of our suppliers' financial security. The team have also been working with financial colleagues to create rules around how to assess the financial stability of potential suppliers.

Contract Management Network webinars are held on a quarterly basis to provide additional advice and support for staff with contract management roles. There are over 180 staff in the Contract Management Network. The webinars this year have included updates for contract managers on the new Procurement Act, the Highways Contract Management Performance Framework, updates from Finance, and an update from Concertus on inflationary pressures on supply chains.

Maintaining Suffolk County Council's Social Value Ask is a responsibility of the Procurement Team. The Ask provides a comprehensive list of ideas for how suppliers can deliver social value when the Council contract and do business with them. This enables the Council to get maximum value out of the money it spends. The Social Value Ask is published on the Council's website.

Plans are being finalised to create two new governance boards to oversee our Strategic Commissioning and Commercial approaches. The boards will include Corporate Leadership Team members and will help to provide additional leadership and assurance across these two key areas.

## **Communications**

**Andrew St. Ledger (Assistant Director – Communications & Public Affairs)**



During 2024/25, Suffolk County Council saw both the continuation and start of significant new projects, requiring communications and engagement activity with Suffolk residents, stakeholders and staff to achieve better results.

Communications and engagement activity in 2024/25 included Suffolk's county deal devolution consultation; our 'Local Matters' roadshows, with 12 events taking place; the A12 Major Road Network consultation; our budget consultation; the Suffolk Show; and the launch of the new Gull Wing bridge in Lowestoft.

The county deal consultation and engagement was the largest single piece of activity in 2024/25. In total, we engaged more than 1,500 people before the county deal consultation launched, received 1,787 responses to the open survey and a further 1,024 responses to the independent, representative IPSOS survey. We also held focus groups and answered questions from the public.

The Communications Team designed and ran a very successful and well-attended Suffolk Show stand in 2024 - under the '50 Years of Service' theme. In the last quarter of 2024/25, we started planning for the 2025 show under this year's theme of 'Transforming Suffolk'.

Suffolk County Council's 2024/25 budget consultation once again had an excellent response, with over 1,300 individuals responding, providing a clear steer to senior leaders about public opinion relating to required savings and council tax changes.

Suffolk Highways has delivered multiple significant infrastructure projects across the county, including new bridges at the A1088, Hempyard, Bardwell, and Halesworth. This required extensive consultation with and communications to stakeholders, including residents, parish councils and elected members.

In addition, Suffolk Highways successfully delivered Europa Way, a new link road to alleviate traffic congestion in Bramford and Sroughton. Regular updates on this multi-million-pound project were issued during the scheme to keep local residents and the wider community informed of progress, with an official opening delivered in March 2025.

Other notable consultation work in 2024/25 included the annual Travel to Work survey, Active Travel Woodbridge, and other active travel projects across Suffolk.

The Communications and Public Affairs Team also supported Suffolk County Council directorates throughout the year, including Adult Social Care (ASC) with its directorate name change and the public communications for several care provider business continuity challenges. We also provided support for the delivery of the Dementia Marketplace, a popular county event supporting people living with the condition, and the launch of several high-profile strategies for Suffolk including the Dementia Strategy and All Age Autism Strategy.

The team also led the design and development of the community opening of the Gull Wing Bridge in Lowestoft on behalf of our Growth, Highways and Infrastructure colleagues. The event saw thousands of local people take the opportunity to be among the first to cross the award-winning landmark. The community event was followed by the Royal Opening of the bridge in November 2024. Again, the team provided key leadership in planning and delivering a safe and significant event for the town, with HRH Princess Anne operating the bridge and unveiling the commemorative plaque.

I remain of the view that Suffolk County Council is committed to meaningful community, stakeholder and staff consultation that actively informs decision-making and service delivery.

The Communications and Public Affairs Team is, in addition to pre-planning activity, already heavily involved in the new devolution and local government reorganisation (LGR) programmes, with both requiring significant community and stakeholder engagement.

## **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion**

**Molly Thomas-Meyer (Assistant Director of Public Health and Communities)**



Suffolk County Council is committed to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This commitment aligns with our statutory duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty, aiming to ensure fairness, accessibility, and inclusivity for all residents and employees.

Oversight is provided by the Strategic Equalities and Inclusion Board, chaired by the Cabinet Lead for Equalities and Inclusion. Meeting quarterly, the Board plays a pivotal role in driving strategic progress and ensuring accountability. In the last year, it has reviewed its terms of reference to provide greater clarity on governance across EDI in the council.

The corporate equalities vision statement and objectives (2022 - 2026) are the guidance and driver of SCC's work on equality, diversity and inclusion:

1. Delivery of the Race Equality Action Plan.
2. Meeting our Public Sector Equality Duty.
3. Increasing inclusion within the Council and for service users.

Progress has been made in delivering the Race Equality Action Plan, which has also served as a helpful catalyst for positive change across all protected characteristics. Work is underway to embed the race equality work within a broader equality, diversity, and inclusion approach using a new Cultural Inclusion through Voice, Insights and Community (C.I.V.I.C) framework as a roadmap to ensure service delivery is evidence-led, risk-based, and focused on reducing disparities. The C.I.V.I.C framework has 4 core strands:

1. **Cultural competency** - Supporting staff in delivering fair and responsive services. For example, 'Equality Team Talks' packages have been developed by the Inclusion Team and are available to guide impactful team discussions across the organisation.
2. **Data/insight** - Using demographic and service user data to identify and address disparities, ensuring equitable access. For example, training has been developed

by Public Health & Communities for contracted services to improve ethnicity data collection and apply learning gained to broader protected characteristics.

3. **Voice** – Increasing active engagement and co-design with diverse communities, ensuring that their voices shape local decision-making. For example, Children and Young People services introduced anti-racist and anti-ethnic-discrimination practice standards for practitioners to enable active, respectful interactions.
4. **Community** – Understanding, collaborating and increasing proactive engagement with communities and community sector organisations to help address inequalities and build trust. For example, the promotion of Suffolk Infolink as a good-practice resource, so that staff are more aware of support and advocacy groups across communities.

Our compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty has been strengthened through the introduction of both a pre-screening assessment phase in our Equality Impact Assessment process and improved monitoring of impact after implementation. Future priorities include embedding Cultural Inclusion through Voice, Insights, and Community within the assessments, increasing metric capture, and automation.

Staff networks continue to provide representation, support and safe spaces to share experiences. Each has a Corporate Leadership Team champion aligned to them to provide routes for escalation and senior buy in. In addition to their substantive roles, our highly-valued group of over 200 volunteer Race Equality and EDI Champions, volunteer Let's Talk About Race Coordinators, EDI Directorate Leads, and volunteer EIA Review Group members, all work across the organisation to reinforce the fact that equality is everybody's business.

The HMICFRS inspection of the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service published in February 2025 (see External Assurance) highlighted that the Service requires improvement at ensuring fairness and promoting diversity. Creating a more representative workforce gives fire and rescue services huge benefits. These include greater access to talent and different ways of thinking. It also helps them better understand and engage with local communities. Two improvement areas, which form part of the Service's action plan in response to the inspection are (1) the Service should make sure it provides the strategic commitment, direction and monitoring needed to fully integrate equality, diversity and inclusion policies throughout the organisation; and (2) the Service should make sure it has robust processes in place to carry out equality impact assessments and review any actions agreed as a result.



## **Safety, Health & Wellbeing**

**Mike Leake (Head of Health & Safety)**



The Council has an effective Safety, Health, and Wellbeing (SHAW) Strategy, and robust performance monitoring arrangements including internal assurance activities and routine benchmarking with the Local Government Association and other local authorities.

The Safety, Health and Wellbeing service provides competent advice to the Council, as required by Regulation 7 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

In accordance with Section 2(7) of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, the Council has strong Corporate Health & Safety communication arrangements through the provision of a SHAW Board, which comprises representation from the Corporate Leadership Team, senior managers and unions. The SHAW Board sets the strategic direction of the organisation in relation to safety, health, and wellbeing. It meets quarterly and ensures appropriate Health and Safety communication channels to all Staff and Councillors.

Further work to deliver enhanced assurance of the reporting and recording of accident/incident data within local authority maintained schools, has seen the roll out of a new electronic reporting tool. The tool will generate more data and allow for analysis of data trends in a timely manner.

The SHAW Strategy for 2022-25 continues to drive measured, continuous improvements in our arrangements through appropriate trend analysis, specifically relating to four key priorities: procurement and contract management; schools; supporting a wellbeing culture in Suffolk County Council (the Council's corporate staff health and wellbeing agenda); and internal/external assurance.

## **Wholly Owned Companies**

**Matt West (Assistant Director for Assets and Investment)**



Suffolk Group Holdings Limited, trading as Vertas Group Ltd, is a group of companies wholly owned by Suffolk County Council comprising Vertas (facilities management), Concertus (property design and consultancy services) and Opus (recruitment). In 2024 Suffolk Group Holdings were ranked sixth out of 100 in ‘Suffolk Limited’, an independent performance ranking of Suffolk’s largest businesses, an improvement of one place from the previous year’s report.

The Suffolk Group Holdings Limited Board met in June, September and December 2024, and in January 2025. During 24/25 Cllr Robert Everitt (\*) was the Council’s representative on the Suffolk Group Holdings Board. The Deputy Chief Executive and the Chief Financial (s151) Officer are also invited to attend as observers. Following Board meetings, the senior managers from Vertas, Concertus and Opus meet with the Suffolk County Council Shareholder Group.

The Shareholder Group met in June and September 2024, and February 2025. This group is chaired by Councillor Lance Stanbury and made up of five Conservative Councillors and one Councillor from the Green, Liberal Democrat, and Independent opposition group. The purpose of this group is to ensure a consistent strategic view is taken across all the wholly owned companies, and to review and monitor the performance of the companies.

To inform the Suffolk Group Holdings Board and the Shareholder Group there are quarterly partnership governance meetings between the companies and the Council. These are held to discuss areas for development, upcoming requirements, and performance issues across each of the wholly owned companies and are attended by key Suffolk County Council clients from across the Council. This approach provides transparency and accountability on the quality of services provided by the Vertas Group to Suffolk County Council and informs the feedback provided to the Board via the Shareholder Group. Further to this the Council’s representative, the Deputy Chief Executive and the S.151 Officer are briefed ahead of the Shareholder and Board meetings by the Assistant Director for Assets and Investment.

(\*) Cllr Robert Everitt sadly passed away on 18 April 2025

As part of the continuous improvement process, consideration was given to whether there is a better, more efficient way to gather shareholder feedback. It was concluded that the current arrangements should continue. Minor improvements were made, including sharing feedback with the companies earlier to increase transparency. There are also new, regular meetings between the Assistant Director for Assets and Investment and the Chief Executive of the Vertas Group to discuss the shareholder feedback at key times during the year.

Alongside obtaining shareholder feedback, the Assistant Director for Assets and Investment continues to meet with senior managers in Vertas, Concertus and OPUS on a regular basis to raise concerns and ensure issues are resolved in a timely way, and as part of ongoing partnership dialogue.

The Audit and Risk Committee for Suffolk Group Holdings is chaired by Non-Executive Director, Geoff Dobson. The Audit and Risk Committee consists of three members who were recruited based on their skills and experience. Alastair Cooper is a new member of the committee and replaces Robert Coyle. Alastair was appointed as a Non-Executive Director following an extensive, nationwide recruitment process. The committee meets on a quarterly basis, with additional meetings as and when required.

Suffolk Group Holdings continue to appoint Grant Thornton as their external auditors to assist in the final accounts sign off. They have also appointed RSM as internal auditors who report back to the Audit and Risk Committee on key business matters over the year.

## **Housing Joint Venture – Edmundham Developments**

**Rob Hancock (Head of Housing, Growth & Planning)**



Edmundham Developments LLP is a 50-50 limited liability partnership between the Council and Lovell Partnerships. The structure and legal provisions of Edmundham Developments have been established to provide protection for the Council (e.g. to protect its land interests) and commercial certainty for both parties.

Edmundham Developments is steered by a Board, with three representatives from each of the two partners. The chairing of the Board is rotated annually, with the Council having chaired since September 2024. The Board meets every two months. The Council has both Member and officer representation across its three seats on the Board. The Council's internal governance processes include its internal Housing Board (including Members and senior officers), and regular portfolio holder updates to Council.

During 2024/25, work started on the first site, in Newmarket. The former St Felix middle school site is being redeveloped for 50 homes, new tennis courts, and extensive open space to allow for further future sports provision. In line with the governance process, a 'Site Settled Business Plan' was approved by the Edmundham Developments Board, setting out, amongst other items, the costs of developing the site and the return to the partners, and triggering the transfer of land from the Council to Edmundham Developments. The first homes will be completed and available for sale in Autumn 2025. Work will begin on a second site in West Row, for 100 homes, in July 2025.

Planning work continues on other sites. The Council are responsible for funding and securing outline planning consents and making land available to Edmundham Developments, delivered via the Housing Transformation Programme. Edmundham Developments are responsible for securing the reserved matters aspects of planning, and for construction through to sales and after-sales. The Edmundham Board has signed off early expenditure (funded via Lovell Partnerships) at all of the sites, to prepare detailed design and contractor packages. Further planning consents are expected during 2025, albeit the planning process is significantly more onerous and slower paced than originally anticipated, as evidenced nationally by 2024 having the lowest number of planning permissions for ten years.

In November 2024, the second annual report was prepared for the Council's Audit Committee regarding the governance of Edmundham Developments. In November 2024, the Council's Scrutiny Committee also reviewed the performance of Edmundham Developments against its original objectives as agreed by Cabinet, with colleagues from Lovell in attendance. These reviews identified minor advisory areas for follow-up, with these being actioned during 2025. The overall relationship with Lovell Partnerships remains strong, and day-to-day working of the Edmundham Board is seen positively by both sides.

## **External Assurance**

All local authorities are subject to external scrutiny from regulatory bodies. The most notable external inspection processes are those undertaken by OFSTED and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) across education services and social care. However, other service areas of the Council are regularly inspected or regulated.

The following outlines the main external inspections that the Council was subject to in 2024/25:

In May 2024, Ofsted published an inspection report of the Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS). The overall inspection judgement stated the service 'requires improvement to be good'. Areas such as the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, and the experiences and progress of care leavers were highlighted as requiring some improvement, while other areas such as the experiences and progress of children in care were judged as Good.

In August, Ofsted published an inspection report of the Local Authority Further Education and Skills Services. The inspection judgement stated that the overall effectiveness of services is 'Good'. The Council offers a wide range of community learning, qualification courses and non-qualification courses for adults across Suffolk, delivered through a subcontracting arrangement with four partners. Inspectors also highlighted areas for improvement, and these included increasing the number of health and social care and digital skills related courses and ensuring that learners have better access to high-quality careers advice and guidance/support.

In February 2025, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published its inspection of Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service. This found the service's work on preventing fire and risk and ensuring public safety through fire regulation is 'Good', but they also highlighted serious concerns about the culture within the service including areas such as leadership, workplace culture, and staff culture. An improvement plan has been put in place to address these concerns.

The outcomes from all external inspections are published and shared with the relevant Director, the Chief Executive and Cabinet Member. Each inspection usually has associated recommendations, and an action plan will be developed and then monitored by senior leadership and, where relevant, councillors to ensure areas identified for improvement are implemented within agreed timescales.

## ACTION PLAN FOR 2025/26

Actions planned for 2025/26 to further strengthen the Council's governance, alongside the standing arrangements already in place are:

	Area	Governance Matters	Lead Officer
1.	Devolution	Work with government and local partners (particularly Norfolk County Council) to create appropriate governance and assurance mechanisms in establishing a new Mayoral Combined County Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk.	Andrew Cook
2.	Devolution	Ensure that decisions required by the County Council to establish the new Mayoral Combined County Authority for Norfolk and Suffolk are subject to the proper governance mechanisms and decision-making protocols.	Andrew Cook
3.	Devolution & Local Government Reorganisation	Preparation for Mayoral elections in 2026 and local government reorganisation.	Nigel Inniss
4.	Local Government Reorganisation	Develop business case that would create an appropriate and well-governed unitary authority.	Mark Ash
5.	Local Government Reorganisation	Work with government and local partners (particularly Suffolk councils) to ensure that transition arrangements follow good governance principles, and facilitate creation of an appropriate and well-governed new unitary authority.	Mark Ash
6.	Government Policy & Reform	Recognise and, where appropriate, take action on the impact of new and emerging government policy, reform, and consultation.	Corporate Leadership Team

	Area	Governance Matters	Lead Officer
7.	Corporate Governance	Review Code of Corporate Governance against new CIPFA guidance on annual governance statements, due in 2025/26, and make any necessary changes.	Nigel Inniss
8.	Finance	Work with Cabinet and CLT to review the 2025-26 budget and financial challenges, paying particular attention to the continued delivery of the Council's savings and transformation. Develop the 2026-27 budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy, addressing the continued demand pressures on Council services and impact of government reforms/policies (including Suffolk being on the Devolution Priority Programme).	Louise Aynsley
9.	Finance	Work with Government on Funding Reforms, including sustainable solution for DSG deficits.	Louise Aynsley
10.	Finance	Collaborate with the Council's external partner, Grant Thornton, to produce business case for local government reorganisation (financials) and devolution.	Louise Aynsley
11.	Finance	Work with External Audit to deliver a timely audit for 2024-25 financial statements and build assurance over prior years' opening balances.	Louise Aynsley
12.	Internal Audit	Arrange five-year, external quality assessment of the Internal Audit service to determine compliance with the Global Internal Audit Standards in the UK Public Sector.	Peter Frost
13.	Internal Audit	Review and assess compliance with the CIPFA Code of Practice for the Governance of Internal Audit in UK Local Government which comes into force from 1 April 2025.	Peter Frost
14.	Internal Audit	Implement actions set out within the 2025/26 Internal Audit Strategy and 2024/25 review of effectiveness.	Peter Frost



	Area	Governance Matters	Lead Officer
<b>15.</b>	Counter Fraud	Ensure the Council has adequate procedures in place following the introduction of the new corporate offence of 'failure to prevent fraud'.	Christos Constantinou
<b>16.</b>	Human Resources	Revise the Workforce Strategy to reflect the emerging organisational priorities linked to Fit for the Future, devolution and local government reorganisation.	Tim Jermyn
<b>17.</b>	Human Resources	Embed Oracle Fusion to realise greater benefits from automation and AI, and further enhance the data available to managers and directorate leadership teams, with greater emphasis on analysis and insights.	Tim Jermyn
<b>18.</b>	Human Resources	Drive the workforce aspects of organisational change and development in preparation for and/or resulting from Fit for the Future, devolution, local government reorganisation, and the insourcing of Suffolk Libraries.	Tim Jermyn
<b>19.</b>	Information Technology	Continue to leverage and scale the use of AI and automation toolsets to improve efficiency and productivity.	Mark Burgess
<b>20.</b>	Information Governance	Implement additional measures to seek to minimise the number of security incidents and data breaches occurring, including technical measures and targeting additional training for those services where incidents are most prevalent.	Peter Knight
<b>21.</b>	Information Governance	Implement a case management system for FOI and EIR requests to enhance the efficiency of managing information requests.	Peter Knight

	Area	Governance Matters	Lead Officer
<b>22.</b>	Information Governance	Review and update the Council's suite of information governance policies to reflect organisational changes and wider national developments.	Peter Knight
<b>23.</b>	Information Governance	Review and update the Council's data protection compliance tools, including the suite of privacy notices, and Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs).	Peter Knight
<b>24.</b>	Information Governance	Respond appropriately to the enactment of the Government's new Data (Use and Access) Bill.	Peter Knight
<b>25.</b>	Procurement	Oversee and support the organisation to ensure effective implementation of the new Procurement Act.	Matt West
<b>26.</b>	Procurement	Ensure all procurement modules of the Oracle Fusion database are kept up to date, and ensure opportunities to implement updates to improve its effectiveness are taken.	Matt West
<b>27.</b>	Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion	Develop the Cultural Inclusion through Voice, Insights, and Community (C.I.V.I.C) framework to embed EDI across SCC.	Molly Thomas-Meyer
<b>28.</b>	Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion	Develop and streamline the Equality Impact Assessment process, by using technology and automation.	Molly Thomas-Meyer
<b>29.</b>	Wholly Owned Companies	Continue to progress SLA and partnership agreement reviews and updates.	Matt West

	Area	Governance Matters	Lead Officer
<b>30.</b>	Wholly Owned Companies	Continue looking to improve the partnership arrangements and feedback process to support the Shareholder Group, County Council, and the partnership.	Matt West
<b>31.</b>	Edmundham Developments	Update the Audit Committee regarding the governance arrangements for Edmundham Developments.	Rob Hancock
<b>32.</b>	Edmundham Developments	Prepare and sign off Site Settled Business Plans for West Row and Bacton. Prepare Early Site Business Plan for Mildenhall.	Rob Hancock
<b>33.</b>	Edmundham Developments	Complete West Row land transfer from Suffolk County Council to Edmundham Developments.	Rob Hancock
<b>34.</b>	External Inspections	Deliver SEND Priority Action Plan and implement SEND Strategy 2024-29.	Sarah-Jane Smedmor
<b>35.</b>	External Inspections	Deliver actions arising from the inspection of Local Authority Children's Services.	Sarah-Jane Smedmor
<b>36.</b>	External Inspections	Deliver actions arising from HMICFRS inspection of Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service.	Jon Lacey
<b>37.</b>	External Inspections	Implement actions arising from 2025/26 external inspections.	Various officers