

Date: 15th January 2026
Enquiries to: Matthew Hicks
Tel: 01473 260535
Email: Matthew.Hicks@suffolk.gov.uk



Alison McGovern MP
Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness

Dear Minister,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2025 inviting Suffolk County Council's views (by midnight on 15 January) on whether postponing the May 2026 local elections would release the essential capacity required to deliver Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) effectively.

This matter was formally considered by both Full Council and Cabinet on 12 January 2026. The agenda papers can be found here: [Meeting Documents - Committee Minutes](#).

Cabinet was specifically asked to note the feedback and votes of Full Council and agree whether the Leader should submit a letter responding to your invitation within the required deadline. At that meeting, Cabinet recognised that the legal power to delay elections rests with government and agreed that a response should be submitted from the Leader reflecting the Council's evidence-based assessment of capacity pressures and associated risks.

Context of Your Request

Your letter and accompanying Written Ministerial Statement invited councils to provide their views on the postponement of local elections and to confirm whether such postponement could release the essential capacity needed to deliver LGR effectively. This response is structured directly around that request.

What "Capacity" Means for LGR

Capacity for LGR encompasses the ability to maintain safe and stable delivery of services while simultaneously supporting complex organisational change. Cabinet highlighted that there are already significant demands on workforce capacity across critical functions including IT and digital systems, HR, contracts and pensions, legal services, and finance — all of which are essential to the design and delivery of the LGR programme.

Cabinet also noted the importance of enabling existing staff to play a meaningful role in the LGR process. Many employees will need to contribute directly to implementation and transition work, and any temporary resource brought in would need to backfill their day-to-day responsibilities or provide technical support to them. This existing pressure further constrains the Council's ability to absorb the additional demands associated with an election cycle.

Key Risks of Proceeding with Elections in May 2026

1. Overlap Between Election Activities and LGR Milestones

Responding to the outcome of a full local election in May 2026 would directly coincide with the most capacity-intensive phase of the LGR timetable. This period of the LGR process requires Suffolk County Council to complete complex modelling, undertake negotiations on Structural Change Orders, and finalise critical dependencies across HR, digital transformation, finance, legal and service design. These tasks cannot be paused or deferred without undermining the safety and stability of the transition.

To support your consideration, I have mapped the statutory election timetable, moratorium period and the expected sequence for SCO negotiations and laying. This analysis shows a substantial overlap between the most capacity-intensive LGR milestones and the requirements of running and establishing a newly elected administration. You will find this at Appendix 1 to this letter.

Compounding this, Suffolk must plan simultaneously for two possible operating models (1 Unitary Authority or 3 Unitary Authorities). Each requires its own governance, workforce and asset transition scenarios. This dual track preparation significantly increases the underlying officer workload. Overlaying an election at this point would divert specialist teams away from work that is time critical to meeting Government requirements and maintaining continuity of service. This would all need to take place alongside, and in addition to, establishment of the Combined County Authority (CCA) – later the MCCA - to be ready to start receiving investment funding from you.

2. Increased Senior Officer and Democratic Services Workload

A newly elected administration in May 2026 would require substantial and immediate senior officer support precisely when LGR delivery demands peak strategic focus.

Induction, constitutional resets, committee establishment, and the commencement of new decision-making cycles each require intensive input from Democratic Services, Legal, HR, Finance and Senior Leadership Teams.

Recent local government experience in Suffolk and elsewhere, demonstrates the scale of effort required to properly brief new councillors, reconstitute governance structures and establish effective decision-making arrangements. Repeating this at the height of LGR mobilisation would unavoidably redirect senior professional capacity away from essential reorganisation workstreams, increasing operational and governance risk.

3. Compressed Timeframe for New Members

Introducing newly elected councillors into the LGR process in May 2026 would create a sharply compressed timeframe for members to understand, scrutinise and make informed decisions relating to one of the most significant structural changes Suffolk has undertaken in decades.

The volume and technical nature of LGR material — transition plans, business cases, financial modelling, equality impact assessments and service redesign proposals — requires time, continuity and deep engagement. Without this, new members would be placed at a disadvantage in fulfilling key statutory duties, including those relating to scrutiny, financial stewardship and equalities obligations. This would present an avoidable governance risk at a moment requiring the highest levels of clarity and informed oversight.

4. Service Continuity Risks

Suffolk continues to experience sustained workforce pressures across statutory services including adult social care, children's services, public health and community safety. These functions are currently managing high levels of demand, vacancy rates and winter-related pressures.

The period following county-wide elections requires redeploying experienced officers from many of the same corporate and professional services needed to protect vulnerable residents and maintain regulatory compliance. HR, legal, digital, communications and operational logistics teams are already stretched and heavily involved in LGR planning. Without postponement, that required redeployment would reduce resilience in precisely those functions that must remain stable throughout the reorganisation period, increasing the likelihood of service disruption at a time when continuity is critical.

5. Non-Aligned Election Cycles

Proceeding with a May 2026 election would result in three consecutive years of major electoral activity across Suffolk, with County Council, district, shadow unitary and mayoral elections occurring in successive cycles. Each cycle entails its own induction, governance resets, committee restructuring, and periods of restricted activity due to moratorium. In the context of LGR — where clarity, pace and organisational stability are essential — this misalignment would generate unnecessary operational and governance complexity. It would also increase costs and officer workload at a time when Suffolk needs coordinated and uninterrupted focus across all tiers of local government to ensure a safe and effective transition.

Cabinet's Decision and Conclusion

From the draft minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 12 January 2026, the Cabinet:

- a) noted the feedback and votes of the County Council meeting held on 12 January 2026; and
- b) agreed that the Leader should submit a letter in response to the Minister's invitation contained in the Written Ministerial Statement (appendix A) and Ministerial letter (appendix B) in line with the deadline of 15 January 2026.

Therefore, in accordance with that decision, I submit this letter giving the view that postponing the May 2026 elections would release essential capacity to deliver Local Government Reorganisation effectively.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond. Suffolk County Council remains ready to work constructively with your department as the LGR process progresses and we await your decision on the elections.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Matthew Hicks
Leader of Suffolk County Council

Appendix 1

Period	LGR / SCO Milestones	Election & Moratorium Activity	Capacity Risks
Jan–Feb 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early technical engagement with MHCLG • Development of governance, HR, finance, asset and service models • Preparation for SCO drafting and Explanatory Memorandum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Democratic Services preparation • Candidate enquiries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual-track modelling (1UA/3UA) demands high specialist officer input • Competing pressures across HR, finance, legal, ICT
March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal SCO negotiation with MHCLG • Drafting of SCO text and schedules • Agreement on workforce, finance and asset assumptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moratorium likely begins late March • Restricted member and public engagement • High governance assurance workload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moratorium limits ability to engage members • Officer time absorbed into compliance • LGR work continues without political steer
April 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalising SCO drafting for MHCLG/Parliamentary Counsel • Technical work on TUPE, assets, finance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full moratorium • High-intensity election delivery • Returning Officer functions draw on ICT, HR, legal, comms, logistics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Election delivery competes with SCO drafting for same specialist teams • Significant risk of delay or reduced quality
May 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCO expected to be finalised for laying in Parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 May – Local Elections • Post-election induction • Committee formation • Constitutional resets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior leaders diverted to new administration • New members have minimal time to understand LGR • Increased governance risk
June–July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliamentary scrutiny of SCO • Mobilisation for implementation planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New members still onboarding • First decision-making cycles embed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced member familiarity affects decision-making • Continued officer time needed for training/governance work