

# Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation

Briefing to Essex County Councillors

7<sup>th</sup> January 2025

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# Exec Summary



The White Paper on English Devolution was published on 16 December 2024 and proposes wide ranging changes to the framework of local government across England including devolution from central government to strategic authorities and local government reorganisation in two tier areas.

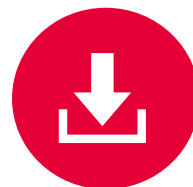


Essex has the opportunity to apply to be part of the Government's proposed 'Devolution Priority Programme' and if agreed by all three upper tier authorities and the Government would lead to

- The Creation of a mayoral combined county authority for Greater Essex as part of the Government's 'Devolution Priority Programme', and;
- Local Government Reorganisation, which would see the abolition of all fifteen principal councils in Essex, including this council, to be replaced with a number of unitary councils.



These benefits are likely to be particularly pertinent to Essex which has one of the most complicated public sector landscapes in England.



We also need to consider that if we do not take up the opportunity to design this for ourselves now, there is a risk we might have this imposed on us later in a form we would not otherwise have chosen.

# Recommendation Council will be asked to endorse

Council endorses the proposal by the Leader of the Council to submit a letter to government which:

- Requests that Essex County Council, along with Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council ('the Partners') be part of the government's Devolution Priority Programme.
- Sets out the Council's commitment to work with the Partners and with central government and the borough, city and district councils to seek to deliver a mayoral combined county authority with a view to holding mayoral election in May 2026.
- Sets out the Council's commitment, working with the Partners, to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation for submission to government as an interim proposal in March 2025 and a full proposal in Autumn 2025.
- Requests the government to postpone the ordinary elections to Essex County Council due to be held on 1 May 2025, initially by 12 months to May 2026 to enable the Council to focus on developing proposals for devolution and local government reorganisation as part of the Government's Devolution Priority Programme.

# Opportunities and Vision for Greater Essex

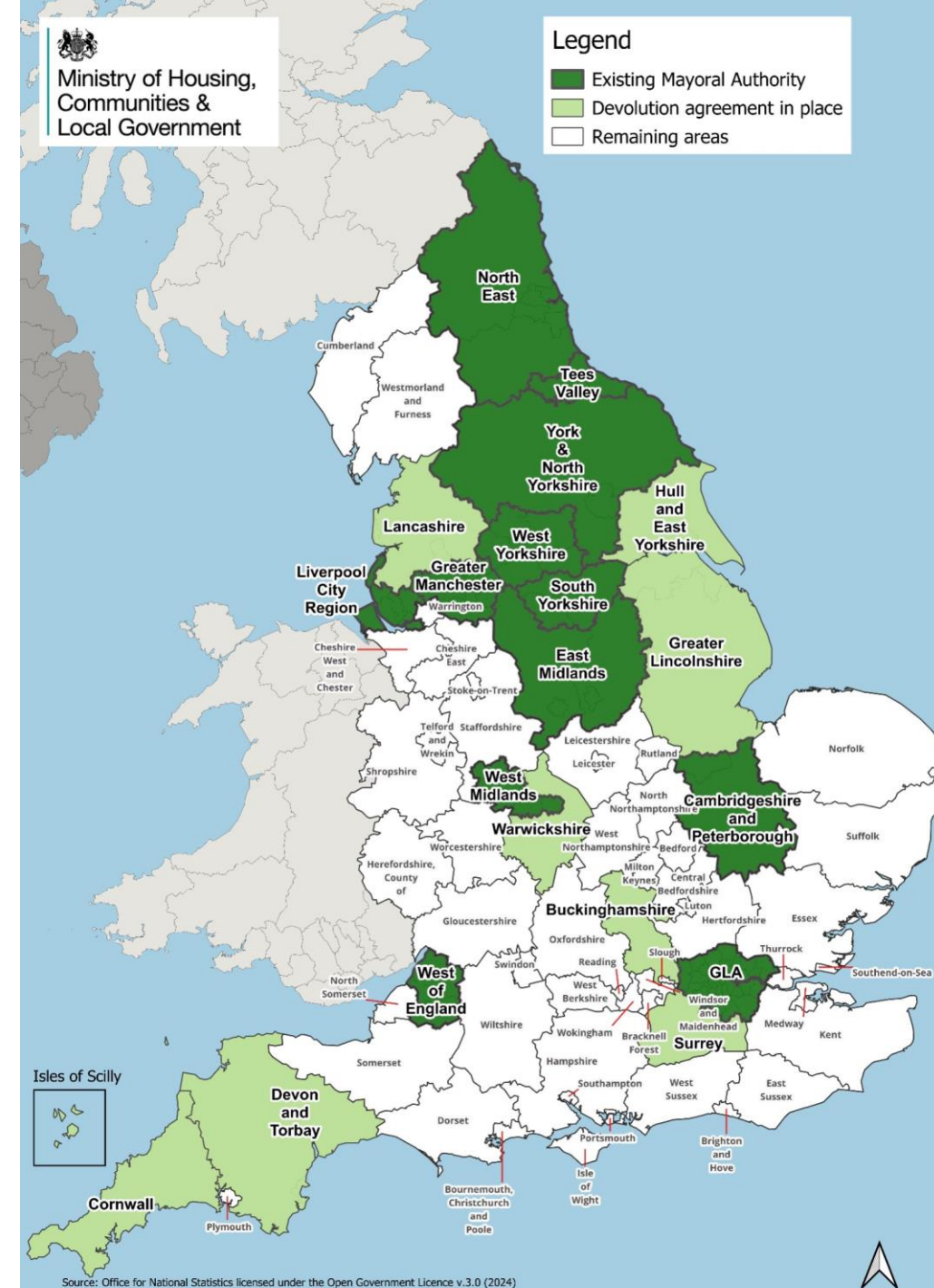
- **This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-invent the sub-national state from the ground-up**
- Greater Essex will have the opportunity to create an integrated operating model from the sub-regional through to the neighbourhood level
- Our ambition should not be just 'safe and legal' but fundamental reform that places the resident at the heart of our concerns and builds a local operating model fit to address the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This model should:
  - *Put residents first*
  - *Unlock growth and economic potential*
  - *Empower communities*
  - *Deliver better, more efficient, more joined up support and services*
  - *Strengthen local democracy*
  - *Provide more financial resilience in the long-term*
- Creating a New Mayoral Strategic Authority in Greater Essex accompanied by the reorganisation of the 15 County, Unitary, District, Borough, and City Councils is a very complex technical exercise.
- There are many risks and issues that will need to be managed to ensure this can be accomplished successfully whilst maintaining excellent service delivery and not compromising outcomes for residents

# **Government White Paper on English Devolution**

**16 December 2024**

# The White Paper – key points

- Sets out policy framework for rolling out English devolution to all places – to be enshrined in legislation
- Devolution is a means to an end – the end is "growth, more joined-up delivery of public services, and politics being done with communities, not to them"
- Devolution will be anchored around new Strategic Authorities with powers by default rather than a series of bespoke deals
- Mayors/Leaders will also be part of senior level Government forums discussing key policy issues
- White Paper sets out the case for Local Government Re-organisation and sees it as complementary to Devolution
- High-priority timetable set out of elected Mayors by May 26 and LGR by 27/28 for those places that want to move first



# New Strategic Authorities



“There will be three different categories of Strategic Authority (linked to access to powers):

- a) Foundation Strategic Authorities (non-mayoral and designated upper tier councils);
- b) Mayoral Strategic Authorities;
- c) Established Strategic Authorities (effective mayoral authorities in place for 18 months+)

[WP, 28]



Strategic authorities should cover geographies of at least 1.5m people [WP, 31]



Where Strategic Authority and P(F)CC boundaries are coterminous, Mayors by default will take on the PCC role and the strategic authority will be the fire authority [WP, 83]



Where Strategic Authorities are set up alongside two-tier local government, districts will not be constituent authorities, but the Government expects effective levels of collaboration [WP, 32]



The Government will legislate to ensure that Strategic Authorities can change structure should local government reorganisation take place, for example, changing from a Combined County Authority to a Combined Authority when a two-tier area becomes single tier. [WP, 28].

# Powers/Funding available to Strategic Authorities (1)

## **Transport and local infrastructure**

- ❖ Strategic Authorities will lead on the development of statutory Local Transport Plans. MCAs will have funding consolidation with greater flexibility and autonomy, and co-ordinate the Key Route Network with Mayors having a power of direction over this network to support delivery of the Local Transport Plan.
- ❖ Strategic Authorities will be responsible for bus commissioning and concessionary fares.
- ❖ Mayors will be given statutory role in oversight of rail network. In addition to partnership with Great British Railways, they will be able to request greater devolution of services, infrastructure, and station control to support integration
- ❖ Responsibility for local roads will remain with constituent authorities

## **Skills and employment support**

- ❖ Existing devolution of the Adults Skills Fund will continue and in addition Govt will remove ringfences from Skills Bootcamps and Free Courses for Jobs funding
- ❖ MSAs to take on joint ownership with employers of Local Skills Improvement Plan linking in to the Local Growth Plan
- ❖ MSAs will have substantive role in co-designing future non-Jobcentre Plus employment support, and will lead on producing a local Get Britain Working Plan and will have devolved funding for supported employment provision to tackle inactivity
- ❖ MSAs will have a role in designing, developing, and testing the National Jobs and Careers Service

# Powers/Funding available to Strategic Authorities (2)

## **Housing and strategic planning**

- ❖ MSAs will own the development of a Spatial Development Strategy which will be approved with support of a majority of constituent members (including the mayor)
- ❖ Mayors will have development management powers including calling in planning applications of strategic importance
- ❖ Mayoral Community Capacity Levy to ensure funding of necessary infrastructure
- ❖ Continuing power to apply compulsory purchase orders and establish Mayoral Development Corporations
- ❖ Strengthen Homes England's accountability to mayors and moving Homes England over time to a more regionalised model
- ❖ Mayoral control of grant funding for regeneration and housing delivery
- ❖ Setting strategic direction of future affordable housing programme

## **Economic development and regeneration**

- ❖ Statutory responsibility developing Local Growth Plans setting out a long-term vision and roadmap for growth
- ❖ Enhanced DBT support for local growth, including integrating Growth Hubs into MSAs
- ❖ Office for Investment will work with Mayors to develop and market strategic investment propositions. National Wealth Fund will work with Mayors to develop investible propositions in their Local Growth Plans.
- ❖ UK Research and Investment will extend its regional partnerships working with MSAs and Innovate UK will produce joint plans with MSAs
- ❖ MSAs will be key partners in boosting culture, heritage, and visitor economy, working with arm's length bodies like Historic England

# Powers/Funding Available to Strategic Authorities (3)

## Environment and climate change

- ❖ MSAs will have strategic role in the delivery of Local Power Plans supported by GB Energy
- ❖ A range of funding will be devolved to Established MSAs in Integrated Settlements: *Warmer Homes Funding, Social Housing Fund, Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme*
- ❖ National Energy System Operator will engage with MSAs as it develops regional energy strategic plans
- ❖ MSAs will have an enhanced role in leading Local Nature Recovery Strategies, including convening partnerships and co-ordinating action, funding, and investment
- ❖ Further devolution opportunities will be explored including on water management, circular economy, pollution, and flood resilience

## Health, wellbeing and public service reform

- ❖ New bespoke duty for MSAs in relation to health improvement and health inequalities
- ❖ Proposal for elected Mayors to sit on ICPs and be considered as chair or co-chair
- ❖ Long-term intention to align public service boundaries including job centres, police, fire, probation, health
- ❖ MSAs to act as convenors on public service reform (PSR) with local authorities and other partners with possible further devolution of PSR funding
- ❖ Establishment of new Mayoral Data Council to integrate data leads from SAs into central decision making on data issues that affect them, and a range of initiatives to improve regional data collection and sharing

## Public safety

- ❖ Where geographies are co-terminus with P(F)CCs, Mayors will by default be responsible for those services
- ❖ Seeking opportunities for increased co-commissioning between probation and local partners, and in the longer-term alignment of probation boundaries with MSA boundaries
- ❖ Govt will work closely with mayors to explore how their skills, employment support, health, and housing levers can be brought together to support rehabilitation of offenders and support reintegration into society
- ❖ Govt support for MSAs in adopting a clear role in building local resilience

# Enhanced powers for elected Mayors

## Areas with an elected Mayor will have access to additional benefits including:

- Access to a 30-year investment fund (est. £1.5 billion)
- Membership of the Council of the Nations and Regions chaired by the Prime Minister.
- Membership of the Mayoral Data Council.
- A mandate to develop Local Growth Plans, with priorities agreed upon with the government to focus on regional collaboration and growth.
- A clear pathway to unlocking higher levels of devolution, including access to the Integrated Funding Settlement.



# Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

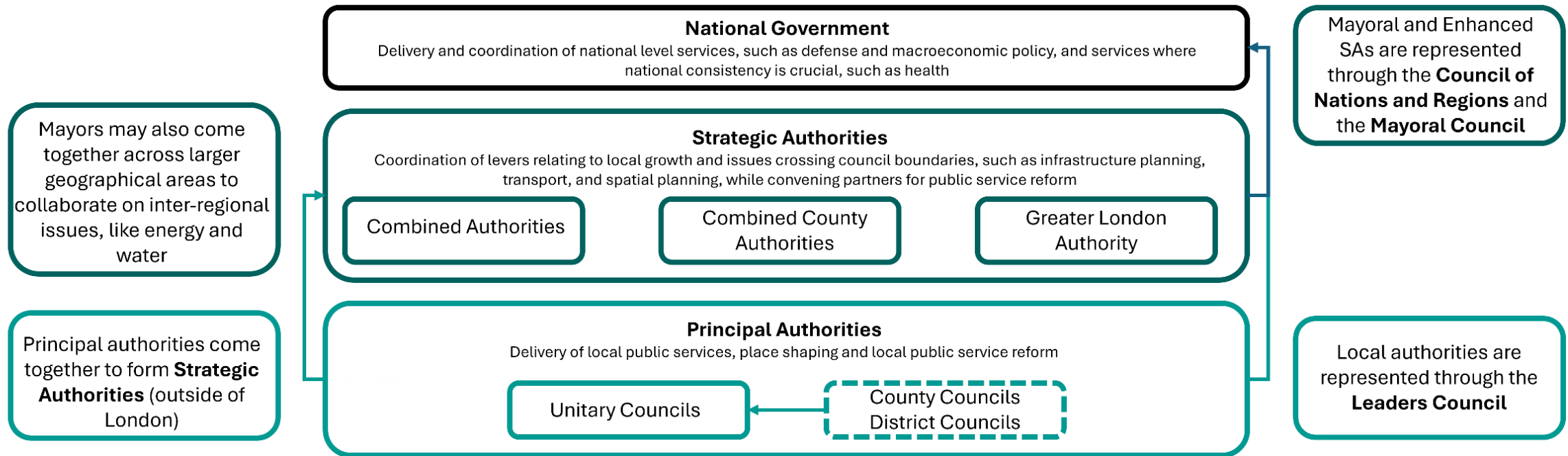
- The White Paper sets out the in-principle benefits of LGR: “unitary councils can lead to better outcomes for residents, save significant money which can be reinvested in public services, and approve accountability” [WP, 17]
- Government will facilitate a programme of LGR, focusing on two-tier areas and smaller unitary councils initially. The White Paper states: “We will deliver this process [LGR] as quickly as possible, including through legislation where it becomes necessary to ensure progress” [WP, 100]
- **New unitary councils will be expected have a population of 500,000 or more** “but there may be exceptions to ensure new structures make sense for an area” “decisions will be on a case-by-case basis” [WP, 100]
- The Government also recognises the benefits that aligned geographical boundaries can have on greater coordination of public services so will also consider realignment of other public sector boundaries to coincide with the local government and Strategic Authority boundaries [WP, 79]
- **The first tranche of local government re-organisation is expected to be completed by April 2027 with a second tranche by April 2028.**
- LA boundaries cannot cross police force boundaries. Recently the government has wished to use existing districts as ‘building blocks’ for new councils.

# Proposed New Tiers of Government

## Policymaking and coordination

## Tiers of government

## Representation



# Establishing new Local Authorities in ‘shadow form’

*If* the government agrees to proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Greater Essex, then new “Shadow Local Authorities” will be established before the existing councils are abolished.

These will become the new unitary local authorities on the day the reorganisation comes into effect and will have Members elected to it in accordance with the Orders laid by the Secretary of State, normally one year before ‘go live’.

***The Government’s timeline has indicated that elections to Shadow Local Authorities would take place in May one year before the new Unitary Authorities go live on the following 1 April, with elected members serving for a total of 5 years composed of:***

- ***c1 year on the shadow LA, and***
- ***c4 years on the new Unitary Council***

## ***Functions of Shadow Authorities***

During the shadow period, shadow authorities will **not** have the full powers of a Local Authority. Their role will predominantly be to prepare for to take on the finance, assets and staff so that they are ready to deliver all local government functions when they go live; and liaise with other local authorities to ensure continuity of public service delivery.

This would include:

- Preparing a budget, appropriate policies and setting of the council tax for its area
- Adopting a Constitution and code of conduct
- Appointing the Chair and Vice Chair of the Shadow Authority, a Leader Cabinet and the Chair and Vice-Chair of
- Appointing interim and final key officer positions including the Head of the Paid Service; Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer

## Joint Working before Shadow Period but after order is made

Before the 'shadow' period there may be a body including shadow and existing councils which have to work together during the shadow period to deal with implementation.

This has been a joint committee in some cases and an 'implementation executive' in others.

The functions of the joint committee/executive are to prepare implementation plans and help oversee implementation.



# Postponement of elections



- The Government has written to upper tier councils like ECC to invite them to submit requests to be part of the next phase of Devolution.
- Upper Tier Authorities can request postponement of elections in May 2025 if they wish.
- If granted, postponement would initially be for a period of one year, but with further extensions likely
- If reorganisation happens in 2028 it will result in a three year extension.
- By elections will still happen during the postponed period.
- There are precedents for elections being postponed for two years during a reorganisation, but not for three years.

# Issues for Consideration

# Greater Essex

## – untapped potential

A population of 1.9m increasing to 2m by 2034. Development of 200,000 new homes by 2040 and 50,000 new jobs by 2030 in key future sectors.

A gateway to trade and investment: two international airports & two Freeports; 350 miles of coastline which serves as a key business gateway to Europe and the world; and local universities producing world-class research.

### Our economy

- 47bn - total value of local economic output (GVA) and net contributor to the exchequer
- Huge Opportunity – productivity at the SE average would mean an economy 17% bigger
- 700,000 strong workforce and 81,000 businesses operating in Greater Essex
- Employment Rate of 79.1% (3%> than national average)



# How will this deliver better for local residents?

We have done significant work with partners on devolution for Greater Essex under both the previous Government's framework and now this Government's – putting in expressions of interest in 2023 and 2024.

We aspire to be the fastest growing economy outside of London by 2040 and make Greater Essex once again one of the most competitive places in Europe by gaining local control of the levers that will enable us to unlock...



**MORE  
INVESTMENT  
INTO THE  
LOCAL AREA**



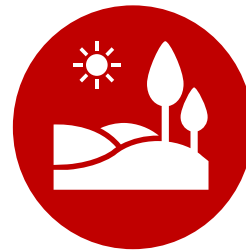
**MORE AND  
BETTER JOBS  
FOR LOCAL  
RESIDENTS**



**BETTER  
TRAINING AND  
HIGHER LOCAL  
SKILL LEVELS**



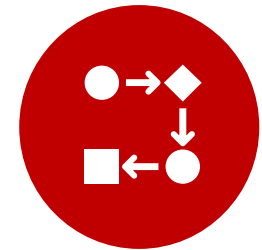
**BETTER  
INFRASTRUCTURE  
AND TRANSPORT  
CONNECTIVITY**



**BETTER LOCAL  
ENVIRONMENT  
AND PUBLIC  
PLACES**



**MORE  
AFFORDABLE  
AND HIGHER  
QUALITY HOMES**



**MORE EFFICIENT  
PUBLIC SERVICES AND  
BETTER ALIGNMENT  
OF LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT  
FUNCTIONS**

*See appendix for full table of powers and funding on offer in the white paper*

# Issues to consider: Devolution

- Preparing to establish Combined County Authority (CCA) ahead of Mayoral elections in 2026
- Agreeing balanced, proportional representation by constituent members on the CCA
- Voting rights and how decisions are made by the CCA
- The role of non-constituent partners
- Operating Models
- Capacity funding and budgets
- Consultation on the CCA – to be led by the Government



# Issues to consider: LGR

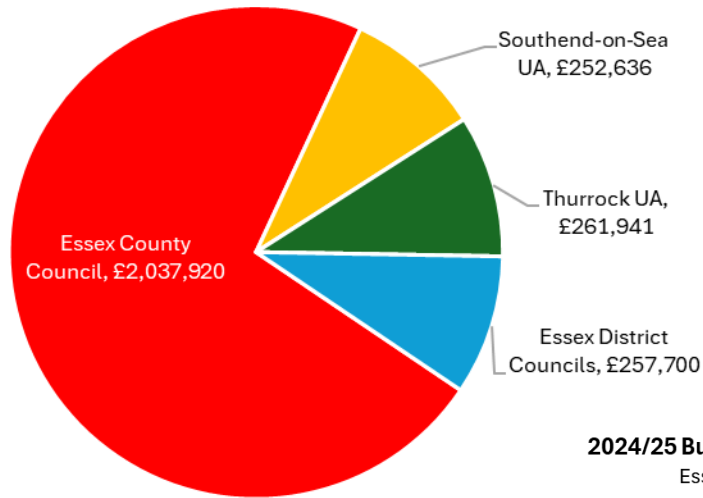
- “We expect all councils in an area to work together to develop unitary proposals that are in the best interests of the whole area, rather than developing competing proposals... LGR should not delay devolution.” [WP, 101]
- Timelines for LGR are April 2027 for tranche 1 and April 2028 for tranche 2 (where areas are more complex)
- Potential postponement of May 25 elections
- Handling of debt issues (including Thurrock)
- Configuration of unitaries and boundaries and criteria for judgement (link to GT work)
- Community engagement and operating models – ‘We will want to see stronger community arrangements when reorganisation happens in the way councils engage at a neighbourhood or area level’ [WP, 100]
- Maintaining/improving quality and resilience of core services
- Managing the transition: e.g. financial and procurement decisions
- Managing the transition: including impact on our staff
- Local leadership now VS Imposed direction later?



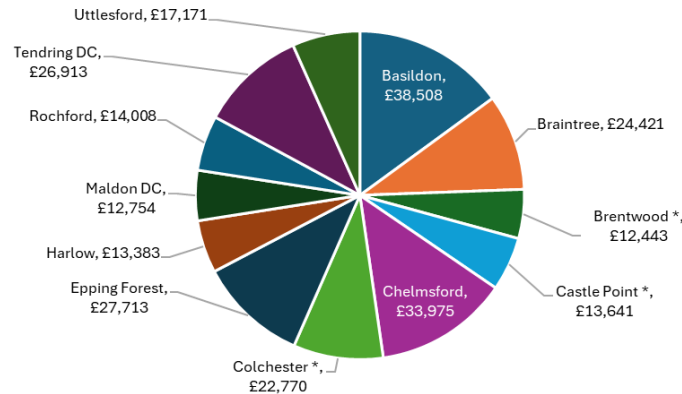
# Where is the money spent in Greater Essex, and what on - £2.8bn planned in 2024/25

## Where in Greater Essex is the money spent?

2024/25 Budget: Total Service Expenditure by authority (£000)

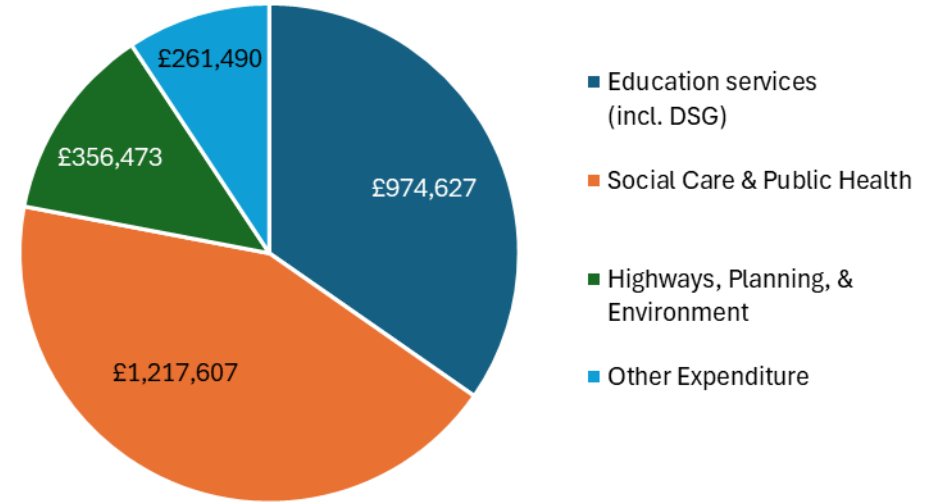


2024/25 Budget: Total Service Expenditure Essex District Councils (£000)



## What is the money spent on?

2024/25 Budget: Total Service Expenditure for All Essex Authorities Excluding Police & Fire (£000)



# Next Steps and Timeline

# Developing Local Proposals around LGR

- On the 26th September Leaders collectively agreed to commission a joint evidence base to inform thinking about Local Government Reform, set out different configuration options and to support discussion and decision making around the viability of those different options.
- CEOs subsequently commissioned Grant Thornton to refresh the LGR evidence base previously produced in 2020.
- This work includes analysis of population size, financial position including debt exposure, and future modelling for a range of configuration options, scored against criteria including size, financial sustainability, community identity etc
- Outputs are due in early January for CEOs to review on the 15th January, and a workshop for leaders planned by the end of January to consider the options and agree shortened list of preferred models for more detailed exploration.
- The Essex Leaders Group will then agree the next steps for further development ahead of any government deadlines.



# Developing Local Proposals around LGR

The expected outputs of the Grant Thornton work will be as follows:

1. Introduction and context
2. Approach - providing detail behind modelling choices
3. Long-list: Summarising full range of options for LGR (covering 2,3,4,5 unitary options)
4. Key socio-economic data (population, land area, jobs, businesses, deprivation)
5. Implications of the White Paper
6. Vision for future places and local services
7. Short-list: Viable options based on alignment of options to (i) White Paper, (ii) vision for places and services, (iii) lessons and risks and (iv) community identity (to note shortlist will be developed following CEO review and leaders workshop)
8. Financial overview (resilience, indebtedness & unit cost and spend)
9. Lessons from previous unitarisation exercises and risks to consider



# Indicative High Level Timeline

	<b>Devolution / Combined County Authority</b>	<b>New Local Authorities</b>	<b>ECC, Southend and Thurrock</b>	<b>Districts</b>
2025	Proposals approved by ECC/SSCC/TC, are consulted on and then approved by Gov	Proposals submitted by LAs autumn (interim proposals March 2025), subjected to consultation and agreed by Gov	Elections postponed* initially until 2026 (but see 2026 below)	Business as usual
2026	Goes live with Mayoral election	Order made to set out timescale and process	Elections cancelled	Elections cancelled
2027	Operational	Election to shadow authorities, preparing for transition, recruit key staff	Preparing for transition	Preparing for transition
2028	Updated governance arrangements to reflect reorganisation, potentially with PCC and fire (PFCC election due 2028)	Shadow authorities become live authorities	Abolished	Abolished

\*ECC and Thurrock only: Southend is not due to have ordinary elections in 2025.

# Appendix

Table of funding and Powers per level of Strategic Authority (from Devolution White Paper)

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Funding and Investment</b>	Access to a multi-departmental, long-term integrated funding settlement**			X	YES (TRAILBLAZER AREAS)
	Long-term investment fund, with an agreed annual allocation		X	X	YES – L3 ONLY
	Removal of gateway review from investment fund, after Gateway One complete			X	NO
	Ability to introduce mayoral precepting on council tax^		X	X	YES – L3 ONLY
	Consolidation of local growth and place funding in a single pot**	X	X	X	NO
<b>Strategic leadership</b>	A statutory duty to produce Local Growth Plans		X	X	NO
	Membership of the Council of Nations and Regions		X	X	NO
	Membership of the Mayoral Data Council		X	X	NO

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Transport and Local Infrastructure</b>	Local Transport Authority and public transport functions, including bus franchising and responsibility for an area-wide Local Transport Plan	X	X	X	YES – L2 & L3
	Simplification and consolidation of local transport funding**	X	X	X	NO
	Removal of certain Secretary of State consents, e.g. on lane rental schemes		X	X	NO
	Duty to establish a Key Route Network on the most important local roads^		X	X	YES – L3 ONLY
	Mayoral Power of Direction over use of constituent authority powers on the Key Route Network^		X	X	NO
	Priority for strategic rail engagement (including mayoral partnerships) with Great British Railways	X	X	X	YES – L3 ONLY
	Statutory role in governing, managing, planning, and developing the rail network		X	X	NO
	An option for greater control over local rail stations		X	X	NO
	A ‘right to request’ further rail devolution			X	NO
	Priority for support to deliver multi-modal ticketing			X	NO
	A clear, strategic role in the decarbonisation of the local bus fleet	X	X	X	NO
	Active Travel England support for constituent authority capability^	X	X	X	NO
	Formal partnership with National Highways		X	X	NO

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Skills and employment support</b>	Joint ownership of the Local Skills Improvement Plan model, with Employer Representative Bodies	X	X	X	YES – L2 & L3
	Devolution of the core Adult Skills Fund	X			YES – L2 & L3
	Devolution of non-apprenticeship adult skills functions through a consolidated skills funding pot**		X	X	YES – L2 & L3
	Central convening of youth careers provision including greater flexibility for Careers hubs		X	X	NO
	A clear role in relation to 16-19 education and training		X	X	NO
	Responsibility for developing local Get Britain Working Plans		X	X	NO
	Devolution of supported employment funding**	X	X	X	NO
	Co-design of future employment support that is additional to core Jobcentre Plus provision		X	X	YES – L3
	Delegated delivery or commissioning of employment support that is additional to core Jobcentre Plus provision			X	YES – L3
	Alignment of Jobcentre Plus boundaries with Strategic Authorities			X	NO

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Housing and strategic planning</b>	A duty to produce a Spatial Development Strategy	X	X	X	NO
	Strategic development management powers (once the Spatial Development Strategy is in place)		X	X	NO
	Ability to raise a Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy to fund strategic infrastructure (once the Spatial Development Strategy is in place)		X	X	NO
	Ability to make Mayoral Development Orders		X	X	NO
	Ability to establish Mayoral Development Corporations		X	X	YES – L3
	Homes England compulsory purchase powers (held concurrently)	x	X	X	YES – L2 & L3
	Devolution of wider grant funding to support regeneration and housing delivery**		X	X	PART – previously Brownfield funding only at L3
	Ability to set the strategic direction of any future programme to support affordable housing provision in their area			X	NO
	Strategic Place Partnership with Homes England		X	X	YES – L3
	Support to establish a public sector land commission			X	NO

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Economic development and regeneration</b>	Partnership working with Department for Science, Industry and Technology and UK Research and Innovation to explore opportunities for closer long-term collaboration in strengthening local research and innovation capacity	X	X	X	NO
	Develop joint innovation action plans with Innovate UK to shape long-term strategies and investments		X	X	NO
	Embed UK Research and Innovation lead points of contact for enhanced collaborative working on innovation with Mayoral Strategic Authorities that are committed to work collaboratively on innovation		X	X	NO
	Responsibility as the accountable body for the delivery of Growth Hubs	X	X	X	AS part of integration of LEP functions – L2 & L3
	Devolution of Growth Hubs funding**			X	
	A Strategic Partnership with the Department for Business and Trade focused on domestic growth, exports, investment, and delivery of local growth priorities.		X	X	NO
	Partnership working with Department for Culture, Media and Sport Arm’s Length Bodies to maximise culture, heritage, and sport spending in place	X	X	X	NO
<b>Environment and climate change</b>	Devolution of retrofit funding this parliament subject to a successful transition period (see 3.7)**			X	NO
	Heat network zoning coordination role	X	X	X	NO
	Coordinating local energy planning to support development of regional network energy infrastructure	X	X	X	NO
	Green jobs and skills coordination role	X	X	X	NO
	A strategic role on net zero in collaboration with government, including on Great British Energy’s Local Power Plan and Warm Homes Plan	X	X	X	YES – L1, L2, & L3
	Responsibility for coordinating delivery and monitoring of Local Nature Recovery Strategies^	X	X	X	YES - L1, L2, & L3

	<b>Detail</b>	<b>Foundation</b>	<b>Mayoral</b>	<b>Established</b>	<b>In Previous Framework?</b>
<b>Health, wellbeing and public service reform</b>	A bespoke statutory health improvement and health inequalities duty^	X	X	X	PART – previous framework had an option role for MCAs in improving local health
	Mayors engaged during the Integrated Care Boards chair appointment process		X	X	NO
	Mayors as members of local Integrated Care Partnerships, and consideration for position of chair or co-chair		X	X	NO -however local arrangements nationally may already see this happening in some areas
	A role in convening partners and driving cross-cutting public service reform, including looking at areas such as multiple disadvantage				No
<b>Public safety</b>	Mayors accountable for the exercise of Police and Crime Commissioner functions where police force and mayoral boundaries align^		X	X	YES –L3
	Mayors accountable for the exercise of Fire and Rescue Authority functions where fire and rescue service and mayoral boundaries align		X	X	NO
	A clear and defined role in local resilience, working with the Local Resilience Forum to embed resilience into broader policy and delivery^				YES –L3

This information is issued by:  
Essex County Council

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