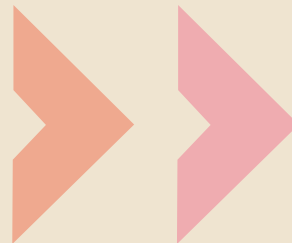# Best4Essex
Shaping Essex for the Next Generation

Local Government at the right scale to deliver, local enough to care

A proposal for local government reorganisation
September 2025 **v1**

Content

Content

Supporting information can be found in the following documents:
Annex 1 - CIPFA template
Annex 2 - Essex LGR Reserves Summary & LGR Debt and Assets
Annex 3 - Risk and Dependencies Log
Annex 4 - Resident Views
Annex 5 – Stakeholders and Partners

Foreword

Best4Essex will**:** protect vital statutory services, strengthen neighbourhood voice, and deliver financial resilience in 4.5 years It is the right combination of four new councils **fit for purpose, fit for place, and fit for future generations.**

As Leaders across Greater Essex, we are putting forward a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create four new unitary councils to serve the people and communities across Greater Essex. Designed for Essex's communities, this plan replaces the current two-tier system with local government that is fit for the future and the changing world we live in whilst being simpler, stronger, and more accountable. Our guiding principle is clear: **local government for Greater Essex at the right scale to deliver, yet local enough to care.**

We are seizing this moment because services face unprecedented pressures, residents demand stronger accountability, and devolution offers us the chance to shape a future fit local government for Greater Essex.

This is not just a restructuring or a redesign; it is a re-imagination of local government in Greater Essex. These new councils will be custodians of place and catalysts for change, delivering

better outcomes for every community across our county now and for generations to come. At its heart, this is about delivering visible change: protecting vital services, empowering neighbourhoods, and creating councils that are easier for residents to understand and engage with.

The **Best4Essex** four unitary proposal balances the need to provide strategic capacity at a scale to drive growth and be operationally resilient, with the need for local accountability and responsiveness. We have designed each new council to be able to maximise the strengths of its economic geography and growth opportunities, building on and developing local expertise based on local knowledge. Each Council covers an appropriate balance of geographical area and population size, within the recognised optimal range for new unitary authorities, each capable of running sustainable high quality and resilient services, while staying close enough to residents to act on what matters most to them.

Residents have told us their priorities are for councils that provide safe and high-quality statutory services, are financially resilient, and respect local community identity. These

priorities are embedded into this proposal. The model also builds on the strong partnerships across health, police, fire and the voluntary sector, creating a coherent platform for collaboration and innovation. Greater Essex residents have said it clearly **'Need to keep it local'.** This proposal responds directly, embedding neighbourhood empowerment from day one.

No other **option balances efficiency and identity** in this way. **Best4Essex** is the only model that spreads risk evenly, avoids the fragility of smaller units, and prevents the remoteness of larger ones. In short, fewer than four councils would sacrifice localism and agility; more than four would sacrifice efficiency and resilience. This **Best4Essex** unitary proposal is the optimum solution for Greater Essex, one that is financially viable, evidence led, economically grounded, and set to deliver on resident priorities.

We commend this proposal to Government as the right choice for Greater Essex: **coherent, credible and compelling**, and the most deliverable path to sustainable local government.

Best4Essex is large enough to deliver, local enough to care, and ready to start now.
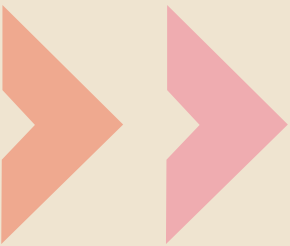
Best4Essex - The only coherent, credible and compelling proposal for Greater Essex

This proposal is	**Coherent & credible**	Creating four unitary councils aligned to Essex's varied communities and economic geography
At the	**Right size to have impact**	Delivering strategic growth alongside community-level improvements
Able to deliver	**Better services**	With genuine integration across care, housing, health, and local public services
And drive	**Inclusive economic growth**	Based on coherent sub regional growth corridors and connected inclusion and prosperity
Operating on a	**Financially sustainable basis**	With payback in under five years, a smoother transition, and long-term resilience
Enabling a	**Stronger local voice**	Through empowered neighbourhood area committees and strong democratic accountability
Shaped by	**Resident views**	Four local unitary councils that respect local identity and address local priorities

The Alternatives Fall Short

- **3UA** too big, dilutes identity, weakens local service responsiveness.
- **5UA** too costly, longer payback, higher disaggregation risk.
- **Alternative4** is London-centric, fragments Greater Essex, and fails the test of countywide coherence.

The Best Option

Best4Essex creates councils that are:

- **Strategic enough** to plan growth and infrastructure.
- **Local enough** to understand and respond to communities.
- **Financially resilient** with clear evidence of savings.
- **Future-focused** – unlocking devolution and delivering reform at pace.
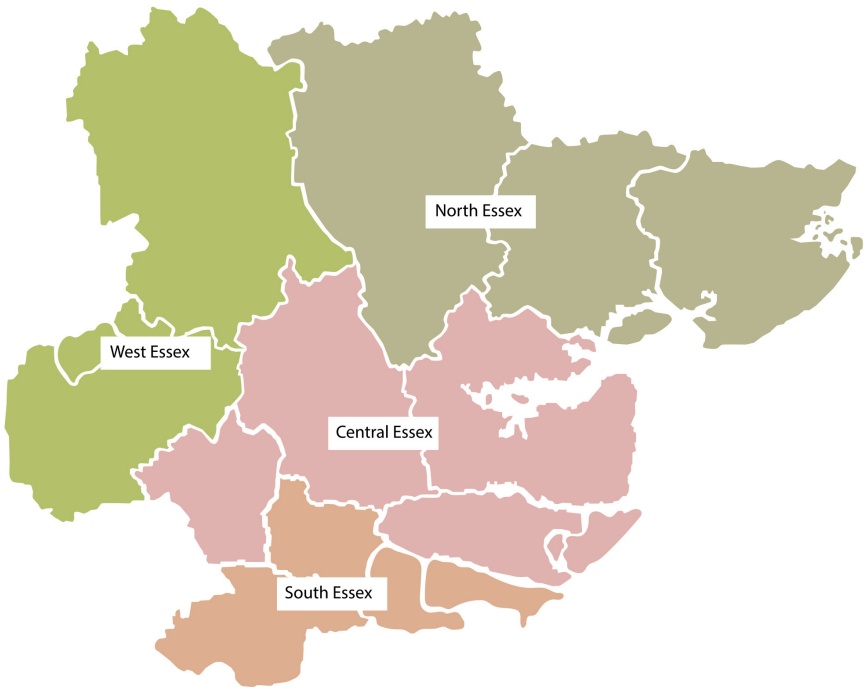- **Bottom up** – addressing the voice of Greater Essex residents

Figure 1 Best4Essex Four unitary map

Best4Essex is the only option that delivers certainty, sustainability and ambition for every part of our county. The right plan for government, the right plan for partners, and above all the right plan for the people, businesses and communities of Greater Essex.

"Scaled to deliver, local enough to care."

We are excited to present our proposal, designed for Greater Essex's communities, to create four unitary councils. Four councils that are locally responsive, financially resilient and strategically aligned. That are grounded in their communities, built on a simple principle: "at the right scale to deliver, yet local enough to care." Transforming local government to work for Greater Essex today and for the generations to come.

We are proud to present this proposal for four new unitary authorities. We believe it is the best and most effective option for Essex, its people, places and environment, not only now but also for future generations, because it is:

01 Place Based

Local Government should be the economic heart of their areas, improving prosperity, attracting investment and growth and providing long term institutional anchors. Arbitrary administrative boundaries that are not deeply rooted in how local economies function, connect and grow will not deliver reform. Best4Essex is grounded in existing and emerging economic geographies and in the identities of our communities. It establishes four unitary local authorities with the least administrative boundary frictions to deliver housing and inclusive economic growth without severing existing corridors, attract investment and build shared prosperity, build on existing collaboration and partnerships. It addresses today's pressures while anticipating tomorrow's needs.

02 One Public Sector

Public Services are fragmented both in delivery and geographies from decades of partial reform, new structures, bodies and agencies. Our proposal understands this complexity of the delivery ecosystem and embeds collaboration and partnerships as a foundation to change. Harnessing the advantages of digital and data transformation, Best4Essex transcends organisational boundaries to provide frictionless joined-up public services at the point of use. Embracing the wider devolution agenda and principles into its design the proposal aligns with the new Mayoral Combined County Authority and will harness emerging legislative changes that will unlock local accountability while improving democratic representation and accountability at all levels.

03 Transformation Led and Future Proofed

The status quo is not functioning; simple reorganisation will not address the challenges in public service delivery and finances in 2025 and beyond. Through real reform and transformation, innovation, digital and AI, Best4Essex provides the insight, foresight and will build the capability and capacity to transform working practices, reduce failure demand, and improve whole-system outcomes.

04 Insight Driven
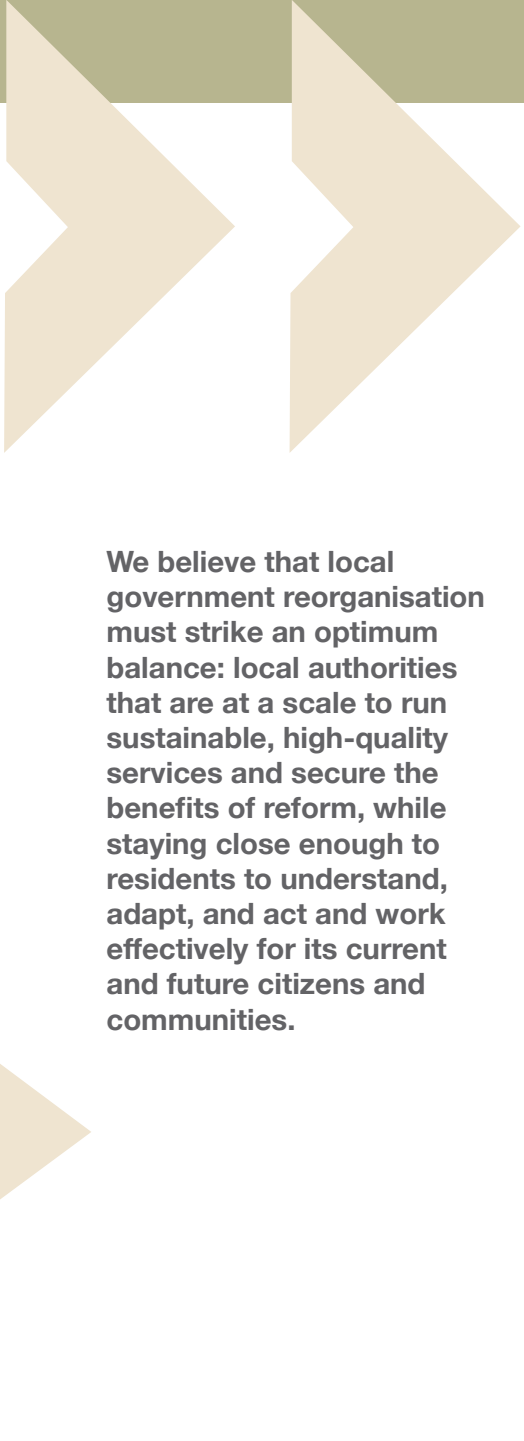
Local government is data rich and insight poor. Through our approach to digital transformation, building a strong data and insight ecosystem in new unitary authorities which is connected to the wider local government and public service ecosystem is not just a nice to have, it underpins the whole future of service delivery. Each unitary authority will respond to up-to-date evidence and holistic local need while shaping – and having the capacity to respond to - regional, national and global agendas, from housing to climate, health to capital delivery.

05 Community Powered

Local democracy is critical to ensuring the best outcomes for all parts of our communities. We don't want to waste this opportunity by recreating existing democratic structures that don't fully represent our communities, we want to build a new more inclusive local democracy with fit for purpose accountability and ensure the best chance to create the conditions for local ownership through new Neighbourhood Area Committees, Town and Parish Councils, Citizens' Assemblies and through a thriving third sector.

06 Financially Sustainable

Basing configurations on current and existing failure demand or financial difficulty is understandable but only if it is based on foundations and structures that can change the status quo of local government finance whilst reducing and managing existing and future demand on key services such as Adult and Children Social Careand SEND. Deliverable and viable today, this configuration is also resilient in the long term. It is rooted in generating prosperity and building frictionless inclusive economic areas that can reframe local investment and council income streams whilst building social mobility and cohesion that enable early prevention, intervention and improved outcomes, reduce failure demand and wider economic inclusion and well-being, creating financially resilient and agile local authorities.

We believe that local government reorganisation must strike an optimum balance: local authorities that are at a scale to run sustainable, high-quality services and secure the benefits of reform, while staying close enough to residents to understand, adapt, and act and work effectively for its current and future citizens and communities.

1.1 | Shaping Greater Essex for the Next Generation

Looking back from 2040, as those born in 2024 prepare to vote, it will be possible to see the scale of change driven by these four councils. Since their inauguration they have been working as a custodian of place and catalyst for change, delivering outcomes that matter for local people a vibrant economy; safe, affordable and high-quality places to live; thriving, connected communities; people living independently and with dignity; children and young people that are safe and able to thrive; better health all through collaboration and partnerships across the public and third sectors. They represent a local government that is responsive to local needs and local areas as well as delivering on future ambitions with local accountability, engagement and voice at its heart.

The area in which people live, work, study, retire is important. It is where they build families and careers, enjoy down time and leisure time. Where they rely on social and physical infrastructure, housing, joined up local services and facilities, a strong local economy and a cared for and improving environment. Where people are connected with others and feel an important sense of local and civic pride through active democratic inclusion and develop a strong sense of place. Public services and local government in particular is a core anchor of our area and many residents also work in and alongside the public sector ecosystem. We consider this a

unique opportunity to build a renewed pride and culture around local government and the crucial role it plays in the future of Greater Essex; defining appropriate local government areas is fundamental to enabling this.

In this proposal we have put place and citizens at its heart. Not only today but our future generations who will help develop and steward the Essex of the 21st Century. We evidence how the **Best4Essex** unitary proposal is the best one for Greater Essex. For our almost two million citizens who rely on our services, for our cities, towns and villages, for our businesses, and for our rural, urban and coastal environments, for town and parish councils and our public, voluntary and community sector partners.

Our vision is for local government across Greater Essex that is a custodian of place, a catalyst for change and an anchor for public sector driven innovation: delivering outcomes that matter for local people and providing an environment in which there is real local community ownership and cohesion with relevant assets and services devolved to more local levels through new Neighbourhood Area Committees that are led by locally-elected representatives that take ownership of hyperlocal issues, Town and Parish Councils that work in tandem with local authorities, and other voluntary and community organisations and groups, all working towards:

- **A thriving economy** building on Greater Essex's strengths to create jobs, investment and opportunity.
- **Safe, affordable homes** high-quality housing that meets current and future need.
- **Strong communities** connected, vibrant, cohesive and sustainable, with pride in place.
- **Independence with dignity** enabling people to live well throughout their later years.
- **Children and young people who thrive** safe, supported and ambitious for their futures.
- **A protected environment** safeguarding and enhancing our globally recognised natural assets.
- **Health and wellbeing at the centre** public services designed around prevention and better outcomes.
- **Partnerships that deliver** local government working with health, police, fire, the Mayoral Authority and communities to achieve more together.
- **Responsive, accountable local authorities** with local engagement and neighbourhood voice at their heart.

1.2 | Founded on places that make sense to local people

"Essex should be big enough to deliver but still feel local to us."

This proposal creates four new unitary authorities that are based around local communities and culture that make sense to local people and mean something to them. They form fully functional economic geographies based on the diverse strengths of Greater Essex and capitalise on the unique opportunities provided by devolution and reorganisation which is especially important in the Government's fast track Devolution Priority Programme areas which will need to demonstrate delivery at the earliest points.

Our proposal will facilitate each council to:

- Provide coherent and accountable responses to the immediate and evolving local needs and demands of people, communities and places.
- Develop and innovate in tackling distinct local social, economic and housing challenges and reframing interventions that deliver outcomes for people and reduce demand pressures
- Improve the quality of services to better represent value for money to local taxpayers and be financially sustainable through more agile and flexible resourcing, use of digital and technology innovation, culture change and business process reform.

- Drive local innovation and engagement to enhance reorganisation, support local economic development across private and third sectors that generate better opportunities and outcomes for local people.

The councils, drawing on local history and culture, are coterminous with existing boundaries and are aligned in ways that make sense for the ways people lead their lives, as illustrated in the following table.
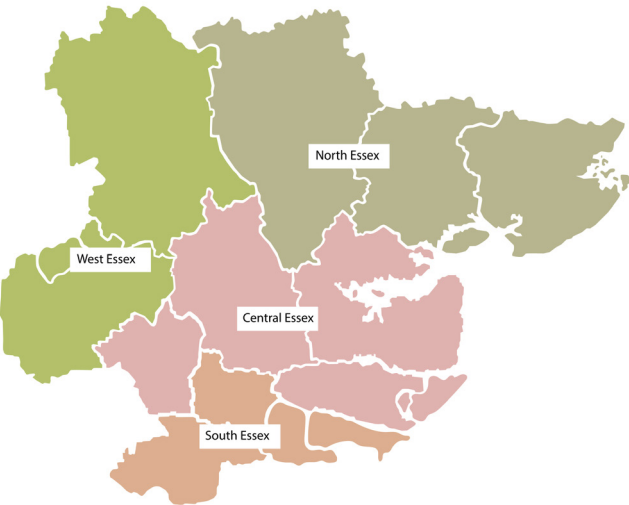
Figure 1.1 New unitary authorities' geography

Unitary	Covers existing councils	Economic Corridors	Population 2023	Population 2040	Miles^2
Central Essex	Brentwood, Rochford, Chelmsford, Maldon,	Central Essex city and rural	419,945	450,120	395
North Essex	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	Great Eastern / Haven Gateway	510,162	557,999	495
South Essex	Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend	Thames Gateway	640,874	704,969	100
West Essex	Uttlesford, Harlow, Epping Forest	M11 London Cambridge corridor	325,609	340,225	391

Table 1.1 New unitary authorities scale

Central Essex | Maldon, Chelmsford, Brentwood and Rochford – A new connected heart for Essex

This new unitary authority blends Brentwood's London fringe economy and Chelmsford as a thriving and growing city with semi-rural and rural hinterlands of Rochford, bringing access to unique coastal environments and communities in Maldon's rural heritage areas. It balances high-growth commuter towns with estuary landscapes, enabling integrated planning for housing, transport, and environmental management. Shared interests in flood resilience, infrastructure investment, and preserving local identity make the case for a cohesive authority that is both economically ambitious and environmentally aware. Together, these areas form a balanced and sustainable unitary with the scale to deliver county-wide responsibilities effectively and the local identity to engage communities in shaping their future.

North Essex | Colchester, Tendring and Braintree – Driving growth from coast to country

This new unitary authority brings together the city of Colchester, with its rich history and university-driven innovation, the market-town enterprise of Braintree, and the coastal economy of Tendring. With a combined offer of knowledge-based industries, local enterprise, and tourism potential, it will be a growth engine for the north of Essex with new garden communities that will support shared infrastructure corridors and transport links to London and the Midlands creating opportunities for joined-up planning and inward investment. From the historic Colchester Castle to the vibrant coastal resorts, this council will have the scale, diversity, and strategic vision to strengthen the local economy while ensuring services meet the needs of both urban and rural communities.

West Essex | Harlow, Epping Forest and Uttlesford – the Gateway to Essex

This new unitary authority combines West Essex's well-connected commuter hubs and rural areas, leveraging proximity to London and Stansted Airport. Epping Forest's M11 corridor links seamlessly with Harlow's enterprise zone and innovation capacity.

It's proximity and shared functional geography with the vibrancy of the Cambridge economy can be a catalyst for reimagining cross boundary working at a strategic and local scale more efficiently while rural market towns and tourism in the hinterlands offer complementary strengths.

Together they can align strategic transport, housing growth, and high-tech economic development, benefiting from shared commuter flows and cross-boundary employment patterns, while preserving the rural and heritage character valued by residents. The new authority would have the scale to plan infrastructure investment effectively while maintaining community identity.

South Essex | Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend-on-Sea – a dynamic southern powerhouse

This new unitary authority creates a critical mass of economic power by combining Thurrock's global logistics hub, Basildon's industrial strength and commercial base, Castle Point's rich medieval heritage, history and community focus, and Southend's established unitary expertise and coastal economy including a strong tourism offer and the fastest growing regional airport. This "Thames Estuary Powerhouse" has the scale and clout to deliver transformative regeneration and strategic transport projects.

This authority will be a powerful driver of opportunity in the south of the county. With a combined population and economic footprint that can support ambitious regeneration, transport improvements, and social infrastructure investment, it will be able to deliver at pace. This grouping blends urban vitality with strong local networks, ensuring that inclusive growth benefits residents and supports inclusive, resilient communities along the Thames Estuary.

South Essex presents the sharpest challenge to financial sustainability, given Thurrock's challenging financial position and high deprivation profile. To address this effectively, there must be a comprehensive approach that can build improved social and physical infrastructure, reduce social demand pressures, and foster conditions for inclusive growth. Streamlining the local government structures in south Essex will allow a new unitary authority to work more effectively with the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) on public health, housing and transport. Such connectivity would join up the South Essex Thames Gateway corridor more effectively, aligning the employment opportunities of such major schemes as Thames Lower Crossing with existing economic assets such as Southend Airport (UK's fastest growing regional airport) and Thames Freeport/Tilbury Docks (the largest of the Thames Docks).

1.3 | At the right scale to deliver, yet local enough to care

This **Best4Essex**-unitary proposal is built on the principle that local government reorganisation must strike an optimum balance: local authorities that are at the right scale to run sustainable, high-quality services and secure the benefits of the reform, while staying close enough to residents to understand, adapt, and act. This is not about drawing the biggest map or the smallest footprint, it's about creating the right units for Greater Essex's long-term future.

Coherent places that work in practice

This proposal presents boundaries that reflect natural communities, economic linkages, and support a move towards co-terminosity and enhanced collaboration with public service partners. Each new unitary authority will be big enough to integrate local health and wellbeing ambitions linked with strategic public health priorities, care, housing, and growth planning but rooted in real place identity, so decisions make sense locally and regionally.

The right size for efficiency and transition

The proposed new councils sit close to the population sweet spot set out in Government guidance, avoiding both the overstretch of oversized units and the fragility of small footprints. This means manageable transition costs, smoother staff and system integration, and real efficiencies from day one.

Services designed for sustainability

By grouping places with similar service pressures, our model keeps social care, children's services, housing, and local economies aligned — the essential foundation for financial sustainability and value for money. We've built on existing shared service arrangements so there's momentum from the start.

A proven appetite to work together

The councils in each grouping already share data, services, or governance structures, creating a strong platform for transition. This means reform can be collaborative from day one, rather than an exercise in forced integration.

Ready for devolution, not just reorganisation

Our groupings align with the Mayoral Combined County Authority footprint and timetable, and we will set up arrangements to ensure transition optimises new powers and opportunities at the earliest points enabling Greater Essex to move at pace on securing and capitalising on the opportunities of devolved powers and funding whilst continuing to deliver critical services. This means local government reorganisation won't hinder the benefits of devolution, rather it will accelerate it.

Grounded in functional Economic geography

The configuration reflects how Greater Essex already functions: four coherent economic areas aligned to transport corridors and commuting patterns[1]. By aligning new unitary authorities with these functional economic geographies, **Best4Essex** avoids the remoteness of oversized models and the fragility of smaller ones.

It ensures each area has the right scale to plan infrastructure, housing and growth, while still reflecting the lived realities of residents and communities. The four new authorities align directly with Essex's functional economic corridors: the M11 (London–Cambridge), A12/A120 (Great Eastern/Haven Gateway), Thames Estuary, and Central Essex. This alignment provides a coherent platform for strategic planning, simplifying delivery and creating investment confidence.

Local voice, not local loss

This community powered model embeds neighbourhood and local voices into both the design phase and the forward stewardship of Greater Essex, so reorganisation is a gateway to more community cohesion and influence, not less. Councils will be close enough to maintain deep local connections, but strong enough to shape the county's strategic future. The proposal provides an environment in which there is local community ownership of relevant assets and services devolved to more local levels through new Neighbourhood Area Committees, Town and Parish Councils, Citizens Assemblies and the voluntary and community sector network.

[1] Travel to work data and drawing on the Greater Essex Growth & Infrastructure Framework (2016-36)

Striking the right balance

This proposal strikes the right balance between councils that are small enough to have a local identity and respond to local issues, yet large enough to provide services at sufficient scale as to be financially viable.

This option is best for	Because the Councils are big enough to...	And small enough to...
Essex	Collaborate effectively on scale for the benefit of the whole of Essex and the region	Retain, celebrate and enhance local identity, culture and history
Citizens	Drive local inclusion and build real democratic representation for Greater Essex	Care about, understand, and respond to their citizens needs and diverse voices
Communities	Ensure strategic decisions benefit communities and the Council area as a whole and create real collaborative structures from strategic through to grass roots	Ensure strong community voice and effective engagement mechanisms through new neighbourhood area communities and citizens assembly's
Businesses	Support specific sectors and respond to collective needs to join up strategic local growth plans with national priorities and renewal	Deliver localised support for business growth, building on strengths and supporting real local needs and innovation
Services	Deliver high quality, value for money (VFM) services with resilience and a demand management focus	Ensure those services are responsive to local need and for those who really need them.
The economy	Functional economic geographies that make sense to business, investment and infrastructure delivery	Tailor support for the local economy in each new Unitary council area
Housing delivery	Align planning and housing growth to deliver a strategic approach to the homes local people need	Deliver homes that reflect the different local needs across Greater Essex while being the crucial enabler of fixing the housing crisis
Taxpayers	Be financially viable and resilient	Be accessible and connected to local people and local needs
Innovation	Have the capacity and capabilities to attract talent, design, integrate and test new ideas, technology and approaches to tackle vital local challenges	Ensure its public service reform agenda is informed by, and addresses, the real needs articulated by local people
Investment	Linked to Local Growth Plans and provide a coherent framing of opportunity areas for both institutional and inward investment	Bottom-up local strengths and nuance can feed up to provide investable areas that will actually deliver

Table 1.2 Striking the right balance

Shaped by Core Design Principles

We have established some core design principles against which we have summarised why we believe this proposal is the right one for the people and communities of Essex.

Design Principles	Our Proposal
Best value for taxpayers	Enables the best possible service quality and outcomes
Efficiencies and innovations	Enables efficiencies, service improvements and new ways of working
Coherent social and economic geographies	Is based on communities that make sense to how people lead their lives
Local economic and housing growth	Enables local places to be shaped and developed in line with their future needs
Councils that are experts in their local communities	Ensures service delivery is informed by local knowledge and responds to local needs and demands and not too remote to create a disjoint between local democracy and communities
Strong, quality public services	Enhances system-wide collaboration across public services
What matters most to local people	Enables the views and priorities of local people to be heard and addressed
Clear accountability and representation	Provides clear, accessible local accountability and democratic representation for local people
Devolution to a sensible sub-council geography	Identifies opportunities for local delivery and coordination of services
Councils based on local identity and culture	Reflects the cultural and historical fabric of Essex and its communities – retaining that local identity

Table 1.3 Core design principles

Meeting Government Criteria

This **Best4Essex** proposal meets the core criteria set by the government, as evidenced throughout our proposal:

Criteria	Met by our proposal	Section
A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	**Yes,** four councils replacing 15 based on existing district / unitary footprints (County, two unitary authorities and 12 districts). Our proposal respects, so far is practicably possible, the way Greater Essex functions economically, aligning with four key growth corridors for the county	3 **Best4Essex** Proposal
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	**Yes,** Council populations range in size between 325k and 640k; between 100 and 500 square miles; service budgets (expressed at 2025/26 levels) ranging from £440m to £915m. These are substantial sums that enable the localities to achieve economies of scale while remaining responsive to resident's needs.	7 Financial appraisal
Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	**Yes,** we set out how the proposal will deliver better outcomes for Greater Essex's citizens, the plans to seize opportunities for improvement and innovation during- and post-transition and doing so within a sustainable financial envelope for each council.	9 Service delivery considerations
Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	**Yes,** some working and community practices already in place between the likes of Southend and Castle Point, Thurrock and Basildon, Brentwood and Rochford, Epping and Harlow, Braintree and Colchester. Historically there has been joint working between Colchester and Tendring such as the Garden Community. This **Best4Essex** proposal expands those natural and already key alignments.	5 Resident and stakeholder views
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.	**Yes,** strong local leadership with close alignment across the four councils and wider public services will support engagement with the MCCA. Proper placed based approach will help deliver the core ambitions of devolution (strategic planning, investment, public health, infrastructure, environment etc.)	10 Leadership and governance
New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	**Yes,** with clear proposals for area-based arrangements; community voice and empowerment; local coordination of services and partnership working; appropriate democratic representation and accountability, and strong engagement with town and parish councils, whilst introducing new inclusive representative democratic structures such as citizens assemblies and reference panels.	10 Leadership and governance

Table 1.4 Meeting Government criteria

Financially viable

The main elements of sustainability for consideration are:

- Efficiencies from re-organising councils
- Funding gaps - the ability of income (through council tax, commercial rates and central government funding) to match local authority expenditure
- Debt - the current level of debt, and the ability to service that debt
- Future prospects - expectations for future matching of income and expenditure in the light of demographic change.

In making our assessment of efficiencies, we have drawn on a variety of sources, including Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) modelling and People too benchmarks for social care. Calculations show that:

- The **Best4Essex** unitary proposal presented herein is a sound financial proposition, with a payback period which adjusts PWC analysis for local condition of 4.5 years, again providing an effective balance between the shorter payback period of the 3 unitary option, but which does not compensate for the lack of local connection, and the 5 unitary option that does not achieve payback within the PWC modelling timeframe.

In terms of debt, with the strong proviso that the debt position of Thurrock needs to be managed carefully by central government to enable a sustainable solution to be found, analysis from a study commissioned from CIPFA indicates:

- No major barriers to any proposed unitary options
- Higher-debt authorities have strong investment property portfolios exceeding their General Fund debt
- Debt profiles are broadly consistent, though further analysis is needed on the sources of debt and refinancing risks
- Financial sustainability concerns are moderated by new unitary proposals.

Aligned with public service partners

Our proposal builds on recognised community footprints already used by our public (section 10.4) and third sector partners for planning and engagement, though these aren't yet formalised into a single framework. Where geographies do not align, we will adopt best in class practices around data sharing and developing cross boundary working practices and cultures. Our proposed unitary design can adopt existing and trusted geographies for public engagement, coordination and efficiencies in service delivery, and data reporting. Building on Safer Neighbourhood Areas, Integrated Care Board, Health Alliance or Primary Care Networks (PCN) footprints, and aligned with the proposed electoral divisions, this will ensure that local voice and service targeting won't be lost in transition.

Locally engaged and accountable

We have used the Boundary commission's recommended geography to model future councillor numbers, which is based on 95 electoral divisions across Greater Essex: 78 on the current Essex County Council geography, and 17 across the existing unitary councils of Thurrock (8) and Southend (9). Applying the maximum number of three councillors per division - as advised by the Electoral commission results in a total of 285 councillors across the four new unitary authorities:

New Unitary	Electorate	Divisions	Total Councillors (3 per division)	Electorate per Councillors	Councillors per 10,000 electorate
North Essex	381,238	25	75	5,083	1.97
West Essex	237,804	17	51	4,663	2.14
Central Essex	317,800	22	66	4,815	2.08
South Essex	462,523	31	93	4,973	2.01
Greater Essex	1,399,365	95	285	4,910	2.04

Table 1.5
Councillor numbers - Summary

These 285 councillors will serve Greater Essex's 1,399,365 electors at a ratio of 1 for every 4,910 electors and 2.04 per 10,000 electors. These are broadly comparable with recent unitary councils: Somerset (4,898 proposed) and North Yorkshire (5,390). This modelling illustrates the four proposed unitary councils are at the right scale and viable and sustainable in terms of arrangements for local democratic representation and to facilitate an effective and efficient Leader and Cabinet System form of governance and scrutiny function, whilst enabling local democratic leadership and representation through new Neighbourhood Area Committees that focus on the important hyperlocal issues.

Resident voice, community and neighbourhood empowerment are at the heart of this proposal. There is acute understanding of the perception that reduced numbers of local representatives will affect local democracy negatively. This is not based in evidence and providing a resident focussed co-design process to complement rapid early implementation will give opportunity to embed structures, governance and partnerships that will improve local democracy rather than create negative consequences.

We are proposing to establish neighbourhood arrangements for Greater Essex through an open co-design process, working with our strong partner ecosystem and residents to develop, co-design, test and embed ambitious arrangements implemented swiftly following vesting day to ensure that they provide clarity of purpose and function and are structured to ensure inclusive coverage, local flexibility, devolving real powers, funding and accountability.

1.4 | Coherent, Credible, Compelling and Best4Essex

We believe this proposal strikes the appropriate balance, for Greater Essex, between the local and the strategic; at the right scale to deliver, yet local enough to care

Solving the core design challenge

Best4Essex solves the core design challenge: create councils big enough to be financially resilient and deliver high-quality services, yet close enough to residents to protect identity, accountability and local voice. The four-unitary model aligns to Greater Essex's real economies and travel corridors, spreads transition risk, and enables reform without losing sight of place.

Best4Essex

Coherent
based on functional economic geographies

Credible
financially sustainable

Compelling
driving change and improving outcomes

Our proposal shows how it will achieve this in more detail. In doing so we have identified, and address, a number of challenges, including:

- meeting needs in both the short-term and long term
- being financially sustainable while delivering efficiencies and cost savings
- driving economic growth while improving local environmental quality
- providing services while strategically shaping places
- providing local accountability within a strategic decision-making framework

Best4Essex is the credible, deliverable option that meets every statutory test and aligns seamlessly with devolution. It offers the lowest delivery risk at the right scale, securing vital services, empowering neighbourhoods, and driving generational change. Building on existing partnerships and shared services, it combines scale with local insight, offering a simplified, resilient and responsive system of government that will deliver better outcomes and safeguard local identity for decades to come.

The Best4Essex proposal achieves this through the creation of four local authorities on a coherent geographical footprint that are fit for purpose, fit for place, and fit for the future.

Best4Essex **to deliver, local enough to care, and ready to begin.**

"Essex should be big enough to deliver, but still feel local to us"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **01 | Single tier local government -** Four unitaries replace two tier system

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government -** Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies

✔ **04 | Meets local needs -** Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience

✔ **05 | Supports Devolution -** Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment -** Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day

This section sets out the case for change in Greater Essex. It shows why the **Best4Essex** proposal is the right scale and design to tackle today's challenges and seize future opportunities, while aligning with the wider devolution agenda and a clear vision for the county's future.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Remote, over-centralised structures and the costly two-tier system.

What it delivers:

A single, clear model that ends duplication and stays close to communities.

2.1 | Greater Essex now

Greater Essex is a place of variety. Coastal towns and estuaries. Historic market centres. Commuter suburbs that touch London's edge. On the surface, it's a story of success: good public services, resilient communities, productive local economies. Look closer and you see the unevenness, pockets of deprivation, deep inequalities, and a rising demand for support.

The county spans 3,670 km² and is home to 1.83 million people. Three cities anchor it: Southend-on-Sea, Colchester, and Chelmsford. Basildon is the other major urban centre. The south is densely settled; in the north, beyond Colchester and Chelmsford, the land is more rural in nature.

Essex is low-lying, its 562-mile coastline the longest of any English county, shaped by estuaries of the Stour, Colne, Blackwater, Crouch, and Thames. Ancient woodland such as Epping Forest marks the South-West, while Dedham Vale in the north-east blends into

Suffolk. The London Green Belt reaches into the south, where more prosperous commuter towns mix with post-war new towns like Basildon and Harlow originally built to house London's overspill, now significantly grown.

It is a county of contrasts - visible in the statistics as well as the stories. High income commuter zones and innovation hubs sit alongside places where opportunities are scarcer. Education and connectivity open routes to prosperity, but differences in investment, skills, and confidence shape how far people can travel along them. Life expectancy can vary by up to nine years between the most and least deprived parts of Essex. In some coastal and urban wards, residents spend a third of their lives in poor health, compared with under a fifth in more affluent commuter towns. ONS wellbeing data shows lower reported happiness and higher anxiety in Thurrock and Tendring, alongside lower employment rates and fewer skills

qualifications. These disparities underline the case for four councils with the scale to sustain services, and the local focus to respond to their distinct community identities. shows lower reported happiness and higher anxiety in Thurrock and Tendring, alongside lower employment rates and fewer skills qualifications. These disparities underline the case for four councils with the scale to sustain services, and the local focus to respond to their distinct community identities.

3,670 km²

1.83 million people

563-mile coastline

Greater Essex as a place

Uttlesford (93,594)

Braintree (159,957)

Colchester (196,998)

Tendring (153,207)

Harlow (96,040)

Chelmsford (185,278)

Epping Forest (135,975)

Maldon (68,327)

Brentwood (78,152)

Basildon (190,544)

Rochford (88,188)

Southend (182,271)

Thurrock (178,201)

Castle Point (89,858)

● Essex County Council, District & Borough Councils

● Unitary authorities within Greater Essex

(Population in mid-2023)

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Figure 2.1 Greater Essex as a place

1,896,590
Population in mid-2023

1,967,306
Forecast population in 2030

19.1%
Aged 0-15 in 2023

18.3%
Forecast 0-15 in 2030

20.0%
Aged 65+ in 2023

22.2%
Forecast 65+ in 2030

4.0%
Of LSOAs in the most deprived decile

11.7%
Of LSOAs in the least deprived decile

£50,818m
Gross Value Added (2022)

2.6%
Of English GVA (2022)

1
County Council

12
District and Borough Council

2
Unitary authorities

696
Local Council electoral seats

£1.86 billion
Budget revenue expenditure in 2024/25 (excluding education)

2.9%
Of total net revenue expenditure by English local authorities (excluding "Other" authority types)
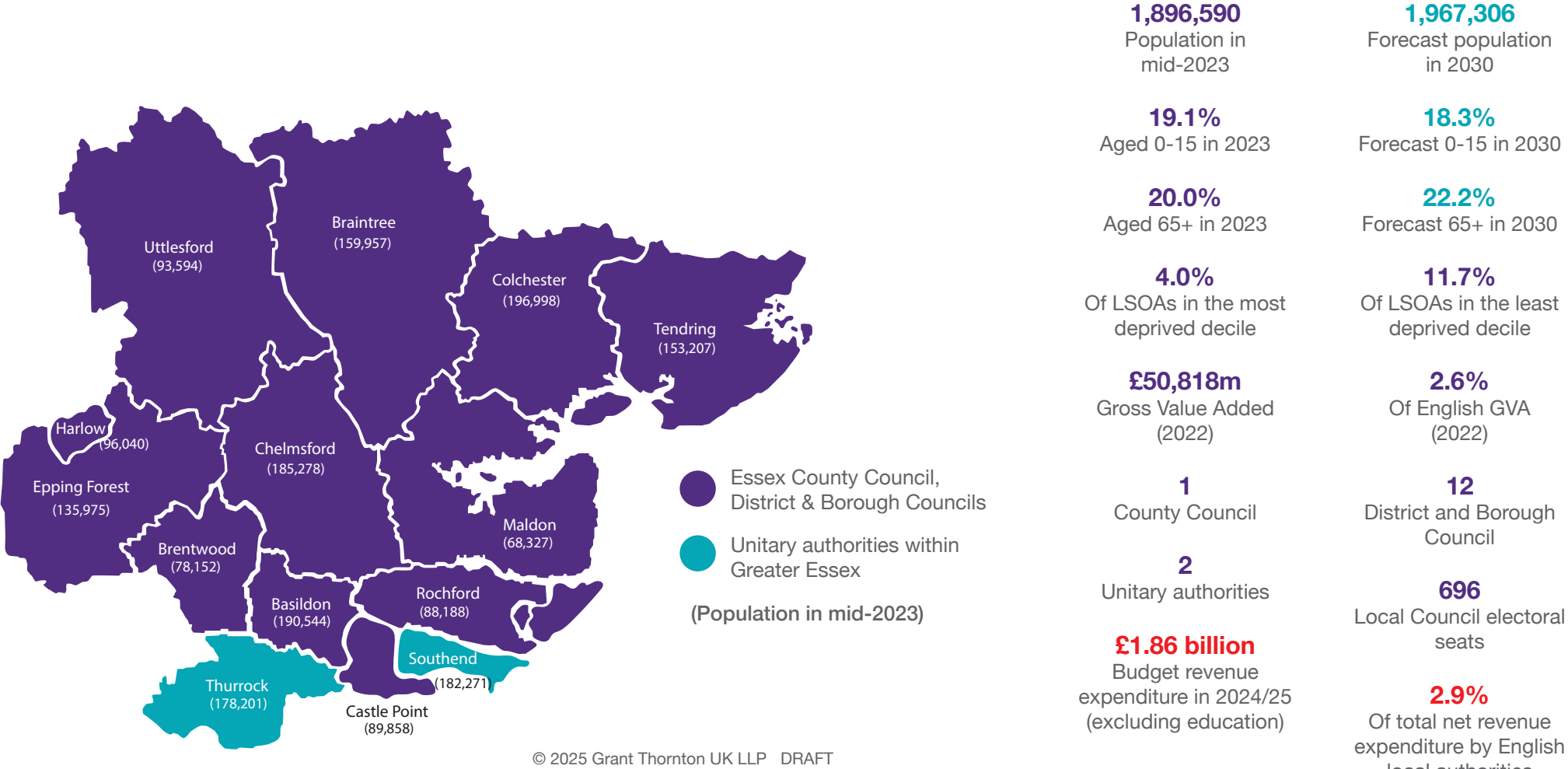
Essex holds real economic potential. International airports, Freeports, Strategic transport links. Some of the UK's best schools and universities. Plans for new Garden Communities. A £50bn economy connected to creative industries and innovation. But structural challenges remain. Long-term deprivation that limits life chances. Low productivity in some sectors. Health gaps between communities. Strains on coastal economies. The impact of climate change. Infrastructure under pressure. Public services perform well but face growing sustainability risks.

Demographics and Connectivity
With 1.8 million residents, Essex is England's seventh most populous county. The south lies within the London commuter belt, home to high incomes and affluent communities in places like Epping, Brentwood, and Chelmsford.

Economy and Employment
GDP was around £43 billion in 2021, 2.2% of England's total. Unemployment sits at 3.8%, below the national average. Wholesale and retail employ the largest share of the workforce, followed by construction, transport, and professional services. The proportion in higher-skilled roles remains lower than national and regional levels.

Wages and Education
Median weekly pay is £784, with an average hourly rate of £20.10 both above England's averages. Yet only 35.5% of working-age adults hold a degree, compared with 43.2% nationally.

Regional Contrasts
Chelmsford and Harlow combine strong industry with well-educated workforces. Elsewhere, deprivation is entrenched. Jaywick in Tendring is among the most deprived communities in southern England. In Thurrock, infrastructure gains such as Tilbury port expansion sit alongside frustration over perceived political neglect.

Education and Innovation
The University of Essex is a key driver, with campuses in Colchester, Southend, and Loughton. Its Knowledge Gateway research park supports more than 50 start-ups. But it faces financial pressures, with international student enrolments down 38% following policy shifts.

Social Mobility
Overall, Essex sits mid-range on measures of childhood opportunity, innovation, and life prospects though it performs better on youth labour-market access.

It is within this context that our proposal for unitary local government across Essex sits. We believe it creates four authorities that are the most appropriate to respond to these challenges, challenges that show up differently in the north, south, west and heart of Essex.

2.2 | Drivers of change

New unitary local authorities must not only be designed with a nod to the history and culture of the communities and places that make up Greater Essex, nor as a response to the challenges and pressures of today, but also with a focus on the needs of future generations. There are a range of challenges arising from change at a global, national, regional and local context, as the following figure[2] illustrates.

Figure 2.2 Trends and Drivers of Change

Enviromental crisis	Ageing and diversifying population	Power changes	Centrality of technology	The future of the economy	Potential 'wild-card' disruptors
Climate crisis	Higher life expectancy and ageing population	Move to poly-nodal world	Tech transforming production and, operating models	Massive wealth inequality	Financial crises
More extreme weather phenomenon	Declining birth rates	Decline of US as global hegemon	Increasing ubiquity of AI, automation and 'big data'	Shift of economic power away from the Global North	Global pandemics
Limited resource availability	Urbanisaiton and population concentration	Resurgence of nationalism and autocracy	New forms of medical technology	New structures of work including 'gig-work' and zero hour contracts	Energy transition
Soil degradation	Increased migration, especially climate-based	New social movements	Increased prevalence of genetic engineering and synthetic biology	Growth of the circular economy	Revolts and regime change
Decreased biodiversity	Stronger role for women	Rise of disinformation	Cheaper renewable energy	Post-materialism and on-demand service models	Limitations of institutional power
Shift to low carbon societies	Increased health comorbidities	Cultural divergence and polarisaiton eg young/old; rural/urban; wealth/poor etc	Cyber-security	Global (white colar) organised crime	
New forms of protein and sustainable food sources	Generational handover				

The new authorities must have both the scale and the local connection and responsiveness to effectively respond to these challenges. We believe the **Best4Essex** proposal achieves this balance.

[2] https://docslib.org/doc/3094608/a-stitch-in-time-realising-the-value-of-futures-and-foresight

2.3 | Greater Essex and its communities, 2040

By 2040 Essex's population will be over 2m; the 15,000 babies[3] born in the county in 2024 will be eligible to vote for their representatives on their local council. The MCCA will have embedded alongside four unitary councils and together they have been actively shaping the future of greater Essex since their inception in the late 2020s.

The four local authorities are recognised nationally for the vision of their place leadership, the cohesion and sustainable development of their communities, the support they provide to the more vulnerable in society and the overall quality of their services. They are, individually and collectively, setting the standard for organisational and operational effectiveness as well as collaboration across and between the broad range of different public and third sector organisations.

Working coherently with the MCCA to both influence and help deliver the broader strategic ambitions for Greater Essex, they are respected and valued by their citizens and seen as an exemplar of what can be achieved by councils that effectively bridge the gap between understanding and responding to the needs of their local communities on the one hand, and strategic influence, decision making and delivery on the other.

Since their inauguration they have been working as a custodian of place and catalyst for change, delivering outcomes that matter for local people - a vibrant economy; safe, affordable and high quality places to live; connected communities; people living independently and with dignity;

children and young people that are safe and able to thrive; better health all through collaboration and partnerships across the public and third sectors. They represent a local government that is responsive to local needs as well as future ambitions with local accountability, engagement and voice at its heart.

And yet our proposal is more than lines on a map; we believe it is the configuration most likely to deliver on such a vision. It brings together existing councils into four new unitary areas are bound by common characteristics and which share common challenges. It enables each council to develop the expertise and specialisms needed to respond to the specific challenges they each face: from rural isolation in North Essex to the focus in South Essex on growth in the Thames Gateway; from infrastructure and inclusive growth in West Essex to the sustainable development of rural and estuary landscapes in the Central Essex.

We provide a more detailed overview of these four councils, and their alignment to Government criteria, in the next section.

[3] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/query/asv2htm

2.4 | Local Government Stewarding Change

The map of Greater Essex was last redrawn in 1998 when the boroughs of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock were separated from the administrative county of Essex and became unitary authorities. Since then, the two-tier system of local government has remained across the rest of Essex, with twelve districts and the County Council.

We now have an opportunity to consider LGR and devolution in parallel, a unique and possibly once in a lifetime chance to fundamentally rethink the local state for Essex. We must ensure our proposals work not only for today's citizens, but also for our future generations.

The new Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) will strengthen the ability of Greater Essex to focus on place-shaping and making. The well-being and sense of agency of our residents and communities depend on our ability collectively to shape the places where people live.

The MCCA will have the tools to effect this change at scale in a meaningful way driving inward investment and economic benefits through scale and in the areas that will have the most impact on people's future prospects – their ability to access the skills they need for good jobs; our ability to attract employers into Greater Essex to provide those jobs; an effective transport network to enable people to access jobs and a housing and planning system that creates the space for businesses and communities to grow.

The new local authorities in our proposal will be well placed to work as constituent authorities of the new MCCA alongside the Directly Elected Mayor and have the scale and expertise to effect this change based on local knowledge and connection with their communities, helping improve the quality of people's lives as they go about their day-to-day business and drive improved public services as the key delivery vehicles. New authorities that will be at the right scale to deliver and make a difference, small enough to care.

Our aim through our proposal is twofold: to derive the maximum benefit from a strategic institution focused on driving the economy of Greater Essex and securing growth, and to underpin the MCCA with local government organisations which understand their communities and that have the scale and agility to both deliver efficient critical services and work collaboratively at a local level to address local needs.

It is therefore vital that proposals for unitary local government nest comfortably within this strategic picture. As we will see in future sections, there need to be enough unitary councils to cover Essex at a sensible geography that enables them to be locally responsive yet sustainable, and not so many as we revert to a fragmented picture that might undermine collaboration and strategic engagement.

We are keen to make the most of the strategic capacity and capability that the new Mayoral institution can bring alongside ambitious new local authorities that cover coherent geographies that are recognised by local people and communities.

We believe the Best4Essex proposal achieves this.

2.5 | Shaped by core design principles

New unitary local authorities must be designed in a way that can realise this vision. To achieve this, and address these drivers of change, any proposal must meet some core principles alongside the Government's criteria.

We've identified ten design principles.

	Design Principles	A proposal must
01	Provide best value for taxpayers	Enable the best possible service quality and outcomes
02	Generate efficiencies and innovations	Enable efficiencies, service improvements and new ways of working
03	Be based on coherent social and economic geographies	Be based on communities that make sense to how people lead their lives
04	Drive local economic and housing growth	Enable local places to be shaped and developed in line with their future needs
05	Create councils that are experts in their local communities	Ensure service delivery is informed by local knowledge and responds to local needs and demands and not too remote to create a disjoint between local democracy and communities
06	Deliver strong, quality public services	Enhance system-wide collaboration across public services
07	Deliver what matters most to local people	Enable the views and priorities of local people to be heard and addressed
08	Have clear accountability and representation	Have clear, accessible local accountability and democratic representation for local people
09	Support devolution to a sensible sub-council geography	Identify opportunities for local delivery and coordination of services
10	Be based on local identity and culture	Reflect the cultural and historical fabric of Essex and its communities retaining that local identity

Table 2.1 Core design principles

In addition, each new local authority created through this process must be:

- based on coherent places that work in practice
- the right size for efficiency and transition
- designed for service sustainability
- based on a proven appetite to work together
- ready for devolution, not just reorganisation
- based on community-driven bottom-up priorities, not bureaucratically designed top-down solutions

We have adopted these principles in the development of this proposal and will continue to use them as our North Star, guiding the establishment of the new unitary authorities. They provide the shared direction and discipline we need to ensure the transition is safe and legal from day one, transformative in the first year, and sustainable for the long term. In doing so, we are setting a clear course for stronger, simpler and more resilient local government that will endure for future generations.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

02 | Case for Change

R9: Risk of disruption to cross-boundary relationships with Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Suffolk.

Part 1

The Best4Essex Unitary Proposal

"We want councils that work for us, not distant structures we don't recognise"

MHCLG Criteria:

- ✔ **01 | Single tier local government** - Four unitaries replace two tier system
- ✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government** - Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies
- ✔ **04 | Meets local needs** - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience
- ✔ **05 | Supports Devolution** - Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)
- ✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment** - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day

This section sets out the **Best4Essex** proposal in detail. It explains the geography and socio-economic profiles of the four unitary authorities, the design principles that shaped the model, and why this configuration offers the strongest and most deliverable solution for Greater Essex. The proposal is tested against the Government's core criteria and shown to be the preferred option when compared to alternatives.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Fragile constructs that create too many small authorities, or unworkable variants that cannot be delivered

What it delivers:

The only configuration that meets every test and is deliverable on time with an effective future resilience-based approach

3.1 | Shaping Essex for the next generation

We believe, as do our residents and stakeholders (section 5), that this four-unitary authority proposal is the best option for Essex, its people, places and environment, not only now but also into the future. This option is positioned as an alternative to the five unitary, Thurrock led four unitary and the three unitary models that are also being submitted to government. It seeks to balance strategic capacity with strong local representation, aiming to create sustainable councils capable of delivering high quality services and contributing effectively to the wider Greater Essex system.

Our proposal, shaped around local priorities and identities, creates four new unitary councils that are based around local communities and cultures that make sense to local people and the ways they lead their lives. This enables each council to

- provide coherent and accountable responses to local needs and demands of people, communities and places.
- develop and hone their specialisms in tackling distinct local social, economic and housing challenges.
- deliver quality services that represent value for money to local taxpayers and be financially sustainable.

Figure 3.2 Best4Essex unitary proposal based on existing council footprints

- drive innovation and reform across the public and third sectors that generate better outcomes for local people.

Our analysis results in four councils that are coterminous with existing boundaries and are aligned in ways that make sense for the ways local people lead their lives, as illustrated below.

3.2 | Unitary profiles

Below is an overview of the characteristics of the four proposed new councils, which in turn shows that they largely meet Government guidance around population size. In a county such as Essex with a large rural component, we must also be cognisant of geographical size of each proposed council, as this affects service delivery.

New Unitary	Covers existing council areas	Population 2023	Descriptor	Core strengths
Central Essex	Brentwood Chelmsford Maldon Rochford	419,945	A balanced mix of market towns, coastal communities, and commuter hubs, with proven joint service delivery between Rochford and Brentwood. Positioned to lead on growth corridors and integrated transport, while protecting rural character. (Add population, GVA, and service baseline here).	• Sub-500k "pathfinder" size, still sustainable • Proven joint services foundation • Capable of integrated planning for commuter demand, flood resilience and balanced growth
North Essex	Braintree Colchester Tendring	510,162	Unites coastal regeneration priorities with Colchester's city economy and Braintree's logistics/manufacturing base. Key growth alignment of the cross boundary new garden settlements. Significant potential to drive cross-border economic growth with Suffolk while improving coastal health outcomes.	• 500k+ population • Strong economic complementarity. • Potential to drive cross-border growth with Suffolk and improve coastal health outcomes
South Essex	Thurrock Basildon Castle Point Southend on Sea	640,874	Combines a major employment hub (Basildon) with Southend's city status and Castle Point's heritage, history and community focus. Well-placed to lead skills and housing growth on the Thames Estuary corridor.	• Largest unit (~640k) but still within MHCLG range • Clear functional economic corridor • Well placed to lead housing, regeneration and skills across the Estuary
West Essex	Uttlesford Harlow Epping Forest	325,609	Harnesses Harlow's innovation district, new shared settlements on the Herts border and emerging life sciences cluster with Uttlesford's strategic links to the vibrant Cambridgeshire economy and it's wider rural hinterlands and Epping's strategic London-Essex link. Can deliver on health tech, aviation, and green belt stewardship. Also connected by an existing delivery partner in the UK Innovation Corridor.	• Sustainable at ~325k population • Clear transport and functional economic links • Capable of delivering on health tech, aviation and Green Belt stewardship.

Table 3.1 New unitary council profiles

We summarise each of the four councils in turn.

Central Essex | Maldon, Chelmsford, Brentwood and Rochford: a new connected heart for Essex

Our model proposes a new unitary authority comprising Chelmsford, Maldon, Brentwood and Rochford.

Uniting the historic riverside charm of Maldon, the dynamic city status and economic engine of Chelmsford, and the rural–coastal character of Rochford with the thriving commuter hub of Brentwood, this authority will be the civic and economic heart of Essex. It builds on the proven joint working between Rochford and Brentwood in regulatory and back-office services, offering a ready-made platform for integration. Chelmsford's role as the county's administrative and cultural centre provides a natural anchor for policy leadership, while Maldon's heritage coastline and visitor economy bring unique environmental and tourism opportunities. Together, these areas form a balanced and sustainable unitary with the scale to deliver county-wide responsibilities effectively and the local identity to engage communities in shaping their future.

This council will specialise in leveraging its connections to drive growth and meet local need: from Maldon and a focus on tourism and coastal management in the east to Brentwood and its road and rail connectivity into London in the West; connecting the more urban and densely populated south with the more rural north, through the (former) county town of Chelmsford. It will leverage its strengths in professional services, advanced manufacturing, tourism, and rural/coastal industries to ensure that its citizens receive the services they need.

North Essex | Colchester, Tendring and Braintree – Driving growth from Coast to country

Our model proposes a new unitary authority comprising Braintree, Colchester, Tendring.

This unitary brings together the city of Colchester, with its rich history and university-driven innovation, the market-town enterprise of Braintree, and the coastal economy of Tendring. With a combined offer of knowledge-based industries, thriving high streets, and tourism potential, it will be a growth engine for the north of Essex. The shared infrastructure corridors and transport links to London and the Midlands create opportunities for joined-up planning and inward investment with the proposed new garden settlements which have already brought the councils together in working practices and shared growth ambitions and would build on this already solid foundation alongside the previous strategic planning geography and alignment with Suffolk through the Haven gateway Partnership much of which will have new relevance as sub regional spatial development is reintroduced through new MSAs. From the historic Colchester Castle to the vibrant coastal resorts, this council will have the scale, diversity, and strategic vision to strengthen the local economy while ensuring services meet the needs of both urban and rural communities.

This council will combine rural service delivery and the relationships between Colchester and the market towns with the rural villages with new and renewed focus on building collaborative cross boundary relationships and capitalising on new and existing economic strengths. It will seek to sustainably harness the economic opportunities of what was previously the Haven Gateway, and collaboration between Colchester and Tendring on Freeport East, collaborating with a new local government ecosystem and strategic ambitions in Suffolk, with a laser focus on agriculture and environmental sustainability, port and coastal economies and tourism.

West Essex | Harlow, Epping Forest and Uttlesford - Gateway to Essex and London

Our model proposes a new unitary authority comprising Uttlesford, Harlow, Epping Forest.

Strategically positioned at the interface between Essex, London, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, this unitary will leverage its location to maximise economic potential. Harlow's enterprise zones and life sciences cluster, the vibrancy of the shared functional geography of north Uttlesford with the vibrant Cambridge economy and Epping Forest's protected green space and heritage assets combine to create a diverse and sustainable offer with significant economic potential beyond its current configuration allows. As a gateway council, it will be ideally placed to secure investment, re- imagine cross boundary working at a strategic and local scale more efficiently to manage growth pressures from both the capital and Cambridgeshire and protect valued landscapes, while delivering strong local services that reflect the needs of fast-growing, mixed communities.

This council will specialise in sustainable growth nested in an innovation corridor that can effectively balance the sometimes-competing interests of new towns, housing growth, protected areas of green belt and ancient woodland, a growing international airport and strategic transport hub and the only motorway in Essex connecting into the London/Cambridge corridor. It will develop a hub-and-spoke service delivery model that focuses core services on the small pattern of towns and rural hinterland they are linked too whilst allowing space for sustainable growth, developing strategic relationships with the wider local government ecosystem and neighbouring areas to attract sustainable growth, talent and investment into Essex.

South Essex | Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend-on-Sea – a dynamic southern powerhouse

Our model proposes a new unitary authority comprising Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend on Sea.

Bringing together Southend's established unitary strength, Castle Point's rich heritage assets, and history and community-focused governance, Thurrock's port and logistics capacity, and Basildon's industrial and commercial base, this authority will be a powerful driver of opportunity in the south of the county. With a combined population and economic footprint that can support ambitious regeneration, transport improvements, and social infrastructure investment, it will be able to deliver at pace. This grouping blends urban vitality with strong local networks, ensuring that growth benefits residents and supports inclusive, resilient communities along the Thames Estuary.

This council will specialise in urban regeneration, leveraging its connections to London. It will address the unique challenges of providing services in more densely populated urban areas and tackling the socio-economic challenges of deprivation. At the same time, the connection that is the Thames will provide a focus for tourism, sustainable growth and expertise around coastal protection.

3.3 | Community, culture, history and identity

Essex offers a rare blend of scenic landscapes, centuries-rich heritage, educational excellence, strong community, affordability, excellent access to amenities, and easy connectivity to London. Essex has a little bit of everything, wrapped up in that unique Essex pride. Our four unitary proposal respects these traditions and variations of culture and identity across Essex. Over time, our public and third-sector services have been designed and evolved to address the contrasting needs of these communities.
Any work at any level must take some account of the social and community history that has led it to where it is and the challenges and opportunities that arise as a result.

Essex is clearly not a single, homogenous county. It is a patchwork of communities whose histories, economies, and identities differ sharply and vary across from coastal, rural, urban, environmentally protected areas and commuter belts. It is a county with a long and proud history. Boroughs like Colchester and Maldon maintain strong local heritage identities. Seaside towns such as Southend and Clacton have distinct socio-economic and cultural drivers compared to inland towns. The rural heartlands prioritise agricultural heritage, green space, and lower density living, with different infrastructure needs. Economically, the M11 corridor in the west ties communities to London and Cambridge; the east and south coast align with maritime and tourism sectors and central areas like Chelmsford serve as administrative, commercial, and retail hubs.

- **North Essex** has strong coastal and rural heritage, with Colchester and Tendring shaped by historic trade and tourism.
- **West Essex** is closely tied to the London commuter economy, especially around Epping, Harlow, and Brentwood, but retains rural market town character in Uttlesford.
- **Central Essex** blends the county's administrative and commercial hub with historic estuarial communities and agricultural hinterlands.
- **South Essex** has a strong urban-industrial identity linked to the Thames Estuary, with Basildon, Southend, and Thurrock sharing regeneration priorities but differing from the county's rural north.

3.4 | Headline population characteristics

The table below summarises some core data to present a pen portrait of the new councils. This shows that each council is of sufficient scale, in population and geographical terms, to effectively serve its communities, that each council has a fair balance of challenges and opportunities, and that they are each well-placed to develop their own specialities in service delivery.

Table 3.2 Core socio-economic data for each new unitary authority

New Unitary	Central Essex	North Essex	West Essex	South Essex
Population 2023	419,945	510,162	325,609	640,874
Population 2040	**450,120**	**557,999**	**340,225**	**704,969**
Size (miles^2)	395	495	391	100
Sparsity ratio 2023^	1,063	1,030	833	6,409
Dependency ratio	62.4%	64.1%	59.4%	58.7%
Population 65+	21.4%	22.3%	18.7%	18.0%
Life expectancy at birth (female)	83.9	82.9	84.3	82.8
Life expectancy at birth (male)	81.1	78.9	80.3	79.3
Least deprived	24.8%	5.7%	9.6%	8.6%
Most deprived	0.0%	6.0%	0.0%	7.0%
Gross value add	£12,476m	£11,492m	£9,404m	£17,446m
Employment rate	82.9%	72.8%	72.8%	78.5%
Annual housing target	3,316	3,431	2,607	4,114
Largest settlement Population^^	Chelmsford 110,507	Colchester 119,441	Harlow 82,059	Southend 175,547

^ citizens per square mile
^^ 2011 data | Source: Grant Thornton Additional Configurations for LGR in Greater Essex

3.5 | Benefits and strengths

The data demonstrates that the Rochford four-unitary model balances scale and viability: each council is large enough to sustain statutory services but small enough to remain close to residents and local identities.

Core benefits

This option is best for	Because the Councils are big enough to...	And small enough to...
Essex	Collaborate effectively on scale for the benefit of the whole of Essex and the region	Retain, celebrate and enhance local identity, culture and history
Citizens	Drive local inclusion and build real democratic representation for Essex	Care about, understand, and respond to their citizens needs and diverse voices
Communities	Ensure strategic decisions benefit communities and the Council area as a whole and create real collaborative structures from strategic through to grass roots	Ensure strong community voice and effective engagement mechanisms through neighbourhood community assemblies
Businesses	Support specific sectors and respond to collective needs to join up strategic local growth plans with national priorities and renewal	Deliver localised support for business growth, building on strengths and supporting real local needs and innovation
Services	Deliver high quality, VFM services with resilience and a demand management focus	Ensure those services are responsive to local need and for those who really need them
The economy	Functional economic geographies that make sense to business, investment and infrastructure delivery	Tailor support for the local economy in each Unitary council area
Housing delivery	Align planning and housing growth to deliver a strategic approach to the homes local people need	Deliver homes that reflect the different local needs across Essex while being the crucial enabler of fixing the housing crisis.
Taxpayers	Be financially viable and resilient	Be accessible and connected to local people and local needs
Innovation	Have the capacity and capabilities to attract talent, design, integrate and test new ideas, technology and approaches to tackle vital local challenges	Ensure its public service reform agenda is informed by, and addresses, the real needs articulated by local people
Investment	Linked to Local Growth Plans and provide a coherent framing of opportunity areas for both institutional and inward investment	Bottom up local strengths and nuance can feed up to provide investable areas that will actually deliver

Table 3.3 Best4Essex Core benefits

MHCLG criteria – aggregate assessment

The Best4Essex proposal also meets the core criteria set by the government, as evidenced throughout our proposal:

Criteria	Met by our proposal	Strengths	Section
a. A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.	**Yes:** four councils replacing 15 based on existing district / unitary footprints (County, two unitaries and 12 districts)	The proposal is based on a clear, functional economic geography, enabling each new unitary, and the MCCA, to drive forwards growth that builds on the exiting ways people live their lives. Growth is based around the M11 innovation corridor capacity in West Essex, Thames Estuary regeneration in South Essex, and A12/A120 infrastructure in North Essex.	3 **Best4Essex** Unitary Solution for Essex
b. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.	**Yes:** Council populations range in size between 325k and 640k; between 100 and 500 square miles; with service budgets (expressed at 2025/26 levels) ranging from £440m to £915m.	Economies of scale are realised through integrated waste management, shared procurement frameworks, rationalised back-office services, and joint commissioning in health and social care. Existing collaborations (e.g., Rochford–Brentwood regulatory services, shared ICT platforms in Central-Essex, coastal regeneration consortia) demonstrate the capacity to reduce duplication while improving service quality. The financial model projects significant annual savings reinvested into frontline priorities.	8 Financial case
c. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens.	**Yes:** we set out how the proposal will deliver better outcomes for Essex's citizens, the plans to seize opportunities for improvement and innovation during- and post-transition and doing so within a sustainable financial envelope for each council.	Each grouping is focused on tangible service improvements: West Essex will integrate transport and housing delivery; North Essex will expand rural access to digital services and sustainable transport; East Essex will tackle coastal deprivation with targeted regeneration; South Essex will link health inequality reduction with housing and economic growth. Cross-boundary initiatives in flood resilience, skills development, and environmental management will ensure service improvements are immediate and visible.	10 Service delivery considerations
d. Proposals should show how councils in the area have sought to work together in coming to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views.	**Yes:** this proposal has been developed using shared data and intelligence. Some working and community practices already in place between the likes of Southend and Castle Point, Thurrock and Basildon, Brentwood and Rochford, Epping and Harlow Braintree and Colchester. This **Best4Essex** proposal expands those natural and already key alignments	The model delivers clear political and operational leadership through local civic engagement, neighbourhood arrangements, clear electoral accountability and governance. The new councils, collaborative bodies and MCCA representation will be formalised into the new governance structure, providing residents with a stronger, more accountable voice.	6 Resident and stakeholder views
e. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements.	**Yes:** strong local leadership with close alignment across the four councils and wider public services will support engagement with the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) through the four constituent authorities working effectively with the Directly Elected Mayor	The configuration is fully aligned with the MCCA spatial framework and economic plan: M25/M11 innovation corridor in West Essex; A12/A120 and London–Cambridge–Stansted corridor in North Essex; Thames Estuary growth hub in South Essex; coastal and environmental priorities in East Essex. Groupings are designed to dovetail with MCCA investment pipelines, allowing joint delivery of housing, infrastructure, and skills programmes from day one.	11 Leadership and governance
f. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment.	**Yes:** with clear proposals for area-based arrangements; community voice and empowerment; local coordination of services and partnership working; appropriate democratic representation and accountability, and strong engagement with town and parish councils.	Building on resident survey evidence, Beehive/NatCen focus groups, and partner engagement across Essex, initial engagement has helped shape priorities and inform this proposal, in which mechanisms for ongoing and deeper engagement are set out. This includes the creation of Neighbourhood panels or Committees within each of the proposed new unitaries.	11 Leadership and governance

Table 3.4 Meeting government criteria - in aggregate

We next review the fit of the Best 4 Essex model against the economic geography of Essex and the emerging views of residents and stakeholders, before providing an options appraisal, comparing this option with the others in development.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

03 | Headline Characteristics & Options Appraisal

R7: Judicial review or political opposition to configuration.

04 | Economic geography considerations

"Decisions made miles away don't fit the realities of where we live and work"

✔ **MHCLG Criteria:**

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government -** Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies

✔ **04 | Meets local needs** - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience

✔ **05 | Supports Devolution** - Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)

This section demonstrates that the **Best4Essex** proposal creates four coherent economic areas. Each unitary reflects established travel-to-work, housing and infrastructure patterns, with population sizes that fall within the Government's guidelines. This ensures the model is both economically functional and demographically sustainable.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Artificial economic units detached from where people live and work. Unsustainable without the ability to generate investment growth and financial resilience effectively.

What it delivers:

Functional economic areas that match how people live, and work, aligned with housing markets and infrastructure, maximising growth and levelling-up potential.

4.1 | Coherent Economic Areas

We believe that our proposal respects, so far is practically possible, the way Essex functions economically. Our starting point for insight is the "Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework 2016-2036" (2017), which provides a map of major housing and employment sites in Essex. Based on local authority data and assessments, it shows:

- Important lines of connection between Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford (notably the M11 motorway)

- Strong connections between Braintree, Colchester and Tendring in the form of A roads

- Good rail and road linkages between Brentwood, Chelmsford and Maldon, with Rochford positioned to developments both north (Chelmsford), and south (Southend-on-Sea)

- Strong connections in the form of rail and A road between Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point and Southend-on-Sea.

Legend

- Essex County
- Unitary Authority
- LA Boundary
- Surrounding County
- Waterbody
- Airport
- Port
- Motorway
- A Road
- B Road
- Railway
- Railway Station

Employment Site Floorspace (sqm)
- No Data
- < 2,500
- 2,501 - 10,000
- 10,001 - 25,000
- 25,001 - 50,000
- 50,001 - 150,000
- > 150,000

Housing Site Capacity
- 10 - 50
- 51 - 100
- 101 - 250
- 251 - 499
- 500 - 999
- 1000 - 1999
- > 2000

Total Housing Capacity by Ward
- 0
- 1 - 100
- 101 - 250
- 251 - 499
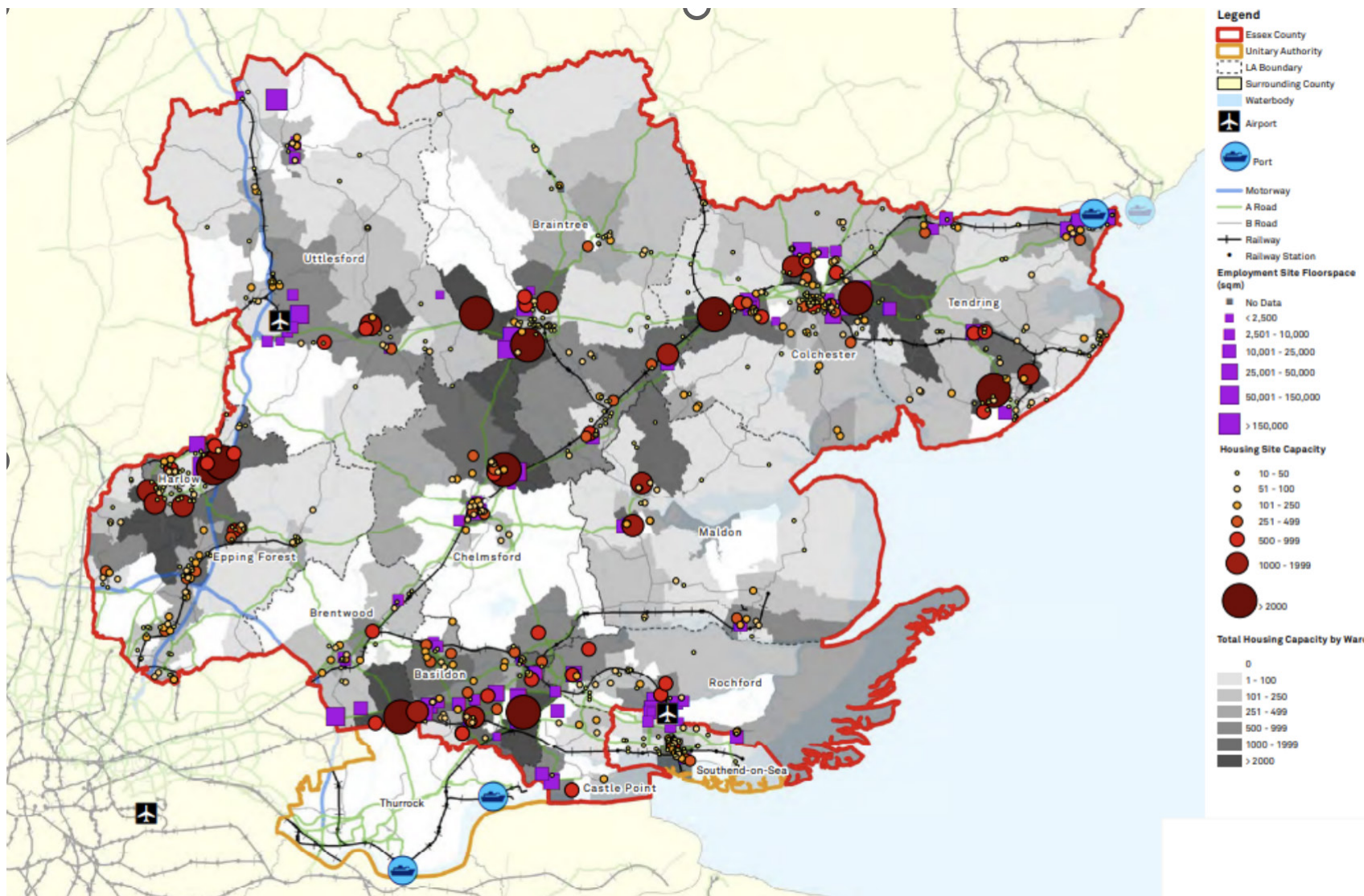- 500 - 999
- 1000 - 1999
- > 2000

Figure 4.1 Housing and employment capacity - Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework 2016-2036" (2017)

Transport infrastructure

This proposal is strengthened by a view of the transport infrastructure (fig 4.2) and railway links in Essex (Figure 4.3), taken from National Railway's London and South East map[4]. It shows:

- **West Essex** Links from Epping Forest (Roydon) to Harlow and Uttlesford (Stansted Airport)
- **North Essex** Rail lines between Braintree, Colchester, and Tendring
- **Central Essex** Rail lines between Brentwood, Chelmsford, Rochford and Maldon
- **South Essex** A southern rail line linking Thurrock (Tilbury Town) with Basildon, Castle Point and Southend.

Figure 4.2 Rail Infrastructure

Key travel to works patterns are reflected in economic growth areas for the county, as shown below, with a strong western corridor based around the M11 heading towards Cambridge for Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford; a northern cluster formed around the Haven Gateway for Braintree, Colchester and Tendring; a Great Eastern Mainline corridor for Brentwood, Chelmsford and Maldon; and an A13 and A127 corridor for Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point and Southend.

Legend
- Proposed Unitary Authority Boundaries
- Existing Authority Boundaries
- Railway
- Railway Station
- Motorway
- Primary Road
- Regional Road
- Airport
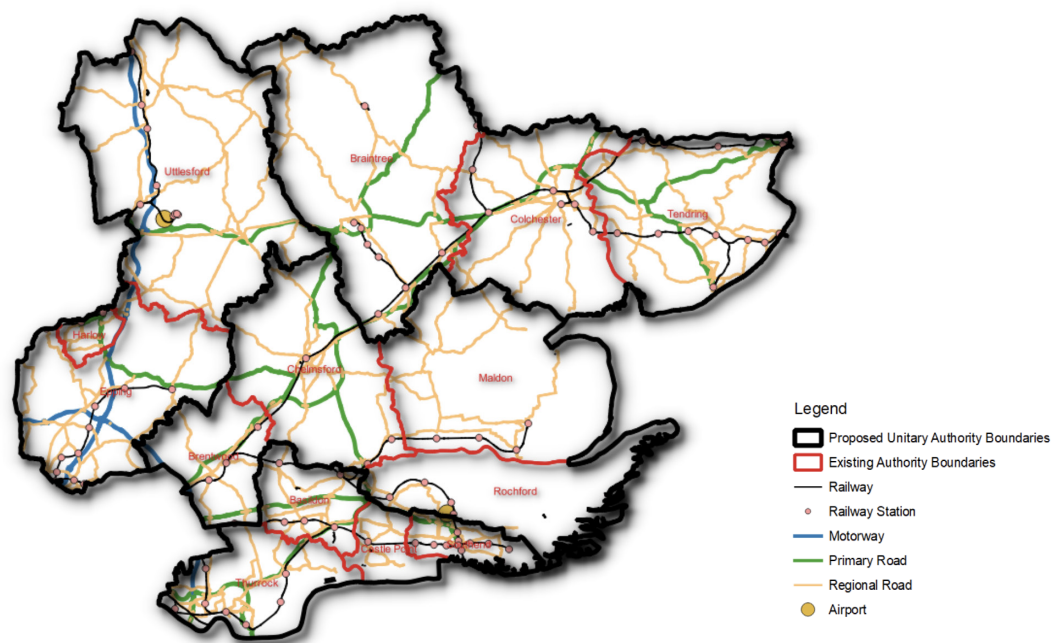
Figure 4.3 **Best4Essex** geography mapped to transport infrastructure

Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database rights 2025

[4] https://assets.nationalrail.co.uk/e8xgegruud3g/6r0rzYCSpaMX3OJ9aec9tq/6749aef0a7a8cf550ec9a7e92af2192/LondonSouthEast_NetworkRailcar_map_Feb25.pdf
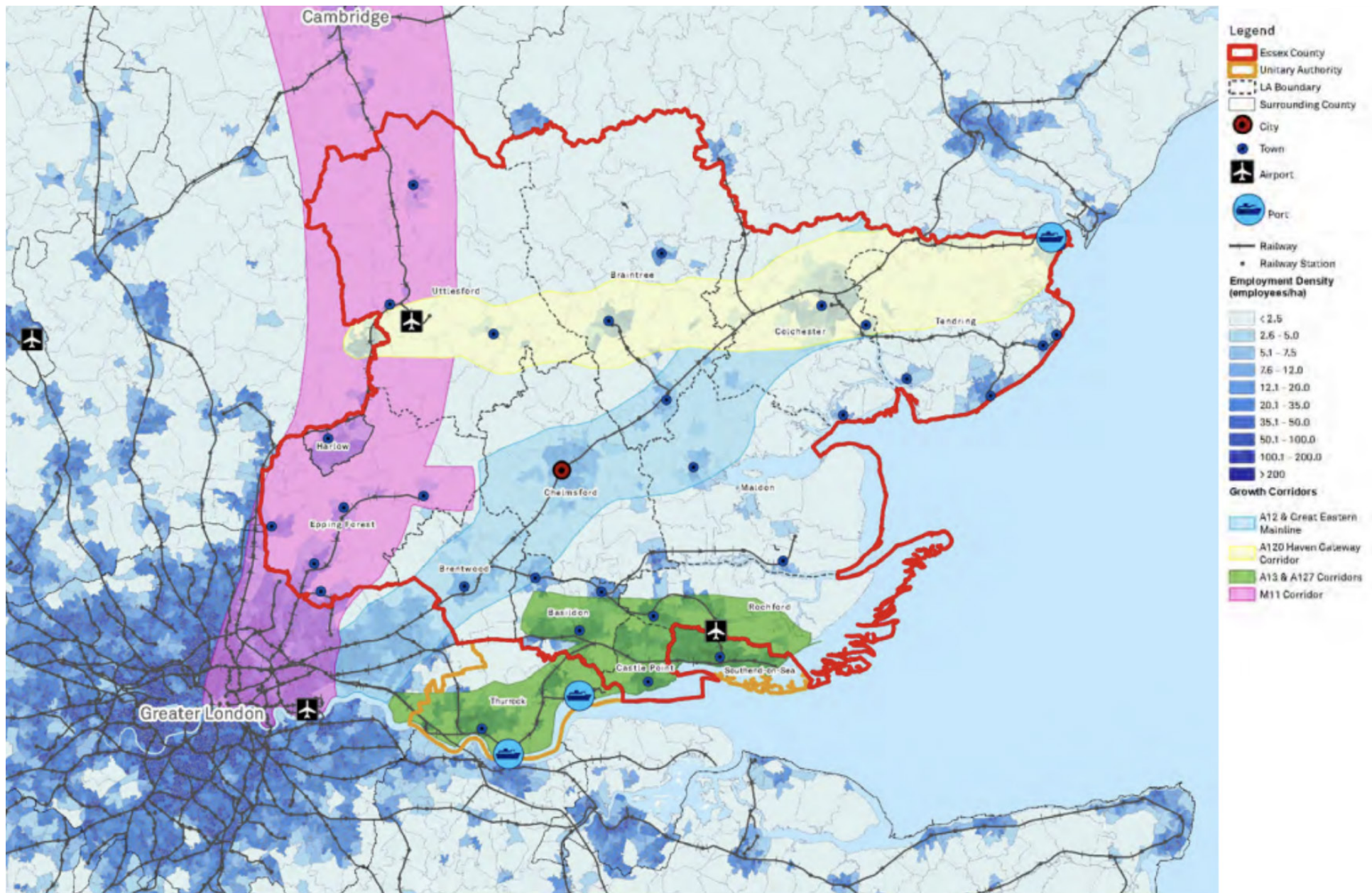
Figure 4.4 Economic growth corridors - Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework 2016-2036" (2017)

4.2 | Four unitaries, driving inclusive growth

It's not enough to drive economic growth, but local authorities must, so far as is practicable, ensure that growth benefits all communities and citizens in Greater Essex. At a local level, inclusive growth means[5] "an approach based on: deep understanding of local assets; connecting people to quality jobs; resourcing place regeneration as well as business investment; and helping businesses keep ahead ..."

This proposal builds on work already underway to help achieve inclusive growth in Essex, including:

Internalisation and Self-Containment:
- Districts such as Colchester (65%), Tendring (60%), and Southend-on-Sea (55%) have the highest levels of internalisation, meaning a large proportion of residents live and work within the same district. This suggests a relatively self-contained local economy and less pressure on inter-district commuting.
- In contrast, Epping Forest (26%) and Castle Point (29%) have the lowest internalisation, indicating more residents commute out of the district for work, often to London or neighbouring areas.

Out-Commuting to London:
- The highest levels of out-commuting to London are from Epping Forest, Brentwood, and Thurrock, reflecting their proximity and strong transport links to London. This outflow creates significant pressure on strategic transport corridors, especially rail and road routes serving these districts.

- Districts with strong London commuting patterns often face congestion at key junctions and railway stations, for example, congestion at M25 junctions 28 and 29 near Brentwood, and overcrowding at Shenfield rail station.

Cross-Boundary Movements:
- From northern districts like Braintree, Colchester, and Tendring, there is notable commuting into neighbouring counties such as Suffolk (2%). Similarly, Harlow and Uttlesford see significant travel to Hertfordshire (8%) and Cambridgeshire (2%), showing that economic and employment catchments extend beyond Greater Essex boundaries

Mode of Travel Variations:
- Car travel is the dominant mode across most districts (69%), especially in rural areas such as Uttlesford and northern Braintree where average commute distances exceed 22 km.

- Walking and cycling are more prevalent in urban centres like Southend-on-Sea (where 43% travel less than 5km to work), Colchester, and other towns, reflecting shorter distances and better infrastructure.
- Rail commuting is highest in districts close to London along the three main rail corridors (e.g., Epping Forest, Brentwood, Thurrock), with significant rail use for commuting into London.

Employment and Housing Growth Alignment:
- Districts with larger housing growth projections (e.g., Chelmsford, Braintree, Colchester, Basildon, and Epping Forest) also have significant travel-to-work catchments and require integrated transport planning to accommodate increased travel demand (see section 10).
- Employment growth sites are often located along key transport corridors (A12, A13/A127, M11), aligning with districts that have high commuting flows and transport infrastructure needs.

[5] https://www.thersa.org/reports/final-report-of-the-inclusive-growth-commission/

4.3 | Why the Best4Essex proposal is the best economic fit

Our proposed solution and community governance model recognises and respects these distinctions, rather than subsume them into an over-centralised structure.

- **West Essex** – Centred on Epping Forest, Harlow, and Uttlesford, this is a London-facing area shaped by M11 corridor growth and commuter flows. Yet beyond the transport hubs, it retains rural market towns and open landscapes, with planning and service needs distinct from urban South Essex.

- **North Essex** – Braintree, Colchester, and Tendring share strong rural and coastal heritage. Colchester's historic role as Britain's first city, Tendring's tourism-driven economy, and Braintree's manufacturing base create a different policy focus to the county's administrative core.

- **Central Essex** – Brentwood, Rochford, Chelmsford, and Maldon blend the county's political and economic centre with estuarial towns, agricultural hinterlands, and commuter settlements. This mix requires governance that can balance growth, heritage, and environmental stewardship.

- **South Essex** – Basildon, Southend-on-Sea, Thurrock, and Castle Point share a Thames Estuary identity, with industrial, maritime, and regeneration priorities. Their needs for infrastructure, housing, and health equality differ markedly from rural districts.

By grouping areas with shared cultural, economic, and geographic profiles, our four unitary model creates governance structures that are close enough to understand local needs but large enough to deliver strategic capacity. It ensures that West Essex's commuter towns, North Essex's rural and coastal communities, Central Essex's mixed economy, and South Essex's industrial estuary all have their own strong voice while still collaborating through a Combined Authority to address county-wide priorities.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

04 | Strategic & Economic Fit

R9: Risk of disruption to cross-boundary relationships with Herts, Cambs, Suffolk.

D5: Synchronisation with Essex MCCA.

05 | Resident and stakeholder views

"Keep services strong, finances stable, and decisions close to home"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **04 | Meets local needs** - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment** - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day

This section brings together the views of residents and stakeholders across Essex. Engagement through surveys, focus groups and research confirms clear priorities: protecting vital services, ensuring financial resilience, and maintaining strong local identity. These findings are reinforced by national comparators and provide the foundation for the Best4Essex model of community engagement and empowerment.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Ignoring resident priorities or repeating consultation fatigue.

What it delivers:

Services protected, finances resilient, identity respected.

5.1 | Resident engagement and views

Across Essex, local government reorganisation has been shaped not only by technical analysis but also by extensive public engagement. Since the start of the year, more than 8,000 residents have taken part in surveys, panels, and consultations. Their priorities are clear: protect vital services, respect community identity, ensure financial resilience, and keep decision making close to home. This section brings together those views. Engagement through surveys, focus groups and research confirms the same themes, reinforced by national comparators, and underpins the Best4Essex model of community empowerment. Best4Essex avoids ignoring resident priorities or repeating consultation fatigue. It delivers services protected, finances resilient, identity respected. Beehive focus groups (2025) found identity is overwhelmingly hyper-local, with pride rooted in towns, villages and parishes, and a strong desire for local control over planning, transport and amenities.

Beehive panels captured the essence in plain terms: **"Need to keep it local"** NatCen workshops reinforced this sentiment, with participants emphasising that "clear accountability matters more than structures."

NatCen workshops across Greater Essex showed priorities centred on safeguarding services, financial transparency, and maintaining local identity, with concerns that larger councils feel too remote. In a further county-wide survey (7,391 responses) reinforced this, showing that efficient use of council tax (99%), accountability (98%), and councillors' knowledge of the local area (97%) were rated as most important. Across Essex, over 70% of residents engaged by NatCen supported neighbourhood-level decision-making, echoing national feedback from other county reorganisations.

To complement this wider picture, a spotlight on the Rochford residents survey generated over 1,000 responses. The findings show that residents are not motivated by structural reform itself, but by the outcomes it can deliver. A clear majority (75%) said they would not have chosen to reorganise local government, with only 14% expressing strong support. Respondents consistently highlighted priorities around protecting crucial services, maintaining local identity, ensuring financial resilience, and supporting the introduction of Neighbourhood Area Committees, with more than 60% in favour. This aligns with the county wide picture, where Beehive and NatCen evidence showed consistent demand for councils that are closer, more accountable, and financially resilient.

The pairing of Rochford and Brentwood reflects these sentiments. Both areas share commuter-rural characteristics and existing service partnerships, and residents were clear that they should not be subsumed into a larger South Essex model dominated by more urban authorities. Respect for community identity has therefore already influenced the preferred configuration.

Taken together, these insights point to the idea that residents, like those in other counties, are primarily concerned with service delivery, financial viability, and local identity. The top four priorities from the Rochford survey were:

- Crucial services not worse off
- Maintaining local identity
- High quality and sustainable services
- Financial resilience
- The Rochford survey reflected similar views, with 44.9% strongly opposing a five-unitary option that grouped Rochford with Southend and Castle Point, as residents did not feel a natural affinity with that configuration, and 75.4% strongly opposing the three-unitary option that grouped Rochford with Southend, Castle Point, Basildon and Thurrock, which was seen as too distant from local identity and community ties. The Rochford survey identity questions also showed negligible affinity with Thurrock, with only 0.2% of respondents identifying links there.
- In contrast, there was clear support for Neighbourhood Area Committees, with more than 60% of respondents agreeing that these should be introduced to give communities a stronger local voice. Residents therefore want councils that are closer to communities, easier to engage with, and more accountable. These concerns mirror those expressed nationally in counties such as Surrey, Hampshire and Cumbria, where continuity of services, financial resilience, and protection of local identity consistently dominate public feedback.

People prefer local

The Essex LGR Resident Engagement Survey (July 2025) asked a representative sample of residents what they considered to be their "local area." The findings were clear:

- 63% saw their local town, city or village as their area
- 24% considered their district
- 8% identified the immediate area within a 5–10-minute walk
- Only 2% felt the whole of Essex was their local area

The message is unambiguous: residents strongly identify with smaller localities, not large administrative geographies. This reinforces the principle that local government reorganisation must work with the grain of people's everyday sense of place.

These insights add weight to this **Best4Essex** proposal, which is grounded in the socio-economic geography of Essex and deliberately shaped around coherent, mid-sized units. They also differentiate this model from alternative configurations that risk diluting local identity. To be effective in addressing challenges and shaping future places, the new councils must reflect how communities actually live and identify, and this proposal achieves exactly that.

Taken together, Essex-wide engagement highlights five consistent priorities:

- Continuity of statutory services, particularly safeguarding, social care and children's provision
- Financial resilience and sustainability, including concerns about stranded debt
- High quality services focused on prevention
- Respect for local identity and stronger neighbourhood empowerment
- Ongoing engagement and accountability, not one-off consultation exercises

These Greater Essex findings are consistent with national engagement on LGR. In Surrey, residents prioritised value for money (60%), clearer accountability (45%), and financial resilience (37%). In Hampshire, residents stressed continuity of services, protection of local identity, and stronger empowerment of parish and town councils. In Cumbria and North Yorkshire, residents highlighted safeguardingcontinuity, simple and accountable governance, and fair representation for rural communities. In North Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire, residents also stressed continuity of services and visible local accountability, reinforcing that Essex's priorities are consistent with areas where unitary reorganisation has already been successfully implemented.
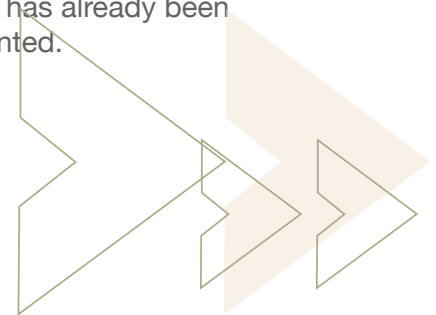
Essex resident Insights	National Views
High quality and sustainable public services (top priority)	Residents consistently prioritised strong services, safeguarding, prevention
Protect crucial services (social care, children's, SEND, homelessness)	Statutory services continuity emphasised in all counties (esp. social care and children's)
Financial resilience: strong concern about council viability	Financial resilience and strandaed debt issues; efficiency and sustainability
Maintaining local identity: district/town/village before county	Local identity and representation highlighted through community boards and parish empowerment
Neighbourhood committees: strong support for local voice	Expectation of ongoing engagement models, not just one-off consultation

Table 5.1 Mapping Essex insights with national views

These will be tested further ensuring every community has the opportunity to engage directly

5.2 | Stakeholder Engagement

Recent Essex wide research reinforces these perspectives. Beehive focus groups highlighted that residents and local stakeholders are concerned about losing access to decision makers if governance becomes too remote and placed high value on councillors who are visible and accountable in their communities. NatCen workshops found that partners across Greater Essex expect new councils to deliver simpler, more transparent governance, but cautioned that rural and coastal communities in particular must not be marginalised. Further consultation analysis activity identified efficiency, accountability and responsiveness as the top stakeholder concerns, with 29% of respondents explicitly opposing the 5UA model because it risked weakening local identity and partnership links.

This evidence builds on early and structured collaboration across Greater Essex through the Grant Thornton configurations work, where district councils jointly assessed options and worked together to shape viable configurations. While technical in nature, that process provided an important form of engagement between leaders and councils, reflecting a shared commitment to align proposals with community identity and partner perspectives.

Stakeholder expectations in Essex closely mirror those seen in other counties already on the reorganisation journey. Partners consistently emphasise the importance of continuity of services, particularly safeguarding and frontline provision, during transition. They highlight the need for financial resilience, stressing that new councils must avoid creating additional risks or costs. A further recurring theme is the need to protect local identity and place-based partnerships, ensuring that the relationships built with communities and voluntary organisations are not weakened under larger unitary arrangements.

In Essex, voluntary and community sector organisations underline the importance of maintaining close working relationships with councillors and officers, which are essential for supporting vulnerable groups and sustaining grassroots initiatives. Employers and service providers stress the need for clarity in contact points and decision making, to ensure residents continue to access services without confusion or delay. Staff groups across councils raise concerns about job security and the clarity of their roles, underlining the importance of regular communication throughout any disaggregation or aggregation process.

Lessons from other areas provide useful context for Essex:

- **Hampshire:** NHS, Police, and voluntary sector organisations emphasised clear service footprints, fewer points of contact, and stability in safeguarding services. Staff were particularly focused on job security and clarity of roles.
- **Surrey:** Partners stressed alignment withIntegrated Care Boards, Police, Fire, and voluntary networks. MPs and councillors highlighted stronger community empowerment and more visible representation at neighbourhood level.

These lessons highlight that, while geographies differ, stakeholder concerns are strikingly consistent. For Essex, it is reasonable to conclude that partners will prioritise:

- **Alignment across systems:** ensuring health, police, education, and voluntary sector partners can operate effectively within clear and consistent footprints
- **Simplicity of governance:** fewer points of contact and reduced duplication, not more layers of complexity
- **Fair representation:** guaranteeing that both rural and urban communities feel they have a voice and are not marginalised by larger units
- **Staff reassurance:** maintaining regular communication with the workforce to address concerns around job security, clarity of roles, and the implications of service disaggregation or aggregation.

As transition planning begins, these themes will continue to be tested and refined through active engagement with partners across Essex, including the NHS, Police, Fire and Rescue, education providers, voluntary and community organisations, and employers, to ensure their priorities are fully embedded in the design of new governance and service arrangements.

Further views from Stakeholders and Partners are set out in Annex 5.

5.3 | Community engagement: plans for the future

Local government reorganisation in Essex is more than structural reform. It provides a unique opportunity to design a system where residents, communities, and partners are fully empowered to shape decisions and services through principles of engagement, co-production and subsidiarity. We have already seen where people's views, and those of our stakeholders, can shape these plans. We view this not as a series of one-off 'set pieces' designed simply to meet the requirements of this process. Instead, through this process we will create a stronger, simpler model of local democracy where residents and communities are empowered to shape outcomes. Every town, village, and neighbourhood will have a voice, supported by councillors who are visible, accessible, and accountable. This vision also aligns with the ambitions of the future Mayoral Combined Authority (MCCA), ensuring that local voice is hard wired into both local and county wide governance structures.

We explore these in more detail in section 10 on leadership and governance, in which we set out our ambitions for neighbourhood governance and partnership working. A sub-council geography, on the principle of subsidiarity, enables each unitary to cascade both the delivery of and accountability for an agreed set of services to the community level. It is this level at which public engagement can really add value, closing the gap between the planning and delivery of services and those they are intended to benefit from certain local planning and licencing decisions to the allocation of discretionary grants and community assets.

The Essex community engagement model is also directly informed by what residents have already told us. **Across Essex, Beehive and NatCen research found strong appetite for neighbourhood level decision making, with residents consistently saying they**

want control over local infrastructure, planning and services taken closer to their communities. Further survey evidence showed overwhelming support for accountability and transparency as the basis of trust in new councils. Survey evidence shows that people want councils which are closer to communities, easier to engage with, and more accountable.

The strong support for neighbourhood committees in Rochford, alongside consistent Essex wide and national findings, demonstrates the appetite for stronger local voice and representation. **Taken together, this provides a countywide mandate to embed Neighbourhood Area Committees within the new unitary framework, ensuring visible, empowered and accountable structures from vesting day.** This engagement approach therefore builds on that evidence, translating priorities into a clear Essex wide framework.

Vision for community engagement in Essex

We intend to use Local Government Reorganisation to create a stronger, simpler model of local democracy where residents and communities are empowered to shape outcomes. Every town, village, and neighbourhood will have a voice, supported by councillors who are visible, accessible, and accountable. This vision also aligns with the ambitions of the future Mayoral Combined Authority (MCCA), ensuring that local voice is hard wired into both local and countywide governance structures.

To deliver this, Essex will adopt the following principles:

- **Neighbourhood empowerment:** councillor-led local leadership with devolved influence at the most local level.
- **Strong parish/town links:** working with existing community institutions as anchors of local democracy.
- **Prevention and resilience:** shifting focus from crisis intervention to long-term community wellbeing.
- **Transparency and co-production:** engaging residents openly and shaping services with them, not for them.

- **Test–learn–grow approach:** piloting community boards or committees in selected areas, learning from experience, and scaling up across Essex.

This approach reflects what residents across Essex have consistently asked for and is reinforced by lessons from Buckinghamshire and North Yorkshire, where area committees and community boards have been embedded to strengthen neighbourhood voice within new unitary structures

Essex Community Engagement Model – MCCA Aligned

These principles will be embedded in tangible arrangements that make engagement real and accessible for residents, with a consistent Essex wide framework that can be adapted locally. New councils will commit to:

- **Neighbourhood committees or boards**, providing collaborative spaces within the community that support engagement and dialogue on issues that matter most to local communities
- **Local committees/partnerships at appropriate footprints**, enabling collaboration across parishes, community groups and service providers, based on clusters of electoral divisions.

- **Inclusive engagement methods**, combining digital channels (online surveys, virtual forums) with in-person activities (public meetings, roadshows, community assemblies), and exploring with the MCCA Mayor the potential for a county-wide Citizens' Assembly.
- **Accessible communications**, ensuring participation by all groups, with offline options through libraries, community hubs and local newsletters.

Alongside these mechanisms, Essex proposes a layered model of engagement that connects community voice with both unitary delivery and the Mayoral Combined County Authority. By hard wiring this into new governance, Essex will demonstrate that engagement is not an afterthought but a countywide design principle.

The model is illustrated in the diagram below:

- **Outer ring (MCCA):** Sets county-wide strategy and convenes partners around the big levers of change..
- **Middle ring (Four Unitary Councils)**: Deliver statutory local government services at scale, ensuring resilience while staying responsive to community needs.
- **Inner ring (Neighbourhood level):** Neighbourhood boards bring residents and local partners into decision-making, linked to parish/town councils and the unitary authorities.

Best4Essex Community Engagement Model

Outer ring
MCCA - Strategic Layer

Middle ring
Unitary Councils
Service Delivery

Inner ring
Community Boards
Local Empowerment

Strategic transport & infrastructure
Economic growth & devolution
Housing & climate resilience
Skills & employment support
Environment & climate change

Adult & Children's services
Housing & homelessness
Waste, planning & environment
Culture & leisure
Public safety (links with Police & Fire)
Service level partnerships with
NHS / Schools

Parish & Town Councils
Residents' associations
Open resident forums
Voluntary & community sector
Education providers
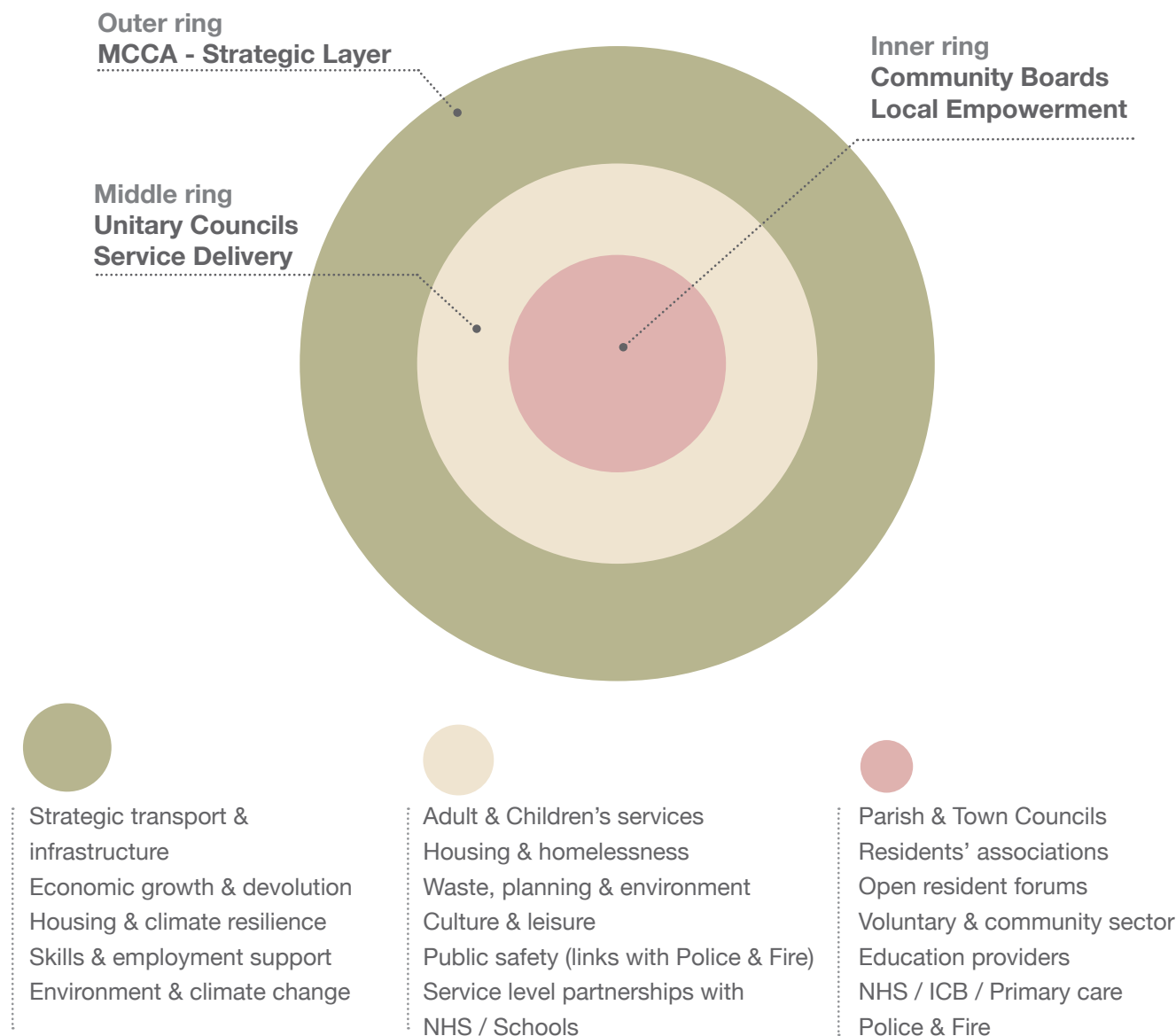NHS / ICB / Primary care
Police & Fire

Figure 5.1 Essex Community Engagement Model

This layered model reflects what communities across Greater Essex have consistently called for: stronger neighbourhood voice and empowerment, closer accountability, and councils that remain visible and connected. It draws on practice in Surrey and Hampshire, where neighbourhood boards and parish councils are embedded as the foundation of engagement. By adopting this approach, Essex will demonstrate that engagement is not an afterthought but a system-wide design principle, carried through into transition planning.

Building on strong resident support with over 60% of Rochford respondents backing Neighbourhood Area Committees, and hundreds citing service quality, protection of crucial services, and financial resilience as priorities Essex will ensure that Neighbourhood Area Committees are established consistently across all four new unitary authorities. These will be visible, empowered and accountable, with delegated responsibilities and clear links into both unitary governance and the Mayoral Combined County Authority.

Greater Essex will resource and sustain these arrangements as part of transition planning, drawing on lessons from Buckinghamshire, Somerset and North Yorkshire, where devolved budgets and area committees have strengthened local accountability. By embedding neighbourhood empowerment Essex will lead the way nationally in turning community engagement into a deliverable and highly effective governance model.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

05 | Resident and Stakeholder Voices

R6: Perceived loss of local identity and democratic voice undermines legitimacy

R12: Resident engagement fatigue through repeated consultations.

D10: NACs design must be co-designed and agreed before vesting to embed accountability.

Part 2
Appraisal

06 | Appraising the Unitary Options for Essex

"Some options just don't make sense for Essex, they're too big, too remote, or too fragile"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **01 | Single tier local government - Four unitaries replace two tier system**

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government - Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies**

✔ **04 | Meets local needs - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience**

✔ **05 | Supports Devolution - Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)**

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day**

This section appraises the main options for the future of local government in Essex. Each option is assessed against MHCLG criteria, including population scale, affordability, service resilience and governance. This analysis shows why the **Best4Essex** model performs most strongly overall and is the preferred option for delivering sustainable, accountable local government.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:
Box-ticking boundary comparisons

What it delivers:
Evidence led choice of the strongest model

6.1 | Why appraisal matters

Undertaking a structured appraisal is essential because as we have seen in previous sections, new councils have challenges to address and opportunities to seize. The challenge is to establish councils at an appropriate scale to build on strong city economies in Colchester, Chelmsford and Southend, as well as the patchwork of towns, on globally significant transport assets, innovation corridors and proximity to London. They must be local enough to understand and respond effectively to deep contrasts in wealth, health, and opportunity, address demographic pressures impacting social care and housing, and respond to climate impacts across its 562-mile coastline. At the same time, Greater Essex is pursuing a devolution deal through the new Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA. The reorganisation of local government and the establishment of devolved governance are therefore running in parallel, creating both opportunity and risk.

Figure 6.1 The different unitary models proposed for Essex

Best4Essex
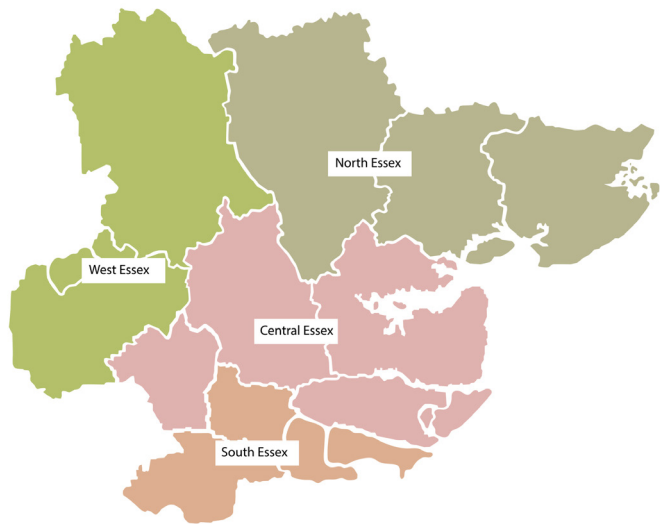
Unitary	Covers existing councils	Population 2023
Central Essex	Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon, Rochford	419,945
North Essex	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	510,162
South Essex	Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend on Sea	640,874
West Essex	Uttlesford, Harlow, Epping Forest	325,609

4UA
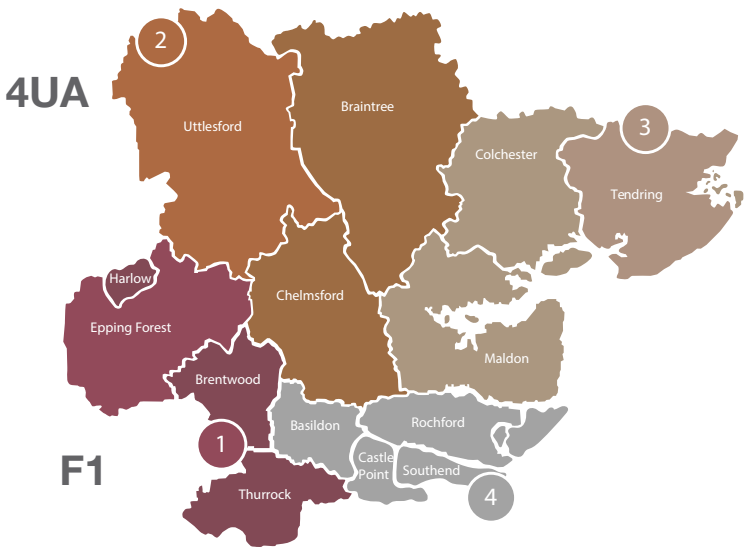
Council		Population
UA1	Thurrock, Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow (West)	488,368
UA2	Uttlesford, Braintree, Chelmsford (North)	438,829
UA3	Colchester, Tendring, Maldon (East)	418,532
UA4	Southend, Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford (South)	550,861

3UA
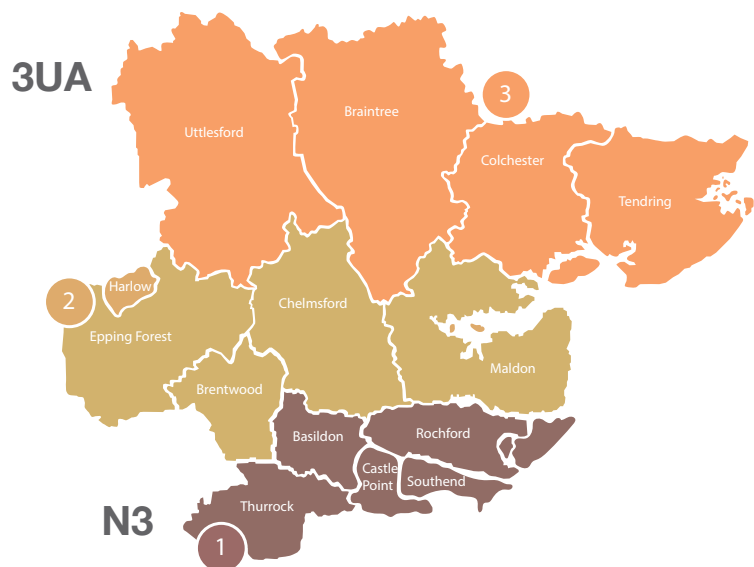
	Council	Population
UA1	Thurrock, Southend, Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford (South)	729,062
UA2	Harlow, Epping Forest, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon (Central)	563,772
UA3	Uttlesford, Braintree, Colchester, Tendring (North)	603,756

5UA
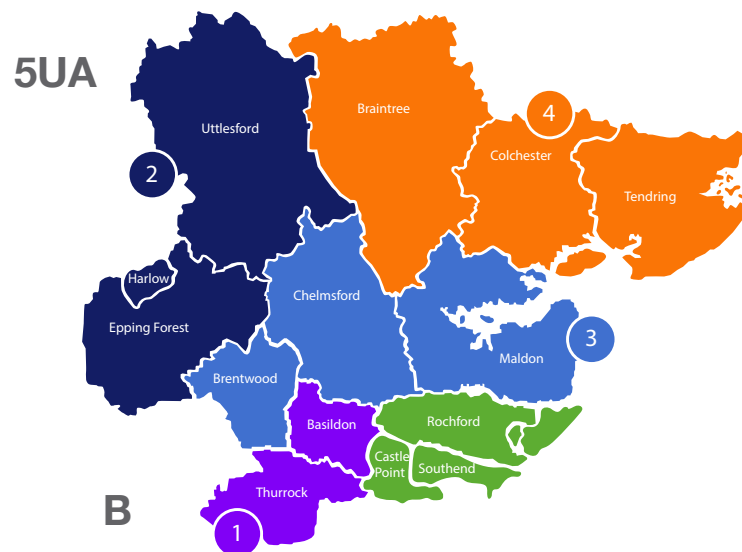
	Council	Population
UA1	Thurrock, Basildon (Southwest)	368,745
UA2	Uttlesford, Harlow, Epping Forest (Northwest)	325,609
UA3	Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon (Central)	331,757
UA4	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring (Northeast)	510,162
UA5	Southeend, Castle Point, Rochford (Southeast)	360,317

Resident and stakeholder voices confirm why this appraisal matters. Early consultation in Rochford, alongside insights drawn from other areas already progressing local government reorganisation, shows that people are less concerned with structures than with outcomes. Three themes consistently emerge: the safe continuity of statutory services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness; financial resilience and value for money; and the protection of local community identity.

Most residents identify primarily with their towns, villages or districts, not the county, and would prefer to see councils that are responsive to the local needs of their communities and not be so remote as to feel inaccessible or bureaucratic. More than 60% supported the creation of Neighbourhood Committees or similar such arrangements, demonstrating a strong appetite for visible local voice and empowerment.

Stakeholder engagement echoes these priorities. Other areas already going through reorganisation have heard partners in health, police, education and the voluntary sector emphasise the importance of service continuity, clear service footprints, and avoiding duplication, clear governance and consistent contact points. Cross-area lessons reinforce this: Hampshire stakeholders stressed safeguarding and clarity; Surrey partners focused on alignment with Integrated Care Boards and neighbourhood empowerment; Cumbria and North Yorkshire highlighted the importance of rural representation and simpler governance.

Taken together, this evidence makes the case that any structural reform in Essex must:

- deliver financially sustainable councils with credible payback periods and manageable transition costs

- create groupings that align with functional economic areas and service geographies recognised by partners

- safeguard and improve the quality of high-cost, high-risk services, as well as maintaining delivery of core services

- embed local identity and neighbourhood voice as a core outcome, not an afterthought; and

- nest within the MCCA to accelerate, not delay, devolution

In short, the options appraisal is not simply a technical exercise in comparing boundaries. It is about identifying which configuration can best meet Essex's immediate challenges while positioning the county to thrive in the longer term. It shows how local voices; partner perspectives and government tests combine to shape a preferred option that is both deliverable and legitimate.

6.2 | Options for review

In Essex, four main configurations have been advanced:

Number of Unitary Authorities Proposed	Referred to as	Led by
3	3UA	Essex County Council
4	Best4Essex Option	Rochford Council
4	Alternative Four Option	Thurrock Council
5	5UA	Southend Council

Figure 6.1 The different unitary models proposed for Greater Essex

In the following sections we have appraised each configuration against the statutory tests, Essex's specific challenges, and the requirements of the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA).

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

06 | Assessing the Options

R10: Failure to realise modelled savings.

D11: Ongoing programme risk management oversight.

07 | Financial appraisal

"We want every pound of council tax used wisely, not wasted on bureaucracy"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government - Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies**

✔ **03 | High quality, sustainable services - Strong, joined-up services; financially resilient**

✔ **05 | Supports Devolution - Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)**

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day**

This section sets out the financial case for the **Best4Essex** model. It compares costs and savings across the options and shows that the economies of scale claimed for larger unitary authorities are overstated. The evidence demonstrates that mid-sized geographies provide the most sustainable route to resilient finances, efficient services, and value for residents and businesses.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:
False economies of scale, no payback and unsustainable transition costs. Hidden costs in technology rationalisation will leave a long tail of transformation costs which will reduce long term delivery.

What it delivers:
Sustainable mid-sized councils, efficient services, and better value. Optimised No. of councils to effectively transition technology and structures

7.1 | Financial case: costs and savings

The financial case presented below draws on work undertaken for councils in Essex by consultancy firm PWC and the consultancy section of CIPFA.

Over the past five months Finance Directors (Section 151 Officers) and their teams across Essex have worked together to provide financial data to both PWC and CIPFA to allow detailed analysis to be carried out of financial data using a top-down approach. The PWC model uses a top-down approach to forecast the costs and benefits of the various models, in which it starts with a broad, "big picture" view and gradually narrows down to specific details.

Although the input data has largely been agreed and signed off, it has not been possible for the Chief Financial (Section 151) Officers to sign off on the assumptions used in the work completed by PWC to stage 2 (the Outline Business Case stage). Our assessment of the financial case for different options for LGR is largely based on the Greater Essex work completed by PWC up to stage two, using the following framework for costs and benefits for the three, four and five unitary models:

- **Transition costs**. These include anticipated redundancies due to duplicated leadership structures, and elements of one-off spending relating to creating, marketing and programme managing transition to a new council)

- **Benefits from aggregation of district services.** These come in the form of streamlining front office, service delivery, and back-office staffing, as well as potential to obtain third-party goods and services more cheaply

- **Disbenefits from disaggregation of unitary services.** These relate to the need to recruit several top-management teams, as well as the potential for costs of procurement to rise (unless shared arrangements can be put in place)

- **Governance changes.** If and when the number of councillors reduces there are potential savings pro-rata to the scale of change

- **Benefits from integration** of district and county functions, enabling performance and value for money to increase.

Nonetheless, though many reports on local government reorganisation have been produced across the country, each locality has different features that mean that top-down assessments, as used in the PWC analysis, should be treated with caution. For example, research findings have very different conclusions as to whether scale makes a difference to unit costs and quality in social care. While we support the base numbers in the PWC report we have made adjustments to the PWC assumptions taking into account wider evidence where available. The table below shows sources and implications for our assessments.

Table 7.1 Summary of finance considerations

Issue	Sources	Issues and Implications
Transition costs (assumes all transition costs incurred in year one)	PWC analysis Brentwood and Rochford shared council case study	Brentwood and Rochford experience indicates that costs of change are lower than those suggested by PWC. Reasons for a much more level set of transition costs include the effects that savings gained by reducing the number of ICT systems for the 3UA will be negated by the need to transition from a larger number of systems. Conversely the need to merge and end a lower number of systems will be negated by the higher costs of having more systems. Further, transitional expenditure on ICT has benefits for efficiency that should be recognised.
Benefits from aggregating district services	PWC analysis Copus (2022)	Copus (2022), a literature review for the District Councils Network, questions the frequent assumption that "Bigger is better" on efficiency. Previous LGR business cases have often put forward plans for ambitious savings based on larger unitary authorities – but backward views on actual savings indicate that these have not, on the whole, been achieved. We therefore treat the PWC analysis with caution, noting, for example, that revamped leadership teams may contain many more assistant and deputy managers than assumed in the PWC report. In addition, there will likely be some impact from pay harmonisation (both financially and in complexity) as the number of UA's is reduced, especially down to 3UA.
Disbenefits from disaggregating county spend	PWC analysis Peopletoo benchmarking Newton Europe	Peopletoo benchmarking questions the frequent assumption that "Bigger is better" in terms of efficiency. Further, RedQuadrant analysis of unit costs of social care shows that adult social care shows little sign of economies of scale, though there is some difference for children's services. PWC and Newton Europe assert that there is statistical modelling underpinning for their view that larger unitary authorities produce savings
Governance changes	Numbers of councillors Copus (2022)	Savings are calculated on basis of changes in number of councillors. However, this may overstate the benefits, as councillors will have less time available to spend on given issues, less time to meet and engage with constituents, with detrimental effects as highlighted in Copus (2022)
Benefits from integration of functions		Place-based, integrated perspective enables preventative approach to adult social care, working for wellbeing improvements in mid-life for people at risk etc

We consider in turn the following aspects of costs and benefits within the PWC assumptions:

- Re-organisation transition costs – one-off implementation costs
- Disaggregation costs - ongoing, due to disaggregation of services from county arrangements
- Reorganisation benefits – ongoing, due to aggregation of services among districts and the two unitary authorities

Re-organisation transition costs

Greater Essex has a two-tier system, with Essex County Council delivering county-wide services and district, city, and borough councils handling local functions. Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock are unitary authorities, providing all services independently. The work required to produce new unitary authorities will be complicated, as there are several moving parts and difficulties with merging systems and processes.

PWC's top-down analysis has examined contingency costs, organisational close-down, public consultation, ICT costs, shadow governance costs, external support, programme management and workforce costs. It predicts large variations between models with significant additional costs estimated for smaller unitary authorities.

In practice, however, the main differences between the three unitary model and the four unitary model proposed here are (a) an additional unitary consisting of Uttlesford, Harlow and Epping Forest, and (b) the requirement to separate Rochford from its partnership with Brentwood Borough Council. Past practice, including the Rochford and Brentwood experience, shows that the costs of disaggregating County services and merging lower tier should be marginal compared to the overall costs and complexities of combining existing unitary authorities and streamlining current district, borough and city systems and processes.

Some of the transition costs are simpler to model, with redundancy and pension strain most likely to be incurred in year 1 and reflect the reduction in workforce, especially at a senior level. Other costs around managing the transition to the new unitary authorities are, outside of ICT costs, likely to be similar for all models as savings from having less unitary authorities is reduced by the need to cover a with much wider geography. Costs for external support and initial management costs will likely be more for the smaller unitary authorities.

ICT system integration across Essex will be complicated due to the number of different systems used, especially within the districts.

This will be an area where significant costs and work will be required, and this will likely be over a period of longer than one year. Greater complexity often brings higher costs, and we believe that such diseconomies of scale must be set against the requirement for more localities to implement systems in the four and five unitary models. Our expectation is that transition costs for ICT will be similar across options, based on the average of the costs modelled by PWC, especially if allocated to year one.

Contingency has been assumed at 10% for all the one-off costs and this has been adjusted in the revised figures.

The table below shows the impact of revising the ICT costs for the 3UA, 4UA (both our proposal and the Thurrock option) and 5UA and reducing the contingency to reflect 10% of the one-off transition costs. The impact of these adjustments is to bring the one-off costs much closer between the models. Adjustments to the external support required appear at the high end for the 4UA options and 5UA but have not been adjusted.

One-off Costs (£000s)	3UA	4UA	5UA	Basis used by PWC including adjustments made
Contingency	5,650	5,950	6,300	Provision for extra expenses potentially incurred through reorganisation, uplifted by inflation in line with the Bank of England CPI. Assumed 11% for each authority based on revised costs. PWC estimates range from £6m (2UA) to £11.6m (5UA).
Organisation Closedown	900	1,200	1,500	Costs from legally and financially closing down councils and creating sound budgetary control systems, estimated as averages of similar costs for other councils. PWC figures from £0.6m to £1.5m.
Public consultation	500	600	700	Assuming costs for adverts in local media and surveys to consult public on proposed changes. PWC figures range from £0.4m (2UA) to £0.9m (5UA)
ICT costs	30,000	30,000	30,000	Average PWC cost used. Savings will be incurred over time for 2UA and 3UA as systems are streamlined but the transition to more unitary authorities is likely to less complex and so much easier to implement, especially in the short-term. PWC estimated £30m (2UA) to £60m (5UA)
Shadow Chief Exec / Member costs	1,050	1,300	1,600	Costs of establishing and running a shadow leadership team ahead of a new unitary authority taking control. Figures aligned to previous local government reorganisations. Adjusted for higher costs incurred for larger unitary authorities. PWC £0.6m (2UA) to £1.6m (5UA)
External support	11,600	13,900	16,500	Assuming costs for external Comms, branding, external implementation support, creation of the new council. Note: Assumption amended to increase the external support costs to the next UA option band with an additional 5% included. This is for Implementation, reorganisation and Transition only. PWC figures used
Internal Programme Management Costs	3,800	4,800	5,700	Aligned with previous local government reorganisations, uplifted for inflation and long-term programme management requirements. PWC figures used
Redundancy and Pension Strain	8,600	7,800	7,300	Surrey County Council's model has assumed an additional 43% of salary to cover pension strain which has been used here. PWC figures used
Total One-Off Transition Costs	62,100	65,550	69,600	

Table 7.2 One-off transition costs   Source: PWC (2025) Greater Essex LGR financial analysis (p25), RedQuadrant modelling and assumptions

Disaggregation costs

Greater Essex has a population of 1.8 million across some 1,400 square miles, making it one of the largest Counties in England. Consequently, amongst the options under consideration, even a five unitary approach would result in unitary authorities that are significant in size by both population and geography, while a two or three unitary model would have unitary authorities that among the largest in England.

The PWC model tends to predict greater efficiencies from fewer localities, despite the problems incurred as services are provided over a wider geography and decisions are made a significant distance away from residents and businesses. Similarly, on social services,

the Newton Europe model (reported in Local government reform: impact on people services – Essex) "shows a small increase in total cost of provision for scenarios with more unitary authorities, driven by increased unit costs and increased staffing needs …".

However, the Newton Europe report goes on to say: "A much more significant lever on future demand and spend will be service performance, and therefore prevalence of need. This is particularly acute for Children in Care in Essex, where ECC have 50% of the national average of children in care per 10,000. This varies significantly between districts and is much higher in Southend and Thurrock. Maintaining

and improving this practice and performance will be a significant lever to demand and cost once the new geography is set."

We endorse the view that the focus should be on maintaining and improving practice and performance, since alternative perspectives such as the Peopletoo analysis of average unit costs for major aspects of social care are top-down perspectives not rooted in local circumstances. In line with this, our assumption is that, initially, the services formerly provided by Essex County Council will be largely novated to the new unitary authorities.

Reorganisation benefits

Reorganisation benefits relate to the reduced numbers of senior management teams, as well as the requirement for fewer councillors, after a reduction in the number of localities. Details on forecast numbers of councillors are given in Section 11 on Leadership and Governance, positing a 64% drop in councillor numbers; while in terms of senior management teams, when the combined Brentwood and Rochford council is taken into account, LGR implies a reduction from 14 to 5 such teams, or fewer.

In the PwC model, the assumption is that reducing senior management posts in Greater Essex by,

for example, 50% results in an equivalent 50% reduction in salary costs. This implies there is no distinction in pay between a Finance Director in a large unitary authority and one in a small or medium-sized council.

We believe that this assumption of geographical size and the complexity making not reflecting a difference to pay scales, as used in the PWC model, is unrealistic (as can be seen by comparing the salary of Essex County Council's chief executive officer with the average salary of Essex district councils' CEOs). If. If the 3UA is assumed to be nil as the base for the costs and benefits of the various models, then an estimated

10% increase in salary costs has been used for 2UA senior management costs, a 10% decrease for 4UA and 15% decrease for 5UA. In addition, the number of deputies and support staff for larger authorities at a senior level would also be higher and the same adjustments of a 10% increase in salary costs has been used for 2UA senior management costs, a 10% decrease for 4UA and 15% decrease for 5UA, has been used.

Assumptions on contracted spend savings of double for 3UA compared to 4UA is at the high end and achieving the 3UA benefits will be challenging, especially within the first two years. Dividing the transition costs by the total benefit in that year provides the payback period.

Impact of phased costs and benefits (£000s)	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Payback
Phasing	50%	75%	100%	100%	100%	
3UA - Three Unitary Authorities						
Annual Benefit	18,797	28,195	37,593	37,593	37,593	
One off Transition costs	-62,100	0	0	0	0	
Additional Salary costs and Layers against Senior Management Costs	0	0	0	0	0	
Annual Cost	0	0	0	0	0	
Cumulative Net Benefit	-43,303	-15,108	22,485	22,485	97,672	**2.4 years**
4UA - Four Unitary Authorities						
Annual Benefit	15,523	23,284	31,046	31,046	31,046	
One off Transition costs	-65,550	0	0	0	0	
Additional Salary costs and Layers against Senior Management Costs	331	331	331	331	331	
Annual Cost	-12,700	-12,700	-12,700	-12,700	-12,700	
Cumulative Net Benefit	-62,396	-51,481	-32,804	-14,127	4,550	**4.5 years**
5UA - Five Unitary Authorities						
Annual Benefit	13,892	20,839	27,785	27,785	27,785	
One off Transition costs	-69,600	0	0	0	0	
Additional Salary costs and Layers against Senior Management Costs	993 0	993	993	993	993	
Annual Cost	-25,414	-25,414	-25,414	-25,414	-25,414	
Cumulative Net Benefit	-80,129	-83,711	-80,348	-76,984	-75,621	**Not within 5 years**

Table 7.3 Impact of phased costs and benefits

The implication of these adjustments is that the 3 unitary authority model has the greatest efficiency, with a payback period of 2.4 years. The 4 unitary authority models have a payback period of 4.5 years, while the 5 unitary authority model does not payback within the period of analysis conducted by PWC as the annual benefits are not significantly more than the additional costs.

Our overall assessment would be that:

- 3UA option has the fastest payback due to economies of scale, but creates larger/remote councils that potentially hinder integration of services and certainly keep decision-making highly centralised and less responsive to local circumstances
- Best4Essex is a balanced option, with manageable transition costs and sustained efficiencies
- Alternative 4UA has fewer natural partnerships than our proposal (as it splits existing functional economic geographies and collaborations, such as UK Innovation Corridor - UKIC, North Essex, Thames Gateway), which limits its efficiency and effectiveness
- 5UA option has higher ongoing costs and transition costs, with questions as to whether the reform achieves pay-back and associated level of financial fragility

Sensitivity test - alternative approaches to financial modelling

An alternative approach to the PWC model is a bottom-up analysis that starts with detailed, specific information progressing from the lowest level of detail to the highest. This approach has been used to support the business case for 5UA and has the support of several district and borough councils. Although the data analysis was not available to support the Best4Essex UA model, overall, this approach also supports it, showing it outperforms the 3UA model (note that it does not provide the savings forecast for the 5UA model). The bottom-up analysis does not assume that contracts held by Essex are the most cost effective and that breaking them into separate contracts is a negative. It relies instead on analysis that in social care, smaller unitary authorities have lower cost per resident than larger ones, as well as the local example of Southend having similar if not lower adult social care costs than Essex County Council.

A key message of this sensitivity test, therefore, is that disaggregation to 4 or 5 localities offers new scope for alternative, transformative approaches.

We next turn to an overall assessment of financial sustainability.

7.2 | Financial case: sustainability

The three main elements of sustainability for consideration are:

- Funding gaps - the ability of income (through council tax, commercial rates and central government funding) to match local authority expenditure
- Reserves and debt - the current level of debt, and the ability to service that debt
- Future prospects - expectations for future matching of income and expenditure in the light of demographic change

We consider these in turn.

Funding gaps

Data to assess the extent of funding gaps for the different options is available in the Essex County Council report "LGR - ECC Cost Disaggregation" (May 2025), which disaggregates county funding and expenditure on the basis of 2025/26 budgets. The patterns that these data reveal are subject to change in the light of decisions on local government funding formulae.

In the Three Unitary and both versions of the Four unitary there is one locality that has sustainability somewhat at risk with deficits of more than 3%. With the Five Unitary, there are two localities that are potentially at risk, which would double the opportunity for adverse outcomes and hamper strategic co-ordination in Greater Essex. By contrast, the 3 unitary model appears to have a better pattern of funding gaps than the two Four unitary options, although the differences are relatively small.

Three Unitary	Funding (£m)	Net spend (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference (%)
North	479	502	-22	-4.6%
Mid	443	422	20.3	4.8%
South	652	649	3.5	0.5%

Alternative 4	Funding (£m)	Net spend (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference (%)
North West	343	342	0.2	0.1%
North East	336	357	-21.3	-6.0%
South West	412	395	16.3	4.1%
South East	484	478	5.6	1.2%

Best4Essex	Funding (£m)	Net spend (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference (%)
North Essex	407	434	-26.8	-6.2%
West Essex	255	239	16.9	7.1%
Central Essex	326	306	19.9	6.5%
South Essex	586	595	-9.1	-1.5%

Five Unitary	Funding (£m)	Net spend (£m)	Difference (£m)	Difference (%)
North West	255	239	-16.9	7.1%
North East	407	434	-26.8	-6.2%
Central	259	252	7.3	2.9%
South West	318	328	-9.9	-3.0%
South East	334	321	13.4	4.2%

Table 7.7 Funding gaps for the five unitary model

Debt and Reserves

Debt and Non-Current Assets

CIPFA were commissioned by all authorities in Essex to assess the debt and non-current assets held across Essex councils.

The data was verified by Finance Directors at all authorities, but this assessment included some caveats as the data was based on positions as of 31st March 2025. A first important point was that the positions are shifting - some Councils are continuing to borrow, while other Councils are repaying debt (for example, Brentwood have recently repaid over £44m of debt). The detailed analysis is included at Annex 2 with the key findings below:

- Total debt in Greater Essex is £4 billion, of which £2.85 billion is General Fund debt
- Given the size of Essex, no undue concern over Essex's overall debt levels.
- No major barriers to any proposed unitary options.
- Higher-debt authorities have strong investment property portfolios exceeding their General Fund debt.
- Debt profiles are broadly consistent, though further analysis is needed on the sources of debt and refinancing risks

- Financial sustainability concerns are moderated by new unitary proposals.
- Debt repayment provision across Greater Essex is reasonable (>2%), but variations will need addressing during reorganisation.
- Further asset analysis will follow once a configuration decision is made

A second fundamental point is a substantial debt problem at Thurrock. Central government acknowledges that Thurrock holds significant unsupported debt that cannot be locally managed. It must be stressed that the viability of any unitary configuration is contingent on substantial Government support both around a reduction in debt and the removal of Exceptional Financial Support. This can only happen if the high interest costs currently being paid by Thurrock is significantly reduced. MHCLG is expected to outline proposals soon, including details on level of support offered, and apportionment of any remaining debt. As the debt situation at Thurrock has consequences for the financial sustainability for the whole of Essex, we believe that central government has a crucial role to play.

For illustrative purposes, the assessments that we present here assume that central government provides support for Thurrock of the order of half its debt level at £400m (as an essential step towards sustainability), and we highlight a set of practical principles for central government action later in this section.

The following tables illustrate the debt per unitary in each of the models. The following tables illustrate the debt per unitary in each of the models. Key CIPFA financial sustainability figures are shown in Annex 2 (Essex LGR-Debt and Non-Current Assets sections 4.6, 5.7, 6.8 and 7.7)

Note that balanced budgets have been assumed for each year until vesting year. It is further assumed that the new unitary authorities will begin with a balanced budget and without the need for Exceptional Financial Support or its equivalent.

Three Unitary Model

Table 7.8 Debt per unitary – Three Unitary

Debt	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring, Uttlesford	Brentwood Chelmsford, Epping Forest, Harlow, Maldon	Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend, Thurrock	Total
GF Debt (£m)	633.2	671.9	1,548.4	2,853.5
Investment property (£m)	389.7	423.4	157.2	960.3

Best4Essex 4UA

Table 7.9 Debt per unitary – Four Unitary (Best4Essex)

Debt	Epping Forest, Harlow, Uttlesford	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon, Rochford	Basildon, Castle Point, Southend, Thurrock	Total
GF Debt (£m)	617.3	339.7	391.1	1,505.4	2,853.5
Investment property (£m)	550.6	109.1	145.8	154.8	960.3

Thurrock 4UA

Table 7.10 Debt per unitary – Four Unitary (Thurrock 4UA)

Debt	Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow, Thurrock	Braintree, Chelmsford, Uttlesford	Colchester, Maldon, Tendring	Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Thurrock	Total
GF Debt (£m)	1,122.6	477.9	287.7	965.4	2,853.6
Investment property (£m)	352.2	390.0	60.9	157.2	960.3

Five Unitary Model

Table 7.11 Debt per unitary – Five unitary

Debt	Epping Forest, Harlow, Uttlesford	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon	Basildon, Thurrock	Castle Point, Rochford, Southend	Total
GF Debt (£m)	617.3	339.7	348.2	1,168.2	380.0	2,853.5
Investment property (£m)	550.6	109.1	143.4	110.6	46.6	960.3

Reserves

The EFOA (Essex Finance Officers Association) has estimated the level of reserves of local authorities in Essex, taking into account estimates of the potential reserve positions for each of the unitary configurations once the Essex CC reserves have been disaggregated.

Some reserves are not usable because they are set aside for very specific reasons or are held on behalf of other organisations. Other reserves may be earmarked for specific purposes and are likely to be part of MTFS spending plans. The un-allocated GF reserve ensures there is a buffer between planned spend and unforeseen spend.

The level of this reserve is generally based on a percentage of net or gross budget and more importantly, an analysis of risk. At a summary level there is over £1bn of reserves in the Essex in 2025/26, reducing to £943m in 2028/29, which is the vesting year. The table below shows a summary of all of the Essex authority reserves excluding Essex CC.

Overall, even at the lowest level of reserves, there is a sufficient reserves position for all models (subject to a satisfactory solution being found to the issue of Thurrock debt). The following table shows the current level of reserves mapped to the options.

£000s	3 Option	Alternative 4	Best4Essex	5 Option
Unitary 1	368,713	239,663	192,468	192,468
Unitary 2	328,277	263,369	310,818	310,818
Unitary 3	404,098	254,485	238,503	193,705
Unitary 4		343,573	359,300	165,154
Unitary 5				238,944
Total	**1,101,088**	**1,101,090**	**1,101,089**	**1,101,089**

Table 7.12 Reserves per unitary (2025/26 figures)

As noted, by vesting year (2028/29) reserves are anticipated to have slightly reduced as follows, mapped to the options.

£000s	3 Option	Alternative 4	Best4Essex	5 Option
Unitary 1	305,687	201,263	154,980	154,980
Unitary 2	264,616	218,744	253,814	253,814
Unitary 3	372,701	210,821	195,991	161,509
Unitary 4		312,176	338,219	144,650
Unitary 5				228,051
Total	**943,004**	**943,004**	**943,004**	**943,004**

Table 7.13 Reserves per unitary (2028/29 projections)

Council Tax Harmonisation

Council Tax harmonisation is a critical issue in the reorganisation process. MHCLG has not mandated a specific approach but expects proposals to:

- Demonstrate how harmonisation will be achieved.
- Consider impacts on residents, especially in areas with significant disparities in council tax levels.
- Include transitional arrangements to mitigate sudden changes in tax levels.

In terms of Council Tax Rates (Band D), there is a range of £133 (excluding parish precepts) across Essex, with the highest overall Council Tax rate of £2,232 excluding parish precepts, with Rochford having the highest overall Council Tax rate of £2,295 including precepts.

Although Council Tax harmonisation is critical, the impact in Essex is not significant - apart from one major factor - regardless of whether a three, four or five unitary approach is undertaken.

Thurrock's financial position complicates harmonisation due to its unsupported debt and potential need for higher council tax rates to support debt repayment. MHCLG has indicated that Thurrock's debt will be treated separately, but no central write-off is planned. Instead, local solutions and efficiency savings are expected to support financial sustainability.

Future Prospects

Fair Funding is currently out for consultation with most authorities in Essex providing a response and raising concerns over some of the proposals. The outcome from the consultation is not available for analysis but it is likely to impact the overall funding for Essex as well as each unitary, regardless of the configuration.

This business case assumes that a solution to significant ongoing deficits in SEND services will be found at national level. As elsewhere in the country, the issue faced in Greater Essex cannot be fully resolved by existing authorities or in any unitary configuration.

Within this context, we examine the extent to which different options face different levels of funding gap pressures in the light of demographic change. Our analysis focusses on the unitary councils identified as having significant funding gaps, and in the table below we contrast these against ONS forecasts of the percentage change in those aged 65 or over. The maps in section 6.2 illustrate the localities.

Proposal	3 Unitary Option	Best4Essex	Alternative 4	5 Unitary Option
Unitary Authority	North	North	North-East	North-East
Funding gap (£m)	-22.9%	-26.8%	-21.3	-26.8%
Difference (%)	-4.6%	-6.2%	-6.0%	-6.2%
Increase those aged 65 or over (2025 to 2040)	29.6	28.0%	28.6%	28.0%

Table 7.14 Funding gap pressures in light of demographic change

It can be seen that the level of pressure on the locality with greatest funding issues would be similar whichever option is adopted. For example, while the North locality in the 3 unitary model would have a smaller proportional funding gap, it is expected to have a larger increase in those aged 65 or more, who tend to be the main drivers of expenditure in adult social care. Similarly, while the North locality in the Best4Essex unitary model has a slightly bigger funding gap than the North East locality in the alternative 4 unitary model, it has a smaller expected increase in those aged 65 or more.

7.3 | Required government action

Debt

In respect to debt at Thurrock, we believe that the following principles are essential:

1. The viability of any unitary configuration is contingent on substantial Government support both around a reduction in debt and the removal of Exceptional Financial Support, which can only happen if the high interest costs and Minimum Revenue Provision currently being paid by Thurrock is significantly reduced.

2. Central government should implement a fair and equitable solution focussed on the locality that caused the 'stranded debt'. Government has committed to providing debt support to Thurrock (quantum and dates unknown), and we believe that further support and freedoms would be required in the intervening period and post vesting day. Support could take the form of an interest-free loan, Council Tax flexibilities, sale of assets and other efficiencies. It is understood through discussions with the MHCLG that the Government intends to set out its proposals regarding Thurrock's debt within the coming months, including the level of support that it is prepared to offer, together with how any remaining debt will be apportioned. We look forward to working with MHCLG to find a suitable solution.

A second fundamental point is a substantial debt problem at Thurrock. Central government acknowledges that Thurrock holds significant unsupported debt that cannot be locally managed. It must be stressed that the viability of any unitary configuration is contingent on substantial Government support both around a reduction in debt and the removal of Exceptional Financial Support. This can only happen if the high interest costs currently being paid by Thurrock is significantly reduced. MHCLG is expected to outline proposals soon, including details on level of support offered, and apportionment of any remaining debt. As the debt situation at Thurrock has consequences for the financial sustainability for the whole of Essex, we believe that central government has a crucial role to play.

Turning to the localities as a whole, central government should develop a sustainable solution that provides capacity for the new unitary authorities to manage future risk:

Operational revenue savings from LGR should be hypothecated for reinvestment in future known demands notably key demand-led statutory services

Central government should recognise the significant volatility risk that comes with LGR

change (tax equalisation, public sector reform) and the need for capacity in revenue and reserves to respond to volatility

Central government must not impose savings solutions on future authorities to pay off stranded debt, given mind to the wider financial sustainability challenges for authorities.

See also **Annex 1 – CIPFA template, Annex 2** - Essex LGR Reserves Summary & LGR Debt and Assets,

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

07 | Financial Case

R1: Thurrock legacy debt.

R2: Transition costs higher than modelled (ICT, estates, HR).

R10: Failure to realise modelled savings.

D4: Central government intervention required on Thurrock debt.

D11: Ongoing programme risk management oversight.

"'Need to keep it local' "

MHCLG Criteria:

✔   **01 | Single tier local government - Four unitaries replace two tier system**

✔   **02 | 'Right-sized' local government - Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies**

✔   **04 | Meets local needs - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience**

✔   **05 | Supports Devolution - Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)**

✔   **06 | Local engagement & empowerment - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day**

This section presents the full appraisal of the options for Essex. It demonstrates that the **Best4Essex** four-unitary configuration is the only option that balances immediate financial and service challenges with long-term sustainability. The appraisal draws together local voices, partner perspectives and MHCLG's criteria to identify a preferred option that is both deliverable and legitimate.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Tick-box boundary comparisons with no vision for sustainable, outcome-focused services.

What it delivers:

A fair, evidence-led appraisal that identifies the strongest, sustainable option.

8.1 | Headline benefits and challenges

We start with a geographical overview of the options. Clearly the financial and service delivery appraisal is a vital component of the options appraisal, but these are, in turn, driven by the choice of geography. Drawing on the overview provided in sections 4 and 5, we provide here a summary of the options.

Geographical considerations and benefits

The **Best4Essex** model is grounded in functional economic geography and reflects how communities actually work. It provides a configuration that is closer to communities and better aligned with local identity. By contrast, the three-unitary option, while simple on paper, creates remote authorities with footprints that do not match local identity or localism. The alternative four-unitary option creates a London-facing authority, but this risks being politically divisive and does not serve Essex as a whole.

Challenges and risks

The five-unitary option fragments Essex into economically smaller councils that may struggle to drive growth at scale, requiring complex cross-boundary arrangements. The three-unitary option risks remoteness and a loss of local connection, while the London-facing alternative four-unitary configuration diverts focus away from Essex priorities and results in a sub-optimal solution for the county overall. **Best4Essex** avoids these pitfalls by balancing scale with local identity and ensuring each unitary is viable, resilient and connected to its communities.

8.2 | Comparison of options against government criteria

All options have been assessed against the six MHCLG statutory tests, which form the core framework for government decisions on reorganisation. These provide a consistent yardstick to judge whether proposed configurations are coherent, financially sustainable, service-resilient, and supported by residents and stakeholders.

MHCLG Criterion	3UA	Best 4 Essex 4UA	Alternative 4UA	5UA
1. Single tier & coherent geographies	4.0 Large units (570k–730k) align to economic corridors, strong coherence, but risk dilution of identity.	4.5 Balances coherence with identity; sub-regional groupings naturally align to M11, A12/A120, the Tech Corridor and Thames Estuary. Fewer boundary tensions than other 4UA proposal, 3UA or 5UA.	3.5 West Essex grouping functional and in line with commuter flows (with exception of Thurrock) but breaks countywide coherence. Localities would cut across growth corridors.	3.5 Smaller units (326k–510k) preserve local identity, but weaker integration across economic corridors.
2. Right size & efficiencies / transition	4.0 Significant economies of scale from three large unitary authorities; payback in 2.4 years.	4.0 Creates four sustainable councils of medium to large size (325k–640k). 3 units near ~500K, Central Essex ~420K positioned as a pathfinder. Shared services (Rochford–Brentwood, ICT) reduce transition risk. Payback in 4.5 years.	4.0 Creates four sustainable councils of medium to large size (431k-554k). Transition risk high.	2.5 Several units below 500k; reduced scale weakens efficiency. Payback not in period covered by PWC analysis.
3. Sustainable services & VFM	4.0 Scale supports resilience in ASC/CSC, though complex amalgamation process runs risk of higher costs. Scale also reduces service responsiveness.	4.0 Sympathetic to existing public service Quadrants, with only two areas needing adjustment, supporting smoother implementation. Achieves the second shortest payback period of all options.	3.0 Reliant on new collaborations changes four LAs from Quadrant arrangements - and splits Brentwood/ Rochford partnership, undermining VFM.	3.0 Smaller units risk fragility in ASC/CSC - Changes several LAs from Quadrant arrangements, hampering delivery.
4. Working together & local views	3.5 County led coordination is strong but with limited local differentiation or bottom-up engagement.	4.0 Essex-wide collaboration evidenced through the building additional LGR configurations. Rochford survey (1000 + responses) provides a strong resident mandate, with 60%+ backing Neighbourhood Committees. Demonstrates how Councils and communities have shaped this proposal.	2.5 Political alignment in Thurrock leadership but limited evidence of wider support across Essex .	3.5 Engagement via YourSay hub is strong, but governance consistency across 5 UAs uncertain.
5. Devolution fit	3.5 High negotiating power with MCCA; but fewer voices risks overlooking local variation. Creates two large tiers.	4.0 Clear MCCA alignment to growth corridors and strategic investment areas M11, Thames Estuary, A12/A120 simplifying delivery of growth and reducing point of entry complexities to attract inward and institutional investment; dovetails with Essex MCCA sequencing.	3.5 Devolution ambition stated, but sequencing unclear. Not well aligned to growth corridors.	3.0 Requires joint governance for MCCA; multiple voices reduce negotiating leverage.
6. Community engagement & empowerment	2.5 Locality boards suggested but not defined; empowerment model light, risk of diluted voice and no clear mechanism to engage communities, which feel out of touch	4.5 The only option with a credible Essex wide empowerment model providing a credible framework to embed community voice in future governance, ensuring accountability, identity and resilience are hard wired into the new councils and aligned to MCCA.	2.5 Consultation underway, but no structured empowerment model defined. Weak on community voice.	4.0 Strong identity retention, but empowerment approach inconsistent across councils.
Total (out of 30)	21.5	25.0	18.5	19.5

Table 8.1 Comparison of options against MHCLG criteria

Methodology

- **Scoring scale:** 0–5, half points allowed. Higher = better.
- **Criteria:** Six MHCLG tests as per July 2025 Statutory Guidance and Commons Library briefing.
- **Approach:** Each model scored against the same criteria using publicly available and internal draft evidence.
- **Weighting:** All criteria equally weighted for a total out of 30.

The scoring is designed to show relative positioning against MHCLG's six criteria. It should be treated as indicative only, because the **Best4Essex** model is supported by detailed modelling, survey data, and independent configuration analysis. The three, alternative four, and five options are drawn primarily from public statements, consultation hubs, and high-level government feedback.

Narrative and scoring are therefore indicative, not definitive. The table should be read as showing relative strengths and risks across options rather than a precise MHCLG scorecard, reflecting what can be reasonably inferred from the available information. Risks include:

- **Three Option**: Efficiency and scale advantages are relatively clear, but assumptions about service resilience and local identity are not yet evidenced in detail.
- **Alternative 4:** Scoring depends heavily on political preference statements and MHCLG's debt treatment letter. No detailed financial case is available.
- **Option:** Engagement evidence is strong, but financial and service fragility is extrapolated from the Essex financial modelling, not a formal business case.

That said, with the best data we have available, the above assessment shows the options rank as follows:

- **83% - Best4Essex** and delivers the most balanced outcome across all six tests, with no major weaknesses.
- **72% - 3 Option** sacrifices local identity and with higher transition risks.
- **66% - 5 Option** is strong on identity but fragile in financial and service sustainability with challenges of service disaggregation.
- **60% - Alternative 4** scores lowest reflecting weaker geographical cohesion and limited stakeholder evidence.

We also provide an assessment of each individual authority against the Government criteria at Appendix B, which shows that they satisfy these individually and collectively. The **Best4Essex** configuration performs consistently well across all six tests, striking the most balanced profile of financial viability, service resilience and legitimacy.

8.3 | Implementation feasibility

Implementation feasibility is a critical factor: proposals must be deliverable within the government's timetable for shadow elections in 2027 and vesting day in April 2028. Lessons from Hampshire and Surrey show that transition feasibility depends on scale, existing collaboration, leadership capacity, and alignment with wider governance reforms.

Implementation feasibility is an integral part of appraisal. Hampshire explicitly weighted this factor; Surrey embedded it within their options scoring. In Essex:

- The **Best4Essex** option has the clearest path to implementation, building on existing shared service partnerships (e.g. Rochford–Brentwood, North Essex Garden Communities). It aligns with functional economic areas and avoids creating authorities that are either too small or too unwieldy.

- The 3 option would require extensive new governance arrangements and complex harmonisation of larger authorities, extending transition timelines.

- The 5 option risks instability: multiple small councils would face stretched leadership capacity, fragmented systems, and higher stranded ICT costs.

Option	Implementation Feasibility	Summary Assessment
Best4Essex	Builds on existing shared services (Rochford–Brentwood, North Essex Garden Communities). Each unitary sized for resilience but not over-large. Aligns with functional economic areas and ICB footprints. Implementation can be phased to align with MCCA establishment.	**Most feasible** Balanced, credible delivery pathway**.**
3 Option	Creates strong, large units but requires extensive new governance arrangements. Risk of remote authorities and more complex harmonisation (ICT, HR, services). Greater risk of disruption during transition.	**Feasible but complex** Can be delivered, but higher disruption risk and weaker local legitimacy.
Alternative 4	Similar scale to **Best4Essex**UA but lacks the same shared service foundations. Groupings less natural, leading to weaker collaboration. Risks of contested identity and lower public legitimacy.	**Feasible but fragile** Deliverable in principle, but higher risk of governance disputes.
5 Option	Requires establishing 5 new councils, each with limited capacity. Multiple ICT and HR transitions. Leadership stretch across 5 units undermines safe delivery of statutory services.	**Not feasible** Timetable unachievable; service fragility likely.

Table 8.2 Comparison of Implementation feasibility

A phased transition plan, aligned with MCCA establishment, means the **Best4Essex** is the most realistic to implement on the 2027 vesting day timetable. The table below provides a concise overview of transition costs, payback, and implementation risks across all options.

Option	Transition Costs	Payback Period	Implementation Risks
Best4Essex	Significant (ICT, redundancy, service disaggregation)	4.5 years	Manageable; each unitary has critical mass
3 Option	Significant (ICT, redundancy, service disaggregation though to lesser extent than 4 unitary approaches	2.4 years	Risk of over-large, less local
Alternative 4	Similar to **Best4Essex**, though more disruption implies higher costs	Not within PWC period	Political/identity misalignment
5 Option	Highest (5x councils, ICT duplication)	No payback	Unsustainable; service fragility

Table 8.3 Comparison of Transition costs

8.4 | Comparing the two 4-unitary options

The high-level conclusion is that a three unitary solution would create councils that are too large for Essex, both now and in the future, while a five unitary model would result in too many councils, raising risks around resilience and value for money. On that basis, attention turns to a detailed comparison of the two proposals for four unitary authorities that have been developed, but they are quite different geographically.

Best4Essex

Thurrock

Unitary	Covers existing councils	Population 2023
Central Essex	Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon, Rochford	419,945
North Essex	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	510,162
South Essex	Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend on Sea	640,874
West Essex	Uttlesford, Harlow, Epping Forest	325,609
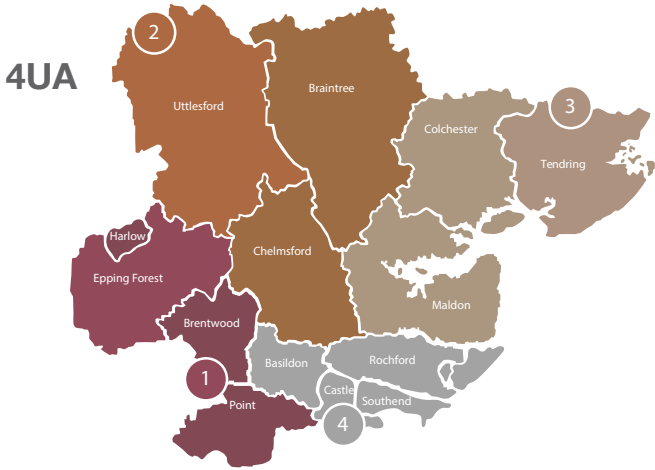
	Council	Population
UA1	Thurrock, Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow (West)	488,368
UA2	Uttlesford, Braintree, Chelmsford (North)	438,829
UA3	Colchester, Tendring, Maldon (East)	418,532
UA4	Southend, Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford (South)	550,861

Best4Essex
- West Essex

The **Best4Essex** proposal recognises the M11 innovation corridor as a crucial driver of growth in the West of the county. For this reason, we don't split Epping Forest and Harlow from Uttlesford but align them to take advantage of the resulting growth opportunities. This is crucial from a strategic planning, investment and economic growth perspective as Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford are already part of the existing UK Innovation Corridor which has an established cross political and organisational boundary working and an emerging government backed growth strategy. This is a key gateway for Essex and connects it with Cambridge and London, as part of a world-leading in tech and life sciences cluster. It would be against the natural economic geography, planned growth and established and effective collaboration between councils and wider partners if these were to be split and the Rochford four option could improve and accelerate the economic performance of the area bringing greater prosperity and resilience to Essex as a whole.
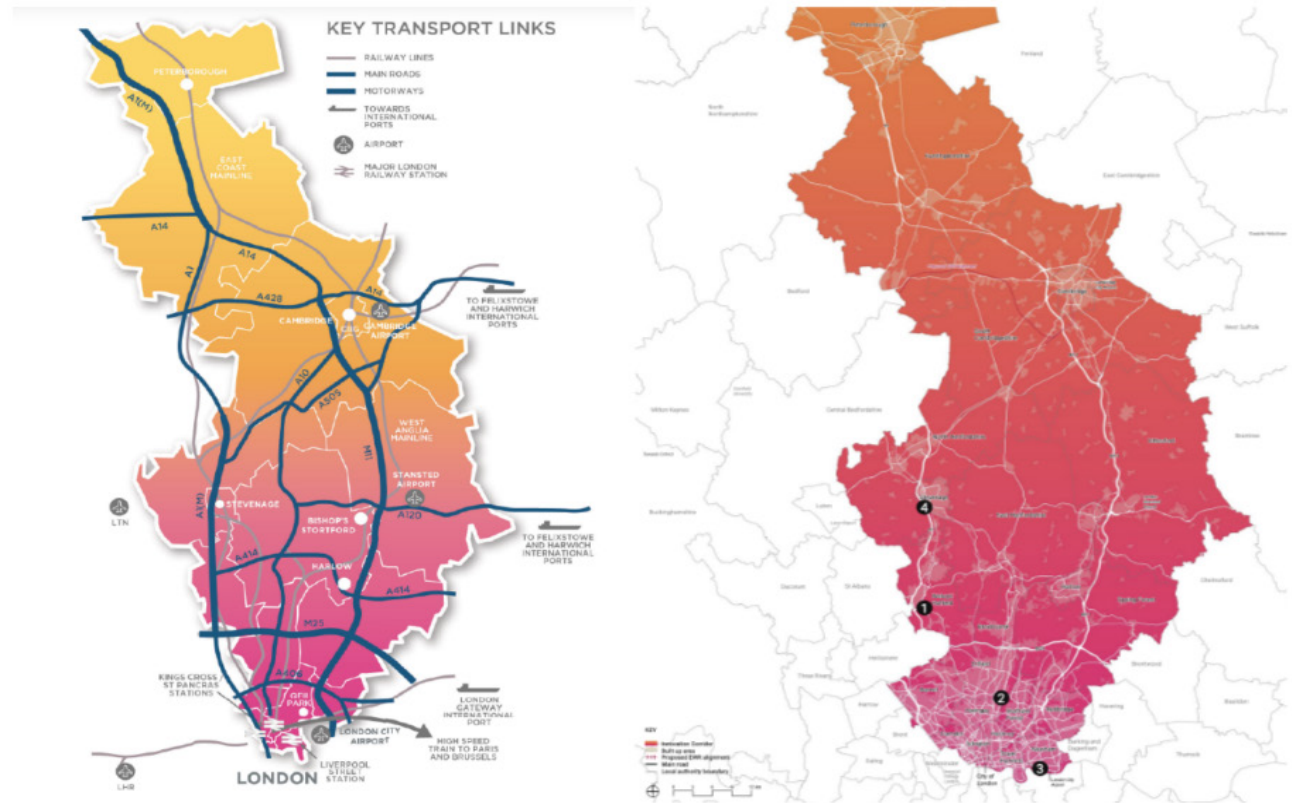

Figure 8.2 West Essex and the M11 Growth corridor

Best4Essex – Central Essex

The creation of a new unitary council for Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon, and Rochford would harness a powerful and distinct 'Central Essex' identity, building on a robust foundation of existing collaboration. This is not an arbitrary grouping but a strategic consolidation of councils that share profound geographical, economic, and demographic characteristics. Unlike proposals that might seek to separate Thurrock or align Rochford with Southend to areas with vastly different urban challenges and Thames Estuary priorities this unitary model unifies a coherent corridor with an established social and geographic history that can optimise a shared future. This consolidation builds upon proven partnerships, such as the shared services already successfully delivered between Brentwood and Rochford, and the natural geographical and economic alignment with Chelmsford the county town and economic engine and Maldon's pivotal coastal and rural economy.

Best4Essex – North Essex

Keeping Braintree, Colchester and Tendring together in a single unitary authority presents a transformative opportunity to harness the region's full economic potential whilst more efficiently tackling the challenges of rural sparsity and ensuring thriving urban centres. It would possess the strategic scale and vision to drive inward investment and deliver integrated planning across a dynamic and diverse economic geography and be locally focussed enough to ensure permeation of the economic benefits encompassing urban centres, historic market towns, to areas of social deprivation such as many parts of the extensive rural and coastal communities. The councils are aligned through the North Essex Garden Communities programme, a nationally significant project planning for over 43,000 new homes and 56,000 jobs. A unitary model would streamline the delivery of this vision, ensuring joined-up infrastructure, transport, and housing strategies. This is critical for leveraging key assets like the A12 and A120 corridors, which provide direct links to global gateways at London Stansted and Harwich International Ports, as well as the Midlands Engine. This option also builds on the legacy of the Haven Gateway Partnership, reigniting nascent strategic collaboration with the emerging Essex County Combined Mayoral Authority and cross boundary approaches established with neighbouring Suffolk to maximise the economic potential.

IN NORTH ESSEX NEW GARDEN COMMUNITIES ARE BEING PLANNED THAT WILL CREATE AMAZING PLACES FOUNDED ON A SERIES OF KEY PLACEMAKING PRINCIPLES.

STANSTED AIRPORT

BRAINTREE

COLCHESTER

HARWICH

CLACTON-ON SEA

Figure 8.3 North Essex Garden Communities

Key benefits of the configuration include:

- **Port & Logistics:** Capitalising on Harwich's status as a key ro-ro freight port and partner in the Freeport East enterprise zone, stimulating advanced manufacturing and green energy initiatives.

- **Agriculture & Environmental Sustainability:** Leading the way in sustainable agriculture across a predominantly rural landscape and driving forward green energy projects, including those associated with Freeport East and the North Sea.

- **Tourism & Heritage:** Strategically managing a world-class tourism asset base that generates over £1 billion annually for the wider Essex coast, from Colchester's Roman heritage, Britain's first city, to the vibrant resorts of Clacton and Frinton-on-Sea.
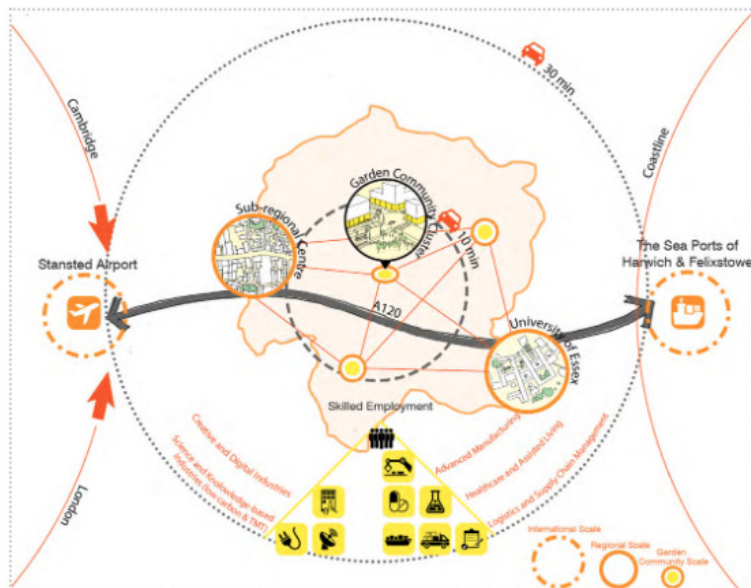
Figure 8.4 A120 Corridor

Best4Essex – South Essex

This creates a critical mass of economic power by combining Thurrock's global logistics hub, Basildon's industrial strength and commercial base, Castle Point's rich medieval heritage, history and community focus, and Southend's established unitary expertise and coastal economy. This "Thames Estuary Powerhouse" has the scale and clout to deliver transformative regeneration and strategic transport projects. This authority will be a powerful driver of opportunity in the south of the county. With a combined population and economic footprint that can support ambitious regeneration, transport improvements, and social infrastructure investment, it will be able to deliver at pace. This grouping blends urban vitality with strong local networks, ensuring that growth benefits residents and supports inclusive, resilient communities along the Thames Estuary.

The best four-unitary option

Key Differentiators for the **Best4Essex** proposal from the alternative four unitary model include:

- **Best4Essex** balances coastal, rural, and commuter areas.
- **Best4Essex** strengthens MCCA links across all groupings, not just in South Essex.
- **Best4Essex** has a more balanced geography that avoids over-concentration of urban centres, while ensuring equitable resource allocation.

8.5 | Alignment with devolution and public service reform agenda

Our four-unitary authority proposal offers the balance Whitehall needs: local government that is at the right scale to deliver, local enough to care. It creates councils of a scale that can deliver real efficiencies and credible savings, while preserving the local identity and governance links that make reforms stick. This is not just about meeting DLUHC's statutory tests it is about creating a framework that works for every department with a stake in the success of Local Government Reorganisation.

Devolution

Local government reorganisation in Greater Essex cannot be separated from the parallel establishment of the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA). Government has been clear that deeper devolution deals require stable, sustainable unitary authorities as building blocks for MCCAs. The reorganisation of local government in Greater Essex is running in parallel with the establishment of the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA). Government's expectation is clear: shadow elections will be held in May 2026, with the MCCA fully operational from vesting day in April 2027. This section tests each configuration against its ability to support devolution and ensure Greater Essex has the clarity, resilience and legitimacy needed for the new MCCA to succeed.

- The English Devolution Framework highlights three conditions for MCCA success:
- Stable unitary partners councils large enough to sustain devolved powers.
- Coherent functional geographies aligned to economic corridors and service footprints.
- Visible and accountable governance clear leadership links from mayor to councils and neighbourhoods.

Option	Alignment	Summary Assessment
Best4Essex	- Aligns with economic corridors (London–Stansted–Cambridge, Thames Estuary, Colchester–Tendring). - Takes a place-based approach. Aligns coherent economic geographies around with new strategic planning and investment approach which will be mandated through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill simplifying delivery for existing functional economic strengths - Creates four sustainable councils (325k–640k), each capable of engaging in MCCA governance. - Embeds neighbourhood voice, providing legitimacy to the MCCA. - Minor boundary sensitivities (e.g. Basildon/Castle Point) do not undermine overall fit.	**Strongest fit** balanced scale, coherence and legitimacy.
3 Option	- Larger sub-regional blocks (600k–700k) offer negotiating weight. - Risks remoteness from residents, weakening legitimacy. - Transition complexity may divert capacity from MCCA set-up. - High technology, digital and data transition complexity and costs of reducing multiple business critical systems into the lowest number of UA's	**Strong but remote** powerful at MCCA level, weaker on local accountability
Alternative 4	- Links Thurrock with London-adjacent districts; aligns with commuter flows but breaks countywide coherence. - Creates asymmetry across Essex; less clarity in MCCA governance. - Limited evidence of broad partner support	**Weak fit** undermines Essex-wide coherence.
5 Option	- Smaller councils (<300k) risk fragility and weak negotiating power. - Fragmented geographies complicate MCCA governance. - Would require new joint governance mechanisms.	**Poor fit** fragmented and unstable at MCCA level.

Table 8.4 Alignment of options against devolution framework

Implementation of the Best4Essex proposal will require new representation arrangements for the Combined County Authority. The MCCA will be established with representation from Essex County Council (3 members) and Thurrock and Southend councils (2 members each) on the MCCA. Under this proposal, each new Unitary local authority will nominate one representative to the MCCA, ensuring each part of Essex is fairly represented.
A simple majority of 3, to include the MCCA Mayor, will be required in any decision-making.

Wider government agenda

For **DLUHC**, it delivers coherent geographies rooted in existing community and economic linkages, with shared service history proving deliverability. For **HM Treasury**, it offers a clear, Green Book-compliant glidepath to sustainability, with manageable transition costs and a lower risk profile than over-scaled alternatives.

For **DHSC and NHS England**, the model aligns naturally with Integrated Care Board footprints, ensuring stability in adult social care and public health services while enabling place-based innovation. **DfE** benefits from unitary areas small enough to maintain oversight of children's services and SEND, while still collaborating across boundaries for specialist provision.

Home Office and PCCs will find a model that respects police and community safety geographies, enabling integrated crime prevention and resilience. DfT gains a structure that supports coherent transport and infrastructure planning, avoiding the governance sprawl that can slow delivery.

For **DEFRA**, the grouping of coastal and rural authorities protects environmental priorities and flood risk management within councils that understand those challenges. **DWP** and **MoJ** can rely on local knowledge and jurisdictional alignment to deliver welfare, skills, and justice services effectively.

Above all, this model is designed for **delivery confidence** minimising risk, preserving local legitimacy, and enabling faster, cleaner transitions. It is a model that government can back with confidence, knowing it will stand up to cross-departmental scrutiny and deliver visible public service improvement from day one.

8.6 | Options Appraisal Conclusions

The Best4Essex model is the only configuration that is financially viable, service-resilient, locally legitimate, and strategically aligned with the Mayoral Combined County Authority. It offers a realistic balance of deliverability, legitimacy, and alignment with devolution timelines. The three-unitary option is complex; the Thurrock variant fragile; the five-unitary model simply financially undeliverable within the government's timescales.

Having considered scale, service baselines, financial viability, and the MHCLG tests, the following configurations are not recommended.

We have already seen the financial analysis demonstrates that only the Best4Essex and Three Options achieve credible payback within the modelling period. Best4Essex balances efficiency with local identity, delivering payback within 4.5 years. The 3 option offers faster payback but at the cost of complexity and remoteness. Thurrock 4UA is financially comparable to Best4Essex but weaker in resilience and coherence. The five UA option is unsustainable, with disaggregation costs outweighing benefits.

Option	Rationale for Discounting
Alternative 4	Weakens Essex-wide coherence by linking Thurrock with London-adjacent districts; undermines natural community and economic alignments; smaller units reduce service resilience; limited stakeholder support evident.
3 Option	Creates over-large councils (600k–700k) that risk becoming remote from residents; dilutes local identity; significantly higher transition complexity; while financially efficient, less legitimate locally.
5 Option	Several councils fall below sustainability threshold (<300k); fragile in high-cost services (Adults, Children's, SEND); disaggregation costs outweigh benefits, delivering no credible financial payback; fragmented economic geographies.

Table 8.5 Summary rationale for discounting proposals

- **Best4Essex:** Net benefits achieved within 4.5 years. Transition costs are significant due to disaggregation of county services, but offset by efficiencies in leadership, back-office, and third-party spend.
- **Three option:** Delivers the fastest payback (2.4 years) due to larger economies of scale. However, it requires higher upfront transition costs and creates more complex service disaggregation.
- **Alternative 4:** Similar cost profile to Best4Essex but weaker economies of scale and less scope for service integration. Payback not within PWC appraisal timeframe, with higher ongoing risks.
- **Five options:** Transition costs multiplied by the need to create more new councils. Disaggregation costs outweigh efficiencies; the option does not achieve payback within the modelling period. Has two localities facing major funding gap (other options have one).

Experience from Surrey and Hampshire shows that the most costly and disruptive aspect of reorganisation is often the disaggregation of county-wide services such as Adults, Children's, SEND and Public Health. In Essex:

- The Alternative four unitary configuration spreads these risks across four councils, each of which remains large enough to sustain specialist provision.
- The three unitary option concentrates risk in larger units, with significant ICT and HR aggregation/disaggregation challenges in merging multiple systems from across a larger number of existing district councils.
- The five option introduces the highest risk, with smaller councils unable to absorb the duplication of statutory services.

The Best4Essex strikes the balance: disaggregation costs are manageable and supported by critical mass in each unitary. The appraisal demonstrates that this configuration is the only option that balances financial sustainability, service resilience, local identity, and devolution alignment. It performs consistently across the six MHCLG tests and is the most legitimate and deliverable option for Essex.

Why The Best4Essex is right for Essex

The four-unitary model achieves the optimal balance between efficiency and localism.

- Fewer than four unitary authorities' risks creating remote, over-large authorities.
- More than four fragments Essex into councils too small to sustain services and create clear strategic alignment.

Each council in the Best4Essex proposal sits within the recognised "sweet spot" of 325k–640k population. This scale ensures resilience in high-cost services (adults, children's, SEND) while preserving local identity and democratic legitimacy.

This proposal is

- **Genuinely place-based:** Boundaries reflect natural communities and functional economic areas (Thames Estuary, London–Cambridge corridor, Colchester–Tendring).
- **Optimised for resilience:** Councils are large enough for financial stability but not so large as to lose connection with communities.
- **Catalyst for devolution:** Provides four stable, credible partners for the Mayoral Combined County Authority.
- **Built for collaboration:** Builds on existing partnerships (Rochford–Brentwood, North Essex Garden Communities). Aligns with NHS, Police and Fire service footprints
- **Community powered:** Embeds neighbourhood governance (committees, parish/town councils, citizen assemblies). More than 60% of residents supported Neighbourhood Committees

It delivers clear benefits for Essex

- **Residents:** Safer, higher quality services; stronger neighbourhood voice.
- **Businesses:** Clearer, investable geographies with strategic infrastructure planning.
- **Taxpayers:** Significant long-term savings from reduced duplication and stronger financial resilience.
- **Essex as a whole:** A simplified structure with a unified voice for securing devolved powers and investment.

Best4Essex offers the strongest balance of

scale, identity, and deliverability for Essex. It creates councils that are financially sustainable, aligned to natural economic and social geographies, and sized to deliver high-quality services efficiently while keeping decisions close to the communities they serve. Each unitary builds on existing partnerships and shared services, combining sufficient scale to achieve efficiencies with the local insight needed to protect place identity.

The model is future ready, with coherent boundaries for devolution, a clear transition pathway, and a commitment to empowering neighbourhoods. It meets government tests for scale, sustainability, service quality, collaboration, and community engagement offering a structure that can deliver better outcomes, protect local identity, and drive generational change across Essex.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

08 | Public Service Improvement

R8: Service continuity risk in Adults, Children's and SEND at vesting.

Part 3
Transformation and Transition

"What matters is that care, housing and local services stay close to the people who need them"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government - Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies**

✔ **03 | High quality, sustainable services - Strong, joined-up services; financially resilient**

✔ **04 | Meets local needs - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience**

This section shows how the Best4Essex model will improve local government and service delivery. By joining up services and driving reform, the four-unitary configuration creates the conditions for better value, stronger safeguarding, and more responsive councils. It also sets out how this model can underpin housing and economic growth that is essential for Essex's future.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:
Fragmented services and diluted accountability for care, housing, and safety.

What it delivers:
Safe & legal day one, transformation second. Reimagining more effective and digitally mature joined up councils that protect care, housing, and safety while driving reform and continuous improvement.

9.1 | Route to stronger public services

A public service reform board, or similar, could usefully draw representatives from these new councils and other public service providers to ensure these benefits are realised and to share best practices and learning.

Each council will determine, with its citizens and partners, its priorities and the outcomes it wants to see for its communities and then coordinate efforts across the wider public service estate towards them. In doing so, and in addition to this overarching role of systems leadership, the work of the councils will be built on three foundations:

- **Providing services:** delivering of high quality and sustainable public services to our citizens - from getting the basics right, such as emptying the bins, to more complicated and/ or responsive services such as noise nuisance and adult social care.

- **Shaping places:** leading strategic and structural investments to ensure that our communities develop in the long term to be sustainable, inclusive and liveable for future generations - from building houses and schools to protecting the biodiversity of the natural environment.

- **Solving problems:** responding quickly and appropriately to the issues and challenges that arise in the everyday lives of people and communities - from emergency responses to flooding to helping someone whose life has tipped into crisis.

Across all these areas there are opportunities for improvement and innovation, afforded by the structural change that creates a space for new thinking and practice and that can make new ways of working possible. It won't be possible to have all these in place for day one; indeed, experience from other areas suggests that this isn't realistic. However, in the lead up to vesting day these opportunities can be spotted and actively brought into a transformation and innovation programme that can be a core thread of the transition into, and through, the early years of these new councils.

Vision for local government

In section 2 we set out a broad vision for the future growth and development of Essex and its communities. In addressing critical socio-economic factors, and focusing on its longer-term shaping role, each new council will work for the benefit of its communities. We also see that how this work is done, the means and values and cultures through which these local authorities will work, is just as important. We set out in section 11.2 how each local authority will need to do this work as part of the transition process. It represents a genuine opportunity to move away from outdated modes of operating, such as new public management, and towards new, innovative models of working as are emerging in pockets within the UK and globally.

Opportunities for improvement

There are some areas in which we know we want to make public service improvements:

"In the process of considering different local governance scenarios, there is a significant opportunity to not only reorganise, but actually redesign the organisations to optimise service delivery." (EY - Independent Analysis of Governance Scenarios and Public Service Reform in County areas)

These opportunities include, but are not limited to, the following:

Geography
- **Reducing boundary issues** eliminating confusion and/or overlap between tiers
- **Partnerships** seeking alignment with other public service providers - to drive collaboration and realise efficiency saving between organisations (and not just within the council)
- **Focusing on local issues** developing stronger, more meaningful, and empowered communities through Neighbourhood Area Committees

Workforce
- **Capacity** recruiting, retaining and developing our best staff to deliver on our ambition for change
- **Managerial savings** with fewer organisations and more streamlined functions, reviewing middle and senior management as well as operational staff
- **Culture** Establishing a high-performance culture - actively modelling the behaviours and actions that will form the DNA of each new council

Services
- **Economies of scale** operating on a larger population footprint
- **Service quality** focusing on what really matters to local people
- **Demand management** understanding, aggregating and managing demand - to offer a better service to our citizens in ways that best meet their needs
- **Prevention** A renewed focus on early intervention so that upstream investment in the short term repays a long-term dividend for people and communities

- **Business support** More streamlined and coherent offer to local businesses - removing barriers and joining up support to enable our local businesses to grow and thrive
- **Property and assets** review the potential for asset rationalisation and reflecting new forms of working
- **Contracts** review services to identify opportunities to redesign, recommission or renegotiate contract

Governance
- **Structure** not simply recreating a larger organisation on existing and familiar design principles and service clusters, but instead creatively assessing new organisational forms and ways of working
- **Representation** Clearer and streamlined representation and decision-making - with fewer councillors and elections and greater transparency over who makes which decisions the costs of democracy will be reduced
- **Insights and local knowledge** joining up data and leveraging tech to analyse and support the evidence-led identification of opportunities and challenges in local communities

Opportunities for Innovation

In addition to organisational cost savings and improvements, there are multiple opportunities for innovation that can deliver stronger, more responsive public services. As noted above, it will be for each new council to identify and take forward innovation opportunities suited to their local context. We suggest establishing innovation labs in each new authority to build the capability and capacity to pursue this agenda.

To illustrate the breadth of opportunity, examples from the UK and globally are set out below.

Participatory Budgeting Platforms

What: Residents propose and vote on small capital projects.

UK Fit: Allocate 1–3% of capital budget; combine online voting with ward workshops.

Quick Win: Pilot in 2–3 deprived wards to build visible trust and accountability.

Digital Twin (Lightweight)

What: 3D models simulate planning, transport, and flood scenarios.

UK Fit: Start with a regeneration zone using Ordnance Survey and Environment Agency open data.

Quick Win: Apply in planning consultations to visualise traffic, flooding and housing massing impacts.

Predictive Highways Maintenance (AI)

What: Cameras, drones and machine learning predict potholes and asset failures.

UK Fit: Pilot on high-complaint corridors during winter; integrate with FixMyStreet.

Quick Win: Launch a pre-winter sealing programme.

Nature-Based Flood and Heat Resilience

What: Rain gardens, swales, green roofs and water plazas.

UK Fit: Retrofit flood-prone streets and parks, aligned with Active Travel priorities.

Quick Win: Convert a council car park row into a rain-absorbing bio-swale.

Place Based Integrated Community Service Hubs

What: Co-locate housing, benefits, employment and health in accessible community venues.

UK Fit: Partner with NHS Integrated Care Systems and Primary Care Networks; single triage, shared case management.

Quick Win: Establish one hub in a high-demand ward with extended hours.

Circular Economy Procurement

What: Require reuse, repair, recycled content and end-of-life plans in contracts.

UK Fit: Apply to all contracts >£50k, starting with uniforms, furniture and construction.

Quick Win: Adopt a "Circular First" procurement specification pack.

Data Trusts and Ethical Data Governance

What: Citizen-governed data sharing for mobility, planning and health.

UK Fit: Establish a resident advisory panel; publish datasets by default.

Quick Win: Release cycling, air-quality and wellbeing data through a community dashboard.

Overall, we contend that the Best4Essex unitary model offers the greatest opportunity to deliver on the promise of innovation. By combining scale, resilience and local responsiveness, it creates the conditions for councils to integrate health and care, devolve services to communities, and invest in digital and green innovation. These opportunities are rooted in the issues communities face every day and therefore play out most powerfully at local level.

Service disaggregation and aggregation: Opportunities and risks

We also acknowledge here that all proposals will require a combination of disaggregation of county services and the aggregation of a range of district council functions and services.

We recognise the challenges:

- High-cost, high-risk county services (Adults, Children's, SEND, Public Health, Education, Transport, Libraries) must be disaggregated carefully.

- District services (Planning, Refuse, Housing including homeless services, Benefits) aggregated into new unitary footprints.

- There will also be critical dependencies with current County Minerals and Waste Planning and Strategic Development in terms of disaggregation and also which resources will move to the MCCA as new responsibilities around strategic planning are implemented – this will be dynamic and will need careful alignment and consideration.

But there are also opportunities in these times of structural change. In such moments of disruption, things that were previously thought to be impossible become possible (as we saw during COVID-19). Reorganisation is an opportunity not to be missed. To rethink and redesign things afresh, with innovation as a core driver of change. Not just rebuilding a new version of what went before, but fundamentally reimagining the way we can work, embedding a systems leadership role at the core of the new authorities, and drawing on staff and resident ideas for change.

9.2 | Route to improving outcomes for children and adults with care and support needs

Children's Services and SEND

The latest Ofsted judgments across Essex councils show strong performance "Outstanding" in both Essex County (2023) and Thurrock (2024), and "Good" in Southend (2024). Similarly, Ofsted SEND visits have reported strong performance across the area.

To ensure safe and legal services on day one and sustained improvement thereafter, each new unitary will confirm statutory leadership (DCS, DASS), a shadow-period improvement plan, and a common practice framework for Early Help, edge-of-care and permanence, aligned to MHCLG's July guidance on continuity and partnership working.

Our **Best4Essex** model will build upon these strengths and further enhance outcomes for all by building stronger and more effective local collaborative working at locality level and maximising the benefits of linking up with other council functions, including housing and leisure services.

In South Essex (Southend, Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point) we will align improvement to a single Mid & South Essex ICB footprint, a single Better Care Fund plan, and s.75 pooled budgets for Family Help interfaces (including perinatal/0–5, adolescent risk and youth justice pathways). This concentrates accountability where need is greatest and enables targeted, place-based support.

Current performance

There are variations in volumes of children in care and children in need, with higher rates in the urban unitary authorities (Southend, Thurrock) reflecting deprivation rather than performance; Essex County rates are below peers. The table below shows rates for Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock, compared against benchmarks.

Table 9.1 Looked after children – Rates per 10,000 children (2023/24)

Looked-after children	Outcome in LA area	Peers	Region	England
Essex	35.6	58.4	50.3	69.7
Southend-on-Sea	79.3		50.3	69.7
Thurrock	63.9		50.3	1.7

Source: Department for Education (2024) Children looked after in England including adoptions

The table below shows rates per 10,000 children for Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock, compared against benchmarks.

Table 9.2 Children in Need - Rates per 10,000 children (2023/24)

Children in need	Outcome in LA area	Peers	Region	England
Essex	184	303	237	325
Southend-on-Sea	265		237	325
Thurrock	321		237	325

Source: Department for Education (2024) Children in Need

The Greater Essex data covers a large diverse population with both densely populated urban centres and sparsely populated rural areas. There are areas of significant deprivation as well as more prosperous areas with lower levels of need. Hence there will be considerable variation of need and outcomes contained within the overall Essex figure. The **Best4Essex** model will be better placed at identifying areas where the greatest needs are located, and by closer working across all council services, be best placed to address those variations.

The **Best4Essex** proposes North East and North West unitary authorities which are consistent with existing Children's Services Quadrants. Mid and South Essex quadrants cover the area of central Essex plus Castle Point and Basildon. These would become part of the South Essex Unitary together with Southend and Thurrock.

Family support integration

Thurrock has 10 Family Hubs and Southend 9 (Children's Centres) whilst there are 12 covering the whole of Essex County delivered in partnership with NHS and the voluntary sector. These are located one in each District Council area and aligned to children's services operational quadrants). **Best4Essex** provides the opportunity of extending Family Hubs across all new Essex unitary authorities through linking up and co-location with libraries, leisure and housing services made more achievable through joining up with former District Council services integration not achievable in the current two-tier system.

West Essex

Uttlesford District
Spangles Family Hub

Harlow District
Treehouse Family Hub

Epping District
Brambles Family Hub

South Essex

Brentwood District
Larchwood Family Hub

Basildon District
Northlands Park Family Hub

Castle Point District
Little Lions Family Hub

Rochford District
Oak Tree Family Hub

North Essex

Colchester District
Berechurch Family Hub

Tendring District
Sydney House Family Hub

Mid Essex

Braintree District
Carousel Family Hub

Maldon District
Maldon Family Hub

Chelmsford District
Chelmsford Central Family

Figure 9.1 Essex Family Hubs   https://essexfamilywellbeing.co.uk/about-us/your-family-hubs-in-essex/
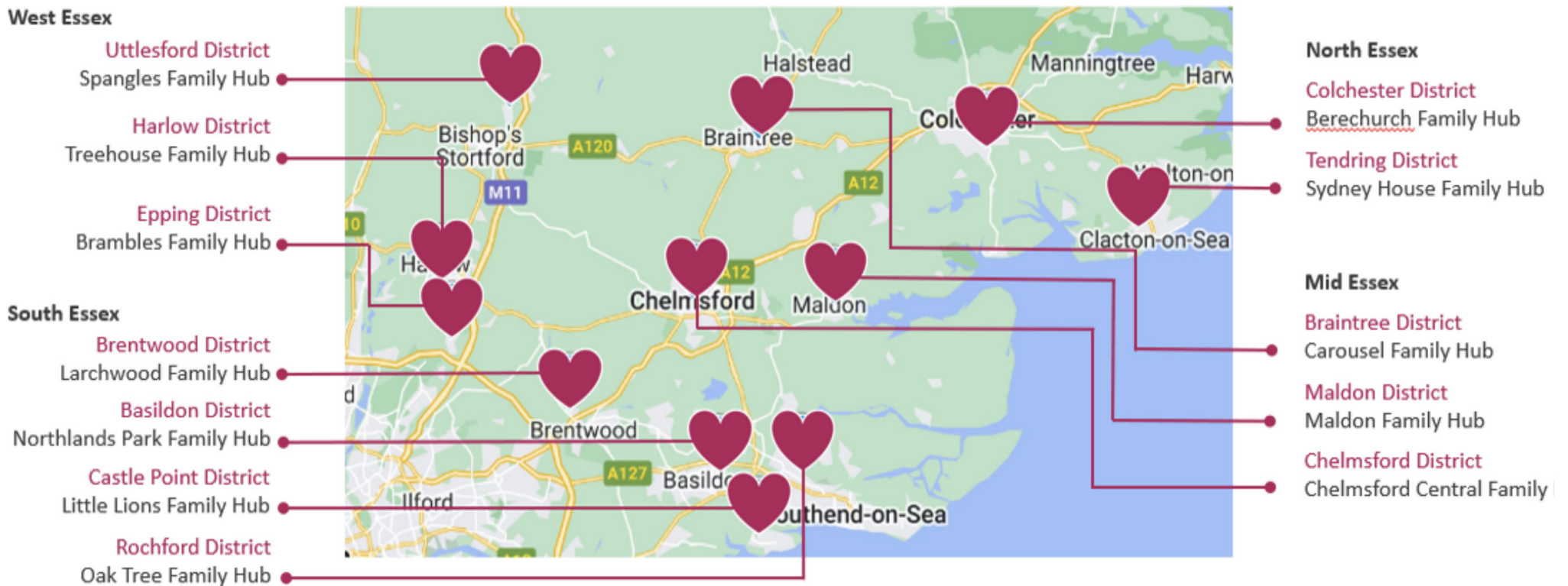
The table shows family support costs averaged out across all children in the area, for Essex, Southend-on-Sea, Thurrock and associated benchmarks

Family support costs	Own	Peers	Region	England
Essex	188	121	149	129
Southend-on-Sea	105		149	129
Thurrock	148		149	129

Table 9.3 Family support costs per capita (2023/24)

Source: Department for Education (2024) LA expenditure on children's services - unrounded data

The relatively lower level of recorded spend on Family Support services in Thurrock and Southend whilst delivering a higher volume of Family hubs / Children's Centres per head of population is indicative of the added value that can be obtained by linking up the delivery of family support services with other parts of the council – which is not immediately available to a county council in a two-tier system.

Each of the new unitary authorities will be able to focus the development of Family Hubs in areas with greatest needs, taking account of health inequalities and deprivation data contained within the current Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Essex which shows Tendring (in the proposed North East unitary) as the 32nd most deprived district in England with the highest workless households and the

highest percentage of children in low income households across Essex.

The new unitary councils would be able to use a common set of shared demand-reduction KPIs (e.g. CiN and LAC rate trajectories, re-referral rates, EIP timeliness), supported by monthly multi-agency performance boards and measure the effectiveness of this investment on overall performance and outcomes.

How Best4Essex delivers for Essex residents – Children and families:

- **Balanced outcomes** ECC has significantly lower rates of Children in Care (35.6 per 10,000) compared with Southend (79.3) and Thurrock (63.9). Children in Need rates are also much higher in Thurrock (321 per 10,000) than in Essex (184). **Best4Essex** balances these extremes by pooling resilience across four footprints.

- **Meeting demand Best4Essex** ensures that the unitary including Thurrock and Southend are of a scale which results in it having sufficient resource – budget and staffing allocation – to be able to manage the levels of demand and need.

- **Public Health** funded services (e.g. health visiting and school nursing) and preventative and promotional health programmes such as weight management and smoking impact on outcomes for families.

Table 9.4 Public Health Grant

Council	Public Health Grant (2025/26) (£m)	Grant per head of population (£)	Total Public health spend (£)
Essex	72.57	47.04	76.75
Southend-on-Sea	11.15	58.56	11.33
Thurrock	13.49	72.81	(n/a)

How Best4Essex delivers for Essex residents – Children and families:

- **South Essex**, encompassing Thurrock, Southend, Basildon and Castle Point has a higher overall concentration of deprivation and health need. It will have a significantly higher Public Health grant than other unitary authorities in Best4Essex, reflecting the higher levels of demand in relation to children in need and children in care. The Best4Essex model provides clear accountability within one system footprint (one ICB, one BCF, one housing/employment strategy) so resources and decisions follow need. This avoids averaging-out need in a larger, less accountable geography and is entirely consistent with MHCLG's expectation to prioritise continuity, partnership working and place-based integration through transition8.

- **North East** which includes the most deprived area within Essex (Tendring) will have a Public Health team able to focus on addressing health inequalities and the impact of high numbers of children being in low income households.

- **Operational continuity** Best4Essex best aligns with Essex's existing Children's Services quadrants, reducing disruption. By contrast, Thurrock's preferred "London-centric" model would cut across quadrant boundaries and risk the disruption of established services.

- **Family support integration** Thurrock has 10 Family Hubs and Southend 9 (Children's Centres) whilst there are 12 covering the whole of Essex County. Best4Essex provides the opportunity of extending Family Hubs across all Essex unitary authorities through linking up and co-location with libraries, leisure and housing services – made more achievable through joining up childrens services with former District Council services - integration not achievable in the current two-tier system.

- **Financial Case** The Best4Essex model complements the programme's 4UA payback and avoids double-counting. We signpost the financial narrative (transition costs, phasing, payback) in Section 7, consistent with the latest model outputs.

Greater Essex has a large backlog of cases awaiting an assessment for an Education Health and Care plan EHC). This included over 3000 in Essex where the average completion rate in early 2025 was 345 days (far exceeding the 20 days statutory target). The County Council receives between 300-400 requests for EHC assessments each month. Southend had, until recently a backlog of 300 cases. This has been reduced over the last 12 months to19. The size of Thurrock's backlog is not within the public domain.

The Best4Essex model will be well placed to manage this demand by apportioning the current backlog and the current/future demand to a dedicated team focusing on particular communities. Each council will have sufficient scale to be able to attract key professional staff, vital to addressing the demand for these assessments. Southend Borough Council reported to the Ombudsman **https://www.lgo.org.uk/decisions/education/special-educational-needs/24-017-502** in June 2025 that it had succeeded in recruiting 20 additional locum education psychologists and an additional 12 SEND assessment staff in order to address the backlog. Our proposed 4 unitary councils will be well placed to work in a similar fashion to tackle the inherited backlog.

However, the potential costs of funding resultant EHC plans for all of those children and young people currently awaiting an assessment, and the continuing heavy demand for new assessments will remain a major financial risk to all post LGR unitary authorities, whether that is a 3, 4 or 5 unitary model. We have highlighted this as an issue that will needs to be addressed by Government in section 7.3

Adults Services

The Best4Essex model creates councils of a scale to shape resilient care markets, while remaining local enough to avoid remote commissioning and over-reliance on out-of-area placements. Alignment to ICB footprints (West, North-East, Central, South) means each new unitary works with one ICB, strengthening place-based integration and avoiding split accountabilities. Emerging plans from NHS England and local ICBs indicate that there may be a reconfiguration of ICBs across the East of England and the creation of a single Greater Essex ICB by 2027-28.

Integration with housing and community assets (extra care, libraries, leisure) will be easier when these services sit under the same council.

Currently extra care provision is uneven (for example larger in Colchester/Chelmsford, less in Rochford/Castle Point). Unitary council based commissioning can directly address this, as is the case in Thurrock and Southend. In addition, much of the current provision in Essex is owner-occupied and unavailable to publicly funded residents.

Current Performance

CQC have published Assurance Reports for Essex, Southend and Thurrock during 2025. Essex is rated "Good" across all areas except for timeliness of "assessing needs". Southend is also rated as "Good" with two areas for improvement - care provision/continuity and Safe pathways/transition. Thurrock's Assurance report is also rated as "Good" with one area for improvement, Equity in experience and outcomes, and one area of outstanding performance, partnerships and communities. There are though variations across the county and local authorities in some key outcome measures where improvements could be achieved.

For older residents, there is strong support to maintaining people's independence and avoiding or delaying admission to long-term residential care. There is some variation across the county and moving to the Best4Essex unitary structure will have positive benefits in strengthening links with community support networks and promoting the role of local VCFS organisations, so enhancing opportunities for people to remain at home with support. The numbers of permanent admissions to residential care for adults aged 65+ there is variable picture with Thurrock exceeding the national average but both Southend and Essex performing better.

Southend and Thurrock perform strongly on the numbers of people supported to live at home (over 65) exceeding the national average. Essex's figures are below the national average, although this may reflect the numbers of older people who fund their own care at home, given the higher proportion of more affluent older people in many areas of Essex. The numbers of permanent admissions to residential care for adults aged 18-64 shows a strong performance across Essex with numbers substantially below the national average in Essex, Southend and Thurrock.

Measures of the effectiveness of reablement indicate below average performance across Essex, Southend and Thurrock, although this is stronger in Essex County. For Direct payments, Southend and Thurrock exceed national averages whilst Essex is performing at or around the national average.

ASCOF[9] Measure	Description	Essex	Southend	Thurrock	England
1C2A	Adults receiving direct payments (%)	24.20%	27.00%	33.70%	25%
2A1	Permanent admissions to residential/nursing care (18–64) per 100,000	6.9	6.5	11.1	15.2
2A2	Permanent admissions to residential/nursing care (65+) per 100,000	349.3	435.6	676.3	578
2D	Reablement: % at home 91 days after hospital discharge (65+)	77.10%	55.00%	53.00%	81.8%
SALT	Number of people (per 100,000) aged 65 and above receiving local authority long-term adult social care support in the community (at home)	2,036	2,981	3,743	2,283

Table 9.5 Headline performance data

Extra care housing

This is a vital and valuable alternative to residential care for many if available throughout the county, but with greater numbers of developments in some areas than others. Essex County Council's Adult Services Map10 indicates that across the County, including Thurrock and Southend, there are just 221 people over 65 accommodated in Extra Care schemes funded by the council, compared to 3,839 in residential or nursing home care. The opportunities of linking up council's housing and development functions with adult social care commissioning teams can help to encourage these developments in areas where there is a shortfall. The **Best4Essex** model creates councils which have the size and therefore the added ability to influence the market as well as being small enough to be able to focus of particular community requirements.

Working with the NHS

Adult Social Care works closely with the NHS and partnership working with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), with NHS provider Trusts – hospitals, mental health trusts and community health services is vital to delivering joined up services AND better outcomes for the population. There are currently three ICBs covering Essex: Suffolk and North East Essex, Mid & South Essex and Hertfordshire and West Essex. Our 4 unitary proposal ensures that each unitary council relates to just one of the current ICBs responsible for health services across Essex:

ICB	Current Local Authority Areas	Best4Essex Unitary
Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB	Epping Forest, Harlow, Uttlesford	West Essex
Suffolk and North East ICB	Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	North East Essex
Mid & South Essex ICB	Chelmsford, Maldon Rochford, Brentwood	Central Essex
Mid & South Essex ICB	Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, Southend on Sea	South Essex

Table 9.6 Alignment with ICBs

However, there are plans for a reduction in the overall number of ICH across England and plans for a clustering of ICBs in the East of England are emerging with the potential direction of travel of the creation of a single ICB for Greater Essex by 2027-2811. This will result in all **Best4Essex** unitaries relating to a single ICB and providing for greater opportunities for co-ordinated and collaborative working between corn coils and the NHS across Greater Essex.

There has been an emphasis on developing placed-based working relationships and partnerships with key NHS agencies, including Primary Care Network. This strengthens our place-based approach for **Best4Essex** and provides a solid foundation on which to plan for even better outcomes and a greater consistency of performance across the greater Essex area.

Building on the strong working relationships with Primary Care Networks, this four unitary authority proposal provides the opportunity to further enhance integrated working between Adult Social Care and primary care.

Market Shaping

Each of the new unitary councils will be well placed to develop the effectiveness of market shaping, aimed at ensuring that there is a strong, high quality care market thriving within the footprint of the council. It is critical that the area is not too large which risks some areas remaining less well served by local services, nor too small which can limit the commissioning potential of the council and lead to restricted markets and more risks of reliance on out of area placements.

How Best4Essex delivers for Greater Essex residents – Adult Social Care

- **Right-sized commissioning** Best4Essex creates unitary authorities large enough to shape resilient care markets but avoids the over-centralisation risk of the three unitary option or the fragmentation of the Five unitary option

- **Promoting independence and reducing reliance on residential care** Best4Essex creates unitary authorities which are best able to focus its commissioning on local services designed to promote independence and reduce/delay the need for older residents to need residential care. Close collaboration with primary care through alignment with Primary

Care Networks, expanded collaboration with local Voluntary sector organisations and closer working with housing services and deployment of Disabled Facilities grant are all features of the Best4Essex model.

- **Performance variation** On direct payments, Southend (27%) and Thurrock (33.7%) outperform Essex (24.2%). But Essex is stronger on reablement (77% vs 53% in Thurrock). Best4Essex allows pooling of strengths and consistent levelling-up.

- **Housing and care linkage** Across Essex, Southend and Thurrock, only 221 older people are in council-funded extra care

compared with nearly 3,839 in residential care. Best4Essex prioritises combining housing and ASC commissioning to expand extra care provision.

- **ICB co-terminosity** Best4Essex ensures each new unitary aligns with just one Integrated Care Board (ICB). Currently ECC spans three ICBs, creating split accountabilities

- **Neighbourhood model** – By linking community assets (libraries, leisure, housing, VCFS) with health and care pathways, Best4Essex strengthens prevention. Thurrock's London-alignment option risks integration drifting towards outer-London providers.

9.3 | Route to economic growth

Key levers for economic growth are actions by the local authority either directly or indirectly (through influence on public sector partners) to:

- Encourage business development
- Attract investment, and
- Invest in local infrastructure (including transport networks and digital connectivity)

Work undertaken for the Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework 2016-2036 (2017) identified employment growth sites with capacity over 1,000m^2, as shown below.

The report notes that many of these identified housing sites are located along four key corridors - The A12 & Great Eastern Mainline Corridor (Brentwood-Chelmsford-Colchester), the A120 Haven Gateway Corridor, the M11 London Stansted Cambridge Corridor and the A127 and A13 Corridors.

Figure 9.2 Economic Growth Corridors

Our proposal, with its choice of geographical boundaries very much underpinned by the four key corridors, offers the best opportunity for clear and coherent local authority strategic direction to bring in investment and achieve the potential of these employment sites, working closely with the new MCCA.

In addition, because our option for LGR is centred around a sense of locality and coherent economic geography, it promotes the deployment of a place-based focus. This means that actions can be more readily undertaken that revitalise town centres and support rural businesses to diversify. Such potential actions include:

- Promote the advantages of the area to attract start-ups, entrepreneurs and growing businesses
- Align with economic growth corridors to simplify delivery sequencing with local growth planning and MCCA and build investment security for both institutional and inward investment.
- Foster a culture of innovation by encouraging collaboration between local businesses.
- Strengthen hubs where residents, businesses and visitors come together, blending heritage with growth and cultural events, and redeveloping underutilised spaces for mixed use

- Enhance business support with mentoring programmes, access to training and signposting to national and regional opportunities.

Through a coherent place based approach and strong identity, these and similar actions would be facilitated in all of the four localities of Essex.
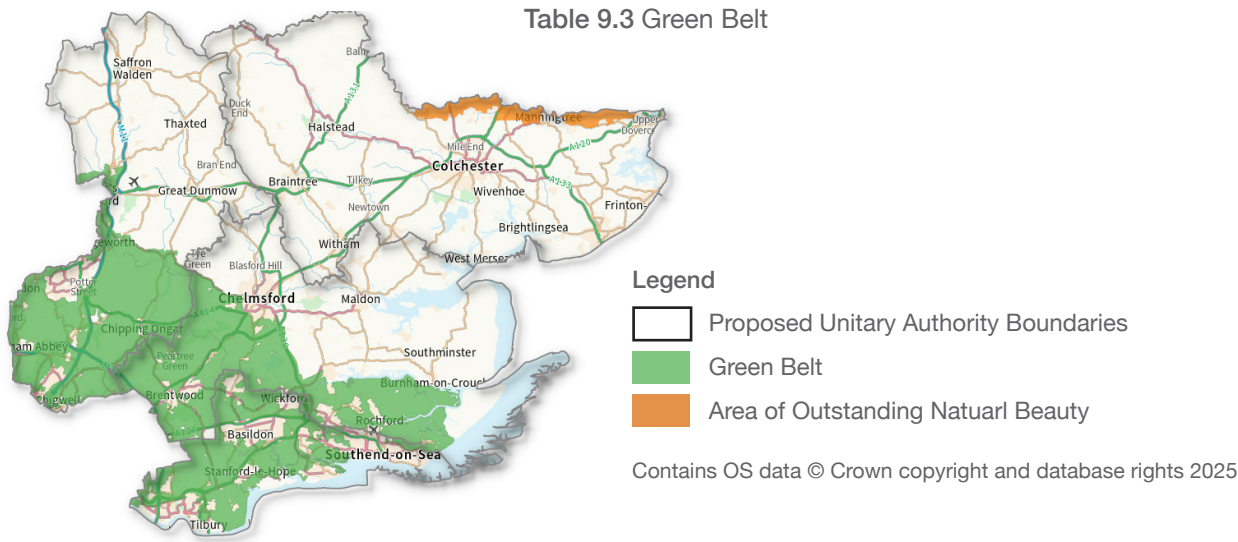
9.4 | Route to housing delivery

Emerging Local Plans in Essex will bring forward land to deliver some 148,000 homes by the mid-2030s, around 9,700 a year.
It should be noted that planning reform changes and specifically the reintroduction of strategic planning responsibilities will affect broad locations for housing as new spatial development strategies come into force.
As these will take a strategic infrastructure and investment first approach these changes will support our configuration as it is based on existing economic growth corridors, structures and infrastructure.

The specific distribution of local authorities has a significant impact on flexibility for housing. Below we compare the Best4Essex and Alternative 4 locality models. The four localities covered by the Best4Essex model would have a green belt component ranging from 0% to 60%, whereas the four localities
in the Alternative 4 model would have up to 82% of their land covered by green belt, a significantly tighter restriction.

Best4Essex	North Essex	West Essex	Central Essex	South Essex	Total
Green-belt (hectares)	0	35100	37940	21650	94,960
Total area (hectares)	128,30	101,070	102,020	36,020	367,140
% green belt	0%	35%	37%	**60**%	25.8%
Alternative 4	**North West**	**North East**	**South West**	**South East**	**Total**
Green-belt (hectares)	16,640	0	56,250	21,800	94,960
Total area (hectares)	159,510	102,640	68,640	36,350	367,140
% green belt	10%	0%	82%	60%	25.8%

Table 9.7 Green Belt comparison

Source: MHCLG (2024) Live tables on local authority Green Belt statistics: 2023-24

Table 9.3 Green Belt

Legend

▢ Proposed Unitary Authority Boundaries

▮ Green Belt

▮ Area of Outstanding Natuarl Beauty

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However, it should be noted that the challenges of the housing targets are considerable for Essex - with overall targets representing a level 85% higher than current building annual rates (over the period 2021/22 to 2023/24) - and particularly challenging for South Essex, with a 310% aspiration. By contrast, the planned increase in housing levels is up to 250% in the Alternative 4 proposal. The table below compares the housing targets for the two four unitary options. This means a coherent investment/economic based approach which our model supports is even more critical to diversify and accelerate delivery.

Best4Essex	North Essex	West Essex	Central Essex	South Essex	Total
Current housing targets	2,626	1,914	2,056	3,719	10,315
Proposed housing targets	3,431	2,607	3,316	4,414	13,768
Average net new housing stock	2,864	1,344	2,175	1,077	7,460
% change proposed housing vs net new housing stock	20%	94%	52%	310%	85%
Alternative 4	**North West**	**North East**	**South West**	**South East**	**Total**
Current housing targets	2,401	2,089	2,908	2,917	10,315
Proposed housing targets	3253	2877	3615	4023	13768
Average net new housing stock	2,599	2,149	1,565	1,148	7,461
% change proposed housing vs net new housing stock	25%	34%	131%	250%	85%

Table 9.8 Housing growth comparison

Source: LGC (2025) "Mapped: Housing targets for each council under proposed method) for current and proposed housing targets", MHCLG (2024) Net additional dwellings by local authority district, England 2001-02 to 2023-24 (Live Table 122), RedQuadrant analysis

Work undertaken for the Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework 2016-2036 (2017) identified sites for meeting housing growth requirements, as shown below.
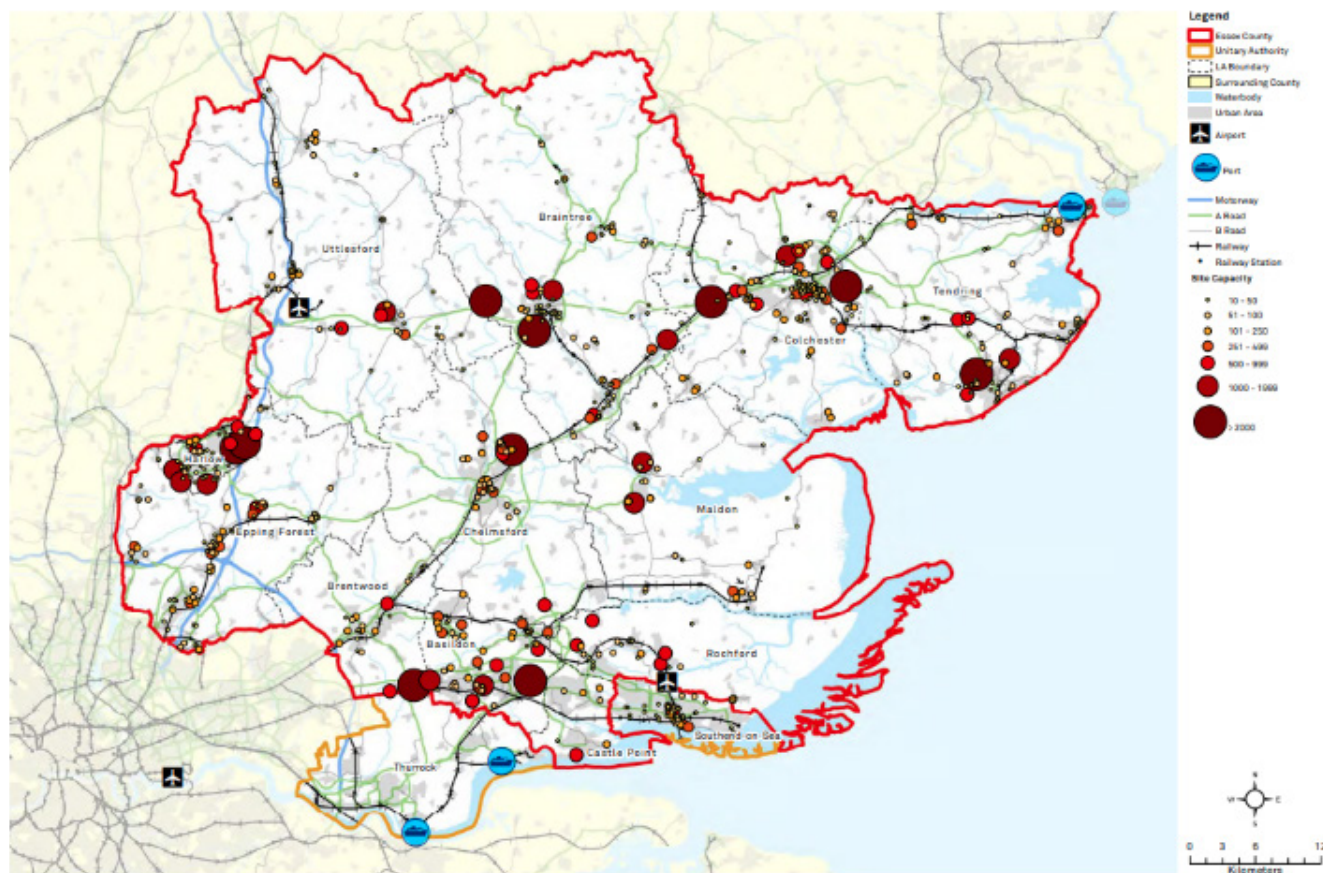
The report notes that many of these identified housing sites are located along four key corridors - The A12 & Great Eastern Mainline Corridor (Brentwood-Chelmsford-Colchester), the A120 Haven Gateway Corridor, the M11 London Stansted Cambridge Corridor and the A127 and A13 Corridors.

Our proposal, with its choice of geographical boundaries very much underpinned by the four key corridors, offers the best opportunity for reduced boundary frictions between local authorities to accelerate and simplify delivery, bring in investment and achieve these identified housing sites.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

09 | Neighbourhoods and Local Empowerment

R6: Perceived loss of local identity and democratic voice undermines legitimacy.

R12: Resident engagement fatigue.

D10: NACs design and pilots must be in place for vesting.

10 | Leadership and governance

"We want councillors who are visible and accountable in our neighbourhoods"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **01 | Single tier local government - Four unitaries replace two tier system**

✔ **04 | Meets local needs - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience**

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day**

This section sets out how the **Best4Essex** model will provide strong and accountable leadership. It outlines electoral arrangements that ensure effective local representation, the neighbourhood structures that will empower citizens, and the partnership working needed across systems and geographies. Together, these arrangements will guarantee visible, engaged and responsive local government.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Remote councils without visible, accountable councillors.

What it delivers:

Safe & legal day one, Transformation, Visible councillors, empowered neighbourhoods, accountable governance.

10.1 | Indicative electoral arrangements

It is helpful to consider the potential for localising accountability, decision-making, service delivery and partnership working, as part of the proposals for Greater Essex.

First, we turn to accountability and arrangements for democratic representation. While this may well be subject to review by the electoral commission as part of transition, it is helpful to offer some thoughts as to the impact of our proposal on elected councillors and representation, in line with the criteria shared in the Minister's letter of 5th February 2025:

d) include early views as to the councillor numbers that will ensure both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas, in line with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England guidance.

The idea of "electoral equality" is fundamental to any council's democratic function - within a council area, the number of electors per councillor should be as even as possible across wards and division. It is achieved by defining an electoral geography which ensures a broad measure of parity in the number of electors per councillor per division. Given the reduction in Councillor numbers, it is important that new councils develop ways of working that enable councillors to effectively connect with, engage and empower the communities they represent.

Effective representation must therefore strike an appropriate balance between ensuring

- there are enough elected councillors that local people know who they are and feel represented by them; it is important that as the councils get bigger, citizens don't feel they are more remote and detached from decision-making.

- there are sufficient councillors in each new authority to effectively run the council and fulfil all the obligations required of them in the discharge of their duties; it is important that there are neither too few, in which case the Council won't operate effectively, nor too many, in which case there will be many without a clear role, and which will place a cost burden on the new councils.

As has been noted elsewhere, this is not an exercise in reducing local democratic accountability. We see it, instead, as an opportunity to simplify and clarify arrangements, therefore enhancing representation and accountability. The following sets out what that may look like for our four unitary solution.

Current situation

There are currently almost 700 councillors in Greater Essex, excluding local Town and parish councillors (620 district and unitary councillors and 78 County councillors). This is an average of one councillor for every 2,005 electors, ranging from 1:1543 in Brentwood to 1:3,299 in Basildon. Put another way, it is a ratio across Essex of 5.1 councillors to every 10,000 electors.

Councillors in single-tier areas across England typically represent between 2,000 and 4,600 electors. Indeed, Ernst + Young's[12] analysis of recent unitary authorities shows an average number of councillors per authority to be 92 with an average ratio of one councillor for every 3,296 electors.

This equates to between 2.2 and 5.7 councillors per 10,000 electors. 90% of all single-tier councils operate within this range. Looking only at unitary councils, the average number of councillors per 10,000 population is 3.1.

This data suggests that the current number of councillors in Essex, in aggregate, needs to be reduced. To reach the average of 3.1 councillors per 10,000 electors suggests a total across all four new councils of 434, ranging from 74 in Essex West to 148 in Essex South. Clearly, these numbers are too high to be workable.

Essex

The 78 divisions in Essex align with district boundaries – there are no divisions which lie in two or more districts.

The table below shows the number of divisions per district:

District	Number of divisions
Basildon	9
Braintree	8
Brentwood	4
Castle Point	5
Chelmsford	9
Colchester	9
Epping Forest	7
Harlow	5
Maldon	4
Rochford	5
Tendring	8
Uttlesford	5

Data from Boundary Commission – Essex County Council boundaries 2024

Figure 10.1 Electoral Divisions within Essex

Proposal

In exploring potential scenarios, we have used the boundary commission's recommended geography as a pragmatic starting point for modelling future councillor numbers across Greater Essex. Through this modelling work we have identified 95 electoral wards across Greater Essex:

- 78 in the Essex CC area (based on the ECC divisions from the ECC boundary review).

- 8 in Thurrock (grouping the new Thurrock wards from the Thurrock boundary review which give electoral parity with the units in the wider Essex area); and

- 9 in Southend (grouping existing wards to ensure electoral parity with the wider Essex area)

Looking at the numbers, by applying the maximum number of three councillors per division, as advised by the electoral commission we would achieve the following levels of representation across the four councils proposed in the Best4Essex:

- North (75 councillors)

- West (51 councillors)

- Central (66 councillors)

- South (93 councillors)

In total this provides 285 councillors across all four councils, a drop of 513 councillors (64%). In aggregate, these 285 councillors will serve greater Essex's 1,399,365 electors at a ratio of

1 for every 4,910 electors and 2.04 per 10,000 electors. These are on the low side to the comparator information, but as noted above, are broadly comparable with recent unitary councils: Somerset (4,898 proposed) and North Yorkshire (5,390). Specifically:

- the number of divisions range from 17 in the West to 31 in the South, therefore with 51 and 93 councillors respectively.

- this provides a range of electors per councillor from 4,663 in the West and 5,083 in the North.

- in turn, the number of councillors per 10,000 electorate ranges from 1.97 in the North to 2.14 in the West.

This modelling is illustrated in the table below.

Table 10.1 Councillor numbers - Detail

New Unitary	Existing councils	Electorate	Divisions	3 Councillors per division	Electorate per Councillor	Councillors per 10,000 electorate
North	Braintree	120,169	8	24	5,007	
West	Colchester	141,251	9	27	5,232	
Central	Tendring	119,818	8	24	4,992	
South	**North**	**381,238**	**25**	**75**	**5,083**	**1.97**
	Epping Forest	100,057	7	21	4,765	
	Harlow	65,849	5	15	4,390	
	Uttlesford	71,898	5	15	4,793	
Central	**West**	**237,804**	**17**	**51**	**4,663**	**2.14**
	Brentwood	60,179	4	12	5,015	
	Chelmsford	135,577	9	27	5,021	
	Maldon	53,510	4	12	4,459	
	Rochford	68,534	5	15	4,569	
South	**Central**	**317,800**	**22**	**66**	**4,815**	**2.08**
	Thurrock	122,245	8	24	5,094	
	Basildon	138,569	9	27	5,132	
	Castle Point	69,076	5	15	4,605	
	Southend	132,633	9	27	4,912	
	South	**462,523**	**31**	**93**	**4,973**	**2.01**
Greater Essex		**1,399,365**	**95**	**285**	**4,910**	**2.04**

In summary form, then, electoral representation for the four new unitary councils are as follows:

Table 10.2 Councillor numbers - Summary

New Unitary	Electorate	Divisions	3 Councillors per division	Electorate per Councillor	Councillors per 10,000 electorate
North	381,238	25	75	5,083	1.97
West	237,804	17	51	4,663	2.14
Central	317,800	22	66	4,815	2.08
South	462,523	31	93	4,973	2.01
Greater Essex	**1,399,365**	**95**	**285**	**4,910**	**2.04**

This modelling illustrates the four proposed unitary councils are viable and sustainable in terms of arrangements for local democratic representation.

10.2 | Civic and ceremonial arrangements

It is important that Essex's long-standing civic traditions are preserved through reorganisation. The county's ceremonial roles Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff will continue unchanged, as they have in other areas. In Cheshire, for example, the Lieutenancies Act 1997 was amended to reflect new unitary authorities, while the ceremonial county remained intact. The same principle applies here. Greater Essex will remain a single ceremonial county, with continuity in historic offices and functions. Alongside this, each new unitary council will be able to establish or retain its own civic identity, through Mayors, Chairs or other traditions, ensuring both county-wide heritage and local pride are safeguarded.

10.3 | Indicative neighbourhood arrangements

Resident voice, community and neighbourhood empowerment are at the heart of our proposal and thinking. The criteria for LGR includes the requirement that "new unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment". Further, MHCLG's feedback to the interim plan (7th May 2025), stated:

 "In your final proposal(s) we would welcome detail on your plans for neighbourhood-based governance, the impact on parish councils, and thoughts about formal neighbourhood partnerships and area committees."

The forthcoming English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will introduce a requirement on all local authorities, in England, to establish effective neighbourhood governance. The main goal of neighbourhood governance is to move decision-making closer to residents, so decisions are made by people who understand local needs. Additionally, developing neighbourhood-based approaches will provide opportunities to organise public services to meet local needs better.

Essex will therefore establish Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) across all four new unitary councils, ensuring consistent coverage and a clear framework for neighbourhood empowerment.

Neighbourhood Area Committees

In its wider feedback to the sector, Government stated a clear steer towards Neighbourhood area committees (NACs):

Neighbourhood Area Committees, led by frontline ward councillors, offer a model of place-based engagement and leadership which maximises the structural efficiencies brought about by Local Government Reorganisation and strengthens localism and community participation across all areas. Neighbourhood Area Committees help councils fulfil their commitments to working in partnership with communities at the neighbourhood level. They can also include other service providers, such as town or parish councillors, when applicable, along with co-opted members from local community organisations.

The interim report of the Commission for Neighbourhoods reinforces the notion that a sense of place inspires civic pride and community identity and identifies that this belongingness could be the foundation upon which to build.

> **"We believe neighbourhoods could resolve the 'expectations paradox' that haunts British politics today: that the public says it wants real change but often balks at proposals for this. Rooting change in neighbourhoods, places the public are clearly passionate about and committing to changing, is likely to garner more support than grandiose national visions of transformation."**

Essex wide engagement confirms this mandate. The Beehive resident panels and NatCen survey work show strong support for neighbourhood-level decision-making across the county, cutting across urban, coastal and rural areas (see Section 5.1–5.3). NatCen found that three in four residents backed stronger neighbourhood governance, while Beehive panels captured the sentiment in plain terms: "Need to keep it local." These findings underline that appetite for local empowerment is not confined to one district but is a consistent theme county wide. Within that broader picture, Rochford provides a clear spotlight: more than 60% of residents backed the introduction of Neighbourhood Area Committees, with top priorities including 431 responses for high quality services, 361 for protection of critical services, and 257 for financial resilience.

Principles

Neighbourhood arrangements need to be appropriate for a county as large and geographically diverse as Essex; there is unlikely to be a one-size fits all approach. We have seen how, to strike a balance between population size and area, the new councils for Essex vary from 100 to 500 square miles with population per square mile of 800 to 6,500. Arrangements need to reflect this urban / rural diversity.

Core principles to guide the establishment of area-based arrangements must include:

- Hyper-local representation Essex will establish clear, structured local governance arrangements that give communities an active role in setting priorities and influencing delivery from day one, through Neighbourhood Area Committees with local elected membership and leadership.

- Delegated powers NACs will operate with delegated powers that enable action on, and ownership of local issues, transparent budgets, and direct accountability of local elected members.

- Community engagement offering an open forum and/or clear engagement mechanisms for local people to convene, discuss what matters most to them, and engage with councillors and other public services

- Strategic links formalised links into the Council and Combined Authority/MCCA framework to align hyper-local priorities with regional investment plans

- Consistent coverage across the unitary footprint, with flexibility for different geographies (urban, rural, unparished areas)

- Subsidiarity taking decisions and delegating assets and services at the lowest effective level, closest to those affected by them

- Integration with devolution Forum chairs or representatives will have a formal route into the Unitary Cabinet or a cross-cutting Leadership Board. Each forum will also map to MCCA growth corridors, ensuring community priorities feed directly into devolved funding bids.

- Co-ordination providing a forum for local service providers across the public and third sectors to connect, collaborate, and join up services

- Co-terminosity wherever possible neighbourhood arrangements should be based on geographies that make sense to local people and align with existing service delivery boundaries

- Visible accountability Standardised local action plans, open public meetings and reporting, and quick-impact projects co-designed with residents to demonstrate value within the first year of operation.

By embedding these principles Essex will guarantee that NACs are consistently in place across all four unitary authorities, adapted locally but working to a common Essex-wide framework. We've applied some of these principles to review approaches to neighbourhood working in recent unitary authorities, as summarised in the table 10.3.

Aspect	Somerset	Cheshire East	Buckinghamshire
Hyper-local representation	Local Community Networks (LCNs) covering geographic areas, include elected members, parish/town reps, plus police, health, education, VCFSE, and business.	Neighbourhood and Local Area Partnerships evolving from previous models; councillors lead local meetings with partners and residents.	16 Community Boards across the county, chaired by local councillors and designed to retain a strong local voice.
Devolved budgets / financial power	Influence council budgets; scope for service/asset devolution to parishes.	Small devolved budgets for local priorities and community projects.	£3.9m devolved budgets across Community Boards to support local priorities and voluntary sector projects.
Community engagement	High engagement through regular LCN meetings, pilots, and "You said / We did" reporting.	Public meetings with voluntary and faith groups, open channels for resident engagement.	Regular public meetings, consultations, and ongoing engagement channels with communities and partners.
Delivery of hyper-local services	Pilots delivering local services (e.g. street scene, youth services), with potential to expand.	Partnerships able to commission small-scale services or community projects.	Community Boards fund local environmental improvements, youth projects, and safety initiatives, often in partnership with parishes.

Table 10.3 Neighbourhood working examples

Essex intends to go further than these examples by ensuring Neighbourhood Area Committees are consistently embedded across all four new unitary authorities, formally linked to MCCA governance, and underpinned by wide ranging delegated responsibilities and discretionary budgets that facilitate and enable localised action and ownership, whilst complementing and partnering with existing governance networks including town and parish councils and the voluntary and community sector. Building on lessons from North Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire, across these arrangements will be established through a structured co-design process during transition, working with residents, parish and town councils, voluntary groups and service providers to ensure NACs

are active swiftly following vesting day. In the first instance, neighbourhoods will be aligned to existing county council divisions to simplify councillor involvement and avoid confusion. Neighbourhood budgets will be drawn from existing allocations, ensuring no new bureaucracy and no additional costs.

To make this real, Essex will prioritise delivery from the outset. During the shadow authority period, each new unitary will pilot at least two Neighbourhood Area Committees in contrasting localities for example, one urban ward and one parished town so that NACs are up and running on vesting day. These NACs will operate with small but ring-fenced budgets for community

priorities, carved out of existing allocations to remain cost-neutral while making spend more transparent and locally accountable. Chairs will have a formal reporting line into the Unitary Cabinet, ensuring neighbourhood priorities are considered in corporate decisions and devolved funding bids. Drawing on Somerset's Local Community Networks and Buckinghamshire's Community Boards, the model will be adapted locally but built on proven practice, including quarterly "You Said / We Did" reporting. With a clear majority of Essex residents expressing support for neighbourhood committees, this ensures empowerment is visible from day one and embedded through the Transition & Implementation plan.

Challenges

These commitments must also be viewed in light of the risks. We must be careful to avoid some challenges, too. Clearly, creating a Unitary Council with local neighbourhood area committees must not simply recreate a version of the two-tier structure it is replacing. It must look, feel and be different. However, we don't believe this is an excuse for inaction. As we have seen elsewhere in this proposal, people lead their lives locally and want to feel they have a say and some sense of control over what happens in their communities. Neighbourhood Area Committees are one such way to achieve that, while countering arguments, famously articulated during the Redcliffe-Maude review, that new councils are too remote.

We must take care not to lose the efficiency gains of moving to a single unitary, or the resulting benefits for Council Tax and business rate payers. Nor do we want to simply create more bureaucracy when what residents value most is, responsiveness. But equally, we must not lose the local knowledge and community relationships that currently exist with those providing local services.

Neighbourhood governance in Greater Essex will not recreate the inefficiencies of the two-tier system. NACs will be visible, empowered and accountable, with delegated responsibilities and real influence. This is what makes the **Best4Essex** proposal stand out: a credible and deliverable framework for neighbourhood empowerment that strengthens local voice and aligns with financial sustainability.

10.4 | Collaboration and partnership working

The proposed four-unitary arrangement for Greater Essex is not starting from scratch. Across the county, there is already a rich network of formal and informal collaborations, shared services, and strategic partnerships that cut across proposed unitary boundaries and, in some cases, sit entirely within them. These partnerships provide operational foundations, political trust, and practical examples of what integrated leadership and service delivery can achieve.

Partnership arrangements and shared services

In Essex we are used to collaborating and working collectively through a broad set of service delivery arrangements and have therefore developed significant expertise in this space.

- **Brentwood–Rochford Strategic Partnership** Since 2022, the councils have shared a joint Chief Executive and are actively pursuing service integration in areas such as housing, environmental health, and licensing—under a "OneTeam" strategic partnership.

- **Basildon, Brentwood & Castle Point Joint Working** These three councils entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to explore shared services and partnerships aimed at efficiency.

- **Epping Forest Collaboration with Colchester & Braintree** Formal collaboration includes a digital customer services partnership, shared procurement planning for future websites, and exploration of shared services across planning and waste.

- **North East Essex Economic & Planning Alignments** Braintree, Colchester, and Tendring already collaborate on shared Local Plan work garden communities, and delivery frameworks, forming a functional economic area.

- **South Essex Digital Infrastructure Initiative** The "South Essex Councils" partnership (ASELA) invested in digital connectivity— deploying over 200 km of full fibre to connect public sector sites (schools, GP surgeries, care homes) with high-speed broadband to drive shared service innovation.

- **Essex–Datakind Data Analytics Collaborations** Essex County Council, local district councils, and Datakind UK are co-developing shared data analytics capacity and establishing data-sharing assurance frameworks for joint problem solving and insight-driven planning.

- **County-wide Devolution and Engagement Partnerships** In 2025, 15 Greater Essex councils plus the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner commissioned a NatCen-led survey of 1,400 residents to gather priorities for LGR, demonstrating cross-council alignment on public engagement.

- **Greater Essex Devolution Programme** North East Essex councils issued a joint statement supporting the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and collaborated on the rationale for a Braintree– Colchester–Tendring unitary tied to existing delivery relationships. The Government has confirmed that Greater Essex passed the legal tests for devolution, enabling continuation of MCCA framework development.

We have also mapped these on to the proposed new unitary councils to illustrate the breadth of coverage:

Type of Collaboration	Examples	Mapped Grouping(s)	Notes
Joint Leadership & Service Integration	Brentwood–Rochford strategic partnership	Central Essex	Directly within proposed unitary demonstrates existing operational integration between two member councils.
Shared Working Frameworks (MOU-based)	Basildon, Brentwood & Castle Point	Central Essex & South Essex	Shows cross-boundary cooperation that could be formalised or retained under the model.
Digital & Customer Service Partnerships	Epping Forest with Colchester & Braintree	West Essex & North Essex	Current digital collaboration links across two different proposed unitary authorities, indicating possible service hubs/shared ICT.
Planning & Economic Collaboration	North East Essex (Shared Local Plans, garden communities)	North Essex	Well-established functional economic area within proposed unitary boundary.
Digital Infrastructure Collaboration	South Essex Councils (ASELA broadband rollout)	South Essex & partially Central Essex	ASELA includes Southend, Basildon, Thurrock, Castle Point, and sometimes Rochford, fibre investment benefits two proposed councils.
Data & Analytics Partnerships	Essex councils with Datakind UK	All 4 groupings	Countywide partnership: data-sharing standards could underpin new unitary structures.
Resident Engagement & Devolution Programme	NatCen survey with 15 councils; Greater Essex passing legal devolution tests	All 4 groupings	Countywide engagement and alignment; supports democratic legitimacy across all unitary authorities.

Table 10.4 Collaboration and partnership working

We believe these examples provide evidence that the core foundations that will assist the transition, establishment and future cooperation between the new councils already exist across Essex:

- **Foundation for our model:** These long-standing partnerships provide both moral and functional precedence that strategic alignment under four unitary authorities can thrive.
- **Intellectual and operational compatibility:** Existing shared service frameworks ease transition, minimizing disruption and resistance.
- **Local and regional confidence:** Recent tech and data collaborations signal a readiness among Essex actors for integrated service delivery and community-led decision-making.
- **Engagement legitimacy:** The structured, independent resident engagement model (NatCen) adds weight to claims of democratic accountability under a unitary model.

Neighbourhood working geography and coterminosity

In responding to these social challenges, Essex partners already use recognised community footprints for planning and engagement, though these aren't yet formalised into a single framework. These include:

- **Essex Police Safer Neighbourhood Areas** These exist county-wide and are already well understood by partners, making them a potential building block for local engagement and performance reporting.

- **Health & Wellbeing Footprints** NHS and public health planning is based on "Neighbourhood" areas (populations in the range of 30k–50k), often aligned to Primary Care Network (PCN) boundaries.

- **Economic & Regeneration Zones** South Essex and North Essex Economic Boards already work with sub-county spatial clusters that reflect travel-to-work and functional economic areas.

- **Voluntary Sector Networks** Several areas operate Community Voluntary Service (CVS) zones, which align loosely with district boundaries but sometimes cut across for thematic reasons (e.g., coastal vs inland).

- **Parish/Town Council Boundaries** 274 parishes across Essex provide a hyper-local governance layer, especially in rural parts of the county.

There is precedent for place-based segmentation in Essex, meaning the unitary design can adopt existing and trusted geographies for engagement and data reporting. Building on Safer Neighbourhood Areas or PCN footprints and aligned with the proposed electoral divisions (section 11), this will ensure that local voice and service targeting won't be lost in transition. We have looked in particular at the Shropshire Place Partnerships as a model of local, community-based service co-ordination, data analysis and insight, and public engagement and will map out a similar approach for Essex.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

10 | Governance and Leadership

R11: Shadow elections and governance arrangements fail to gain traction.
D3: Shadow elections required for legitimacy.
D6: Boundary Commission determinations required to underpin new wards/divisions.

11 | Transformation and implementation

"Change must protect services today and make councils fit for tomorrow"

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ 03 | High quality, sustainable services - Strong, joined-up services; financially resilient

✔ 04 | Meets local needs - Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience

✔ 06 | Local engagement & empowerment - Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day

This section demonstrates that the **Best4Essex** model is ready to deliver. From day one, it will safeguard vital services, control transition costs, and reinvest savings into transformation drawing directly on lessons from other successful unitary transitions.

Best4Essex

What it avoids:

Hidden transition technology costs, retrofitting existing failure demand and new bureaucracy.

What it delivers:

Safe services, manage down failure demand to redesign service delivery and build a transformation and innovation culture from day one.

The transition to new unitary authorities in Essex will be managed in connected phases:

- **Transitional arrangements:** existing local authorities working with other councils in the same new unitary authority pre and post Shadow Council Elections in May 2027 to enable the most effective platform and for the new authority to hit the ground running.

- **Safe and Legal on Day One:** ensuring all statutory services continue without interruption and that the new councils are operationally functional from vesting day in April 2027.

- **Transformation thereafter:** using reorganisation as a platform for transformational service redesign. Informed and stewarded by stronger local democratic engagement, underpinned by modern digital, data and technology foundations, agile and flexible business processes and resourcing to build a new resilient public services delivery model. Seamlessly sequencing alignment with the development of the new Greater Essex Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) as part of a One Public Sector ecosystem for Essex.

The timetable for Greater Essex is fast tracked due to it being part of the Governments Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). We will submit this business case in September 2025, this will be followed by MHCLG consultation in the autumn, with decisions expected in Spring 2026. Shadow authority elections for the new

UAs will take place in May 2027, providing twelve months of preparation before vesting day in April 2028. Learning from other areas, we recognise that vesting day is a starting point, not an end point. Transition followed by comprehensive transformation will be sequenced to prepare, minimise disruption, protect critical services such as Adults, Children's, SEND and Homelessness, and build confidence among staff, residents, and partners.

As the former leader of Ryedale District Council reflected on the creation of North Yorkshire Council: "Reorganisation is all-consuming. Decision-making slows down. Major projects are paused or shelved altogether as resources are diverted to the transition effort… Management's top priority for Day 1 was ensuring the bins were emptied. Nothing would signal a dysfunctional start more blatantly than uncollected rubbish by the kerbside. With intense work, the authority achieved its stated ambition to be 'safe and legal'. North Yorkshire Council exists, but it will not truly be one authority for many years yet."

This example underlines the importance of realistic planning and the principle that vesting day is only the beginning of a longer journey of transformation.

11.1 | Governance & Programme Structure

Effective governance will underpin a successful transition. Our model combines political oversight, officer and operational leadership, and programme management capacity, sequencing with the MCCA timetable.

Shadow Authorities

Shadow authorities will be established from May 2027 following elections.
Each will:

- Consist of elected members representing the new geography.
- Appoint a Shadow Executive (Leader and Cabinet) to provide political leadership during the pre-vesting period.
- Prepare the first budgets, Medium Term Financial Strategies (MTFS), Business planning, council tax harmonisation plans, and service transition strategies.
- Recruit Chief Executives and senior leadership teams, ensuring organisational leadership is in place before vesting.

Oversight Group

To ensure countywide coherence, we propose an Essex Leaders' Implementation Oversight Group.
Its role will be to:

- Provide joint decision-making across the four shadow authorities and the MCCA programme.
- Ensure dependencies with the MCCA timetable are tracked and resolved and work closely with the new Mayor (from May 2026).

- Maintain regular dialogue with MHCLG, local MPs, and Whitehall departments.
- Co-ordinate strategic communications both internally and externally.

Programme Management Office (PMO)

A dedicated Transition PMO will be established in 2025, integrating with both Greater Essex MCCA and local transition teams.

- **Remit:** Coordinate transition activities, delivery planning and roadmap, manage risks and interdependencies, monitor costs, and ensure consistent and standardised reporting.
- **Resource plan:** Staffed through a blend of redeployed council officers and specialist support.
- **Integration with MCCA**: The PMO will maintain a single transition roadmap, aligning unitary creation with MCCA milestones.

Governance

During the consultation and decision-making period (Autumn 2025 to early 2026), we will not stand still. Work will continue at pace to establish the foundations for transition including collating baseline data across staffing, contracts, assets and ICT, and begin service design workshops and developing delivery plans and roadmaps. All while being careful to do work which provides value whichever business case solution is ultimately agreed upon. Partner engagement with the emerging MCCA and devolution dependencies will be of significant focus, especially harmonisation of strategic areas or functions where cross organisation working practices will need to be established early to accelerate delivery and aggregation/disaggregation of our business-critical services into the new UA organisational design. Specific cross cutting structures and existing collaboration will be embedded with other key partners including the NHS, Police, Fire and the voluntary sector and we will ensure continuity planning is co-designed, while early governance frameworks for the shadow authorities are drafted. This proactive approach means that, once MHCLG confirms its decision, Essex can move immediately into detailed delivery planning rather than losing valuable time.

To deliver this timetable, a robust governance model is required. The framework below shows the complementary roles of the political, strategic, programme and partner tiers, ensuring local democratic legitimacy, effective oversight, and alignment with the MCCA.

Tier	Body	Main Role
Political	Shadow Authorities (4)	Provide local political leadership; prepare budgets and service transition plans; oversee staff and resident engagement
Strategic	Essex Leaders' Implementation Oversight Group	Coordinate across the four shadow authorities; ensure dependencies with Essex MCCA; act as interface with MHCLG
Programme	Transition and Transformation PMO	Day-to-day programme management; risk and cost tracking; reporting; shared resource for all councils, efficiencies and rationalisation, critical operational dependencies both external and internal). Early transformation and business planning function to build in new corporate strategy to MTFS/Transformation pathway for year 2 onwards. Critical programme governance function.
Partner	MCCA Programme Board	Ensure alignment of LGR transition with MCCA devolution milestones and strategic priorities across partner ecosystem.

Table 11.1 Governance framework

These governance and timeline arrangements provide a credible pathway for Essex to deliver four new unitary authorities that are safe and legal from day one, while building strong foundations and alignment of critical dependencies (operational, strategic and political) to ensure deeper organisational transformation and fit for purpose redesign of the Essex Local Government ecosystem. By aligning transition with the Essex MCCA, the programme will maximise the benefits of devolution early, maintain resident and partner confidence, and ensure that the new councils are not only operationally ready in 2027 but positioned to drive long-term transformational change and improvement.

Principles

Core principles[13] we will apply to the management of transition include:

- Ensure there is a completely fresh start to create a separation between the old and new organisations while retaining areas of innovation that align with the delivery plan and transformation roadmap.
- The critical dependencies with the new MCCA, and Essex public services ecosystem are mapped, and data sharing, governance and ways of working are in place.
- Ensure there is a quality delivery plan in place and appropriate structures and feedback loops within it for reflexive iteration and pivot where necessary.
- A comprehensive and collaborative digital, data and technology (DDaT) rationalisation delivery roadmap is in place.
- Recruit the right people and skills early on, starting with the chief executive, and ensure they are used effectively from the very beginning.
- Create a focussed internal design panel from the onset of the transition to build internal ownership and delegate decision sign off for agreed elements from transition through transformation.

- Once shadow elections have taken place, create a strong vision and objectives for each of the new organisations and ensure a focus is put on achieving the outcome and goals that have been outlined. Build this into a new corporate strategy properly aligned with the business planning and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) cycle and transformation delivery plan.
- Develop a strong, innovative and adequately resourced financial model and capability and embed this as the foundations of the new authorities.
- Build long term and effective communication structures throughout the reorganisation process both to internal staff and our external stakeholders with iterative feedback mechanisms. Embed in Business-as-usual post transformation.
- Work closely with councillors to ensure there is a strong and supportive relationship built on trust with agreed and appropriate operational/political boundaries.
- Draw on the experiences and lessons learned from those that have reorganised previously but also be forward looking and build in innovation and new ways of working where appropriate.

[13] Looking back on the local government reorganisation of 1995-1998: reflections and learned SOLACE (2006)

11.2 | Transition Timeline

The timeline below sets out the fast-track pathway for Essex, integrating MHCLG's statutory decision-making process14 with local preparations and the parallel Essex MCCA timetable. It illustrates how each stage from business case submission through to vesting day and beyond will be sequenced to ensure both safe and legal transition and readiness for transformation.

Government Stage	Programme Phase	Key Activities	Governance Responsibility	Timing
Stage 1: Inviting unitary proposals		Invitation to prepare and submit proposals, with guidance	MHCLG	5th February 2025
Stage 2: Submission of formal unitary proposals		Submit final **Best4Essex** case to MHCLG	Essex Councils	26th Sept 2025
Stage 3: Statutory Consultation		National and local consultation on Essex options	MHCLG	Nov 2025 – Jan 2026
	Phase 1 Mobilisation (while awaiting decision)	Establish Transition PMO; baseline data (staff, ICT, contracts, assets); partner/stakeholder engagement; draft shadow authority frameworks; initial service design workshops; risk & finance modelling	Essex Leaders' Oversight Group & PMO	Autumn 2025 – Winter 2026
Stage 4: Decision to implement a proposal		Secretary of State decision	MHCLG	March 2026
Stage 5: Making secondary legislation		Statutory Instruments laid Legislation made, subject to parliamentary approval	MHCLG	Before Summer recess - Autumn 2026
Stage 6: Transition Period	**Phase 2 Preparation**	Detailed service design (aggregation/disaggregation); HR and TUPE planning; ICT/data rationalisation plans; align with Essex MCCA programme. Pilot Neighbourhood Area Committees (NAC) and develop engagement and local democracy roadmap in at least two contrasting localities per unitary. Transition and transformation draft roadmap and interdependency mapping, delivery planning.	Oversight Group & PMO	Spring 2026 – Spring 2027
		Mayoral Election for new MCCA	Essex County Council / MCCA	7th May 2026
	Phase 3 Shadow Authorities	Local elections to four new unitary shadows	MHCLG / Returning Officers	6th May 2027
Stage 7: New unitary authority goes live		Appoint leaders & Chief Execs; budget setting & council tax harmonisation; staff engagement & TUPE prep, integrate NAC pilots and new committees into shadow authority governance and reporting lines. Implementation/ iterations of early phase delivery planning. Formalised working with MCCA.	Shadow Authorities, MCCA	May 2027 – Apr 2027

	Phase 4 Vesting Day	Four new unitary councils go live; statutory services continue safe & legal. NACs meeting regularly with delegated budgets and "You Said / We Did" reporting from day one. Transition and transformation delivery planning and roadmap delivery/development/iteration. Critical integrations with wider public service delivery partners including MCCA, NHS, Blue lights	New Councils, MCCA, Critical Public/Private/ Voluntary Service Partners,	1st April 2028
	Phase 5 Transformation	Full transformation plan delivery. Service redesign; digital/data modernisation; full integration with Essex MCCA and wider public, private, voluntary service delivery partners	New Councils, MCCA, Critical Public/Private/ Voluntary Service Partners	2028 onwards

Table 11.2 Timeline and core transition stages

The transition will be delivered through five distinct phases as shown in table 11.2. Each phase is designed to ensure clarity of responsibility, strong political oversight, and minimal disruption to services.

Phase 1 – Mobilisation (from Sept 2025)

This phase culminates in the submission of the final Essex 4UA business case to MHCLG in September 2025. Alongside this, we will establish the Transition PMO to provide central programme oversight and begin baseline data collection across staffing, finance, contracts, ICT and estates. We will establish strong foundations for the transition and transformation phases early delivery plan roadmaps and dependencies. All while being careful to do work which provides value whichever business case solution is ultimately agreed upon. Political leaders will agree interim arrangements for the Essex Leaders' Oversight Group, ensuring early alignment with the emerging Essex MCCA programme.

Example: Learning from North Yorkshire, where the council underestimated the complexity of transition, we will commit early resources to baselining contracts and ICT to avoid last-minute risks to payroll, benefits and waste collection.

Phase 2 – Preparation (Spring 2026 – Spring 2027)

While MHCLG undertakes consultation and prepares its decision, Essex will continue to prepare actively. This includes drafting constitutions for shadow authorities, continuing to develop delivery plans and initiating service design workshops (covering both aggregation and disaggregation), and building risk registers for critical statutory services such as Adults, Children's, SEND and Homelessness. Engagement with NHS, Police, Fire and voluntary sector partners will be used to stress-test continuity plans and embed system-wide

confidence. This period will also coincide with the establishment of the new MCCA Essex County Combined Authority and election of a Mayor. It will be imperative to begin early alignment and dependency mapping (See critical dependency below) across the new local government ecosystem to ensure both effective aggregation and disaggregation of services and collaboration on policy and strategy. We are acutely aware of change and transformation occurring with partners within the public service ecosystem and will use agile methodology to manage risk and iterate through complex change and uncertainty.

Critical Dependency: The new Mayor will assume comprehensive planning powers which are legislated in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill (PIB). These include call in powers for strategic sites and the development of statutory spatial plans which will inform growth

requirements for all constituent councils. The PIB is likely to receive royal ascension in early 2026, most likely prior to Mayoral elections. This will mean that all authorities within the MCCA area will need to begin developing early relationships, governance structures and collaborative cross boundary data and working practices from this date with the MCCA. This is a critical dependency and will affect planning, housing and economic development functions within the emerging UAs. It will also affect ICT and data sharing practice, governance and new committee structures. Full details are not fully understood yet as there will be immediate secondary legislation and guidance following the ascension of the PIB. However, we should ensure our transition and transformation plan allows for these dependencies and the likely work involved in addressing them from June 2026.

Example: Somerset's experience showed that early "Local Community Network" pilots created clarity for residents and partners, even before vesting. We will use the consultation period to test engagement models at community level, providing visible reassurance that services will not stand still.

In Essex this will include piloting Neighbourhood Area Committees in at least two contrasting localities within each new unitary, ensuring they are fully operational on vesting day. This will give visible, cost-neutral neighbourhood governance from day one, reinforcing local identity and accountability.

Phase 3 – Shadow Authorities (May 2027 – April 2028)

Shadow elections will take place in May 2027. The four shadow authorities will then take responsibility for preparing budgets, council tax harmonisation, and setting organisational structures. Chief Executives and senior leadership teams will be recruited, supported by clear HR and TUPE plans for staff. This twelve-month period will be critical for embedding a new organisational culture and ensuring readiness for vesting.

Example: In Buckinghamshire, a decisive early appointment of a permanent Chief Executive provided stability, while in Northamptonshire the absence of early senior leadership caused disruption. We propose following the former model, ensuring the right leadership is in place quickly and used effectively.

Neighbourhood empowerment should also be embedded during this phase. The Neighbourhood Area Committees piloted in Phase 2 can be formally integrated into shadow authority governance, with Chairs linked into shadow Cabinets and reporting lines agreed. This would ensure that by vesting day NACs are not only operational but already connected into the democratic and budget-setting framework of the new councils

Phase 4 – Vesting Day (1st April 2028)

On vesting day, the four new unitary councils will assume full legal and financial responsibility. The focus will be on ensuring all statutory services are delivered safely and legally from day one. Critical areas include payroll, revenues and benefits, social care, homelessness prevention, housing, planning, environmental services and democratic functions. Public communication will emphasise continuity of front-line services, supported by visible branding and clear access channels.

Example: Cornwall and Cheshire showed that strong early communication and branding helped reassure staff and residents, while lack of clarity elsewhere caused confusion. We will invest in simple, clear messages to explain what is changing and what is not, ensuring confidence at the point of vesting.

Neighbourhood Area Committees will also be fully in place from vesting day, meeting regularly with delegated budgets and "You Said / We Did" reporting mechanisms. Their Chairs will participate in formal reporting lines to Cabinet, ensuring neighbourhood priorities are embedded into council decision making and linked into devolved funding bids. This provides visible and accountable neighbourhood governance from day one.

Phase 5 – Transformation and full MCCA Integration (2028 onwards)

From vesting day onwards, attention will shift towards transformation. The new unitary authorities will use their combined scale to redesign services, rationalise digital and data platforms, and drive financial efficiencies. They will also build on the early work undertaken in phase 2 to accelerate delivery of service reform developed in tandem with the MCCA to align strategic functions such as planning, transport, health, skills and housing. This phased approach ensures that the immediate priorities of service continuity and public reassurance are balanced with a long-term commitment to system change and innovation.

Example: We will take forward lessons from other local authorities that have been through the process of forming a new unitary authority. By building a pipeline of redesign projects, undertaking comprehensive dependency mapping and building an early draft delivery roadmap during the shadow period, we will be ready to accelerate transformation from Day One of vesting.

These phases make clear that the transition will not be a single event but a carefully sequenced journey. By learning from other reorganisations, we can give government, citizens and partners the confidence that both the technical mechanics and the human elements of transition are well understood and planned for.

11.3 | Service Transition Planning

Transition planning will need to cover both aggregation of district and borough services into new unitary footprints and disaggregation of current county and unitary functions into the four new authorities. The guiding principle will be to protect statutory services, maintain continuity for residents, and use the transition as a platform for longer-term redesign.

The challenges of disaggregation are two-fold: to mitigate the risks, especially for high risk and critical services such as adult social care and children's services, and to identify and harness the opportunities for service improvement.

Creating four Unitary authorities will enable economies of scale to be made when considering the development of a 'one service' approach and enable the redesign of service delivery, making them fit for the area, the communities and the future.

It's vital the opportunities for improvement and change are also harnessed, which will require a user centred approach allowing staff to identify, capture, review and feed them into the broader transformation programme. An innovation and design team or function working alongside the 'nuts and bolts' of transition will offer the capacity and capability required to help leverage these opportunities.

Service aggregation

Many services will be aggregated from local and district-based delivery into the new, larger authorities. Our model has three and four existing councils coming together to form new unitary authorities. Other functions –notably back-office, such as IT, HR, finance, call centres, etc are common to all councils and can be merged.

Creating four new unitary authorities will enable economies of scale to be made when considering the development of a 'one service' approach especially with ICT and digital rationalisation which will be significantly more complex for the 3UA model and is a 'hidden cost' usually born through the longer transformation process (i.e. housing management systems, Planning, Revs and Bens, Building Control). The creation of four new authorities enables more efficient and economic redesign of service delivery. Making them fit for the area, the communities and the future.

The similarities between local authorities are many as such back-office services form a common back bone to them and seek to deliver similar outputs under the same legislation or directive. It is the method by which they are delivered that often differs from Council to Council. Therefore, the platform and opportunity for back-office services to come together and develop new improved services with a new approach to delivery is obvious.

District services that can be aggregated include:

- ICT
- Human Resources
- Financial Services
- Customer Contact whether through digital methods or physical
- Revenues and Benefits
- Democratic and Corporate Core
- Planning
- Environmental Services
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Communities

Integration offers two core challenges: how best to maximise these opportunities, which may require a responsive approach to change, as well as programming opportunities into the early years of the new councils, for example to align contracting arrangements, and to manage the risks around aggregating services, which range from merging different IT systems and delivery models to alignment of policies and the loss of core staff during the process:

- **IT and systems integration:** phased migration plans, with "safe and legal" interim arrangements (e.g., parallel running or bridging solutions) to ensure uninterrupted payroll and benefits.
- **Contract alignment:** early identification of contract end dates and novation requirements, with central support from the PMO.
- **Workforce impacts:** strong HR engagement and TUPE planning to retain skills and mitigate the risk of staff loss.

Service disaggregation

Disaggregation is the effect of splitting up services currently provided by Essex County Council, Thurrock and Southend Council who are all current unitary authorities, and any relevant cross-district arrangements, into the new configuration of four unitary councils. This includes separating staffing teams, finances, services, assets, data, contracts and more. As roughly seven-eighths of local authority spend (excluding schools and police) is in county-wide services compared to district services, disaggregation represents a major structural shift.

- County-wide services requiring disaggregation include:
- Children's Services
- Adult Social Care
- Public Health
- Highways and transport
- Registrars and Coroners
- Flood management
- Waste Disposal
- Trading Standards
- Museums Service and Record Office
- Corporate Policy
- Education and SEND
- Capital Delivery
- Planning and Environment

We have already looked at the opportunities for service delivery reform in section 10.2; below we summarise the challenges of aggregation/disaggregation for some of the more complex and high-profile services. Many of these have specific commissioning arrangements in place which will need careful review and nuanced approach how they are included in delivery plans.

Adult Social Care services will be disaggregated into the new unitary authorities, ensuring continuity for all individuals receiving care. Key risks include quality assurance and safeguarding, continuity of provider relationships, staff recruitment and retention and maintaining statutory duties under the Care Act. Mitigation will involve:

- Maintain current Essex-wide Safeguarding Board which is built upon strong relationships with NHS, Police and voluntary sector partners
- Retain integrated arrangements that add value (e.g. Section 75 agreement for delivery of Adult Mental Health services)
- Ensure day one access to placement agreements and frameworks for purchasing of domiciliary care services.
- Transition and renegotiation of block contracts and frameworks in phases, using a risk-based prioritisation.
- Shared data protocols and digital care records across new unitary authorities from Day One.

Children's Services disaggregation of statutory functions must protect improvements already achieved in Essex. Key priorities will include:

- Continuity of social work case management and safeguarding functions.
- Maintaining confidence of statutory and voluntary sector partners through a time of change

- Alignment of early help and education support with local housing and community services to strengthen preventative approaches.
- Alignment with ASC and SEND / Education services with critical dependency mapping and transformation and integration plan
- Data sharing agreements and protocols in place

Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation – District responsibilities will transfer into the new unitary authorities, requiring alignment with county safeguarding and support services. Key priorities will include:

- Developing a joint planning framework for transitional housing and homelessness prevention.
- Avoiding duplication of statutory duties or gaps in provision for vulnerable groups.
- Ensuring continuity of temporary accommodation supply during transition.
- Linking housing and homelessness strategies to wider social care and health services.
- Alignment with housing and planning strategy, direct delivery and HRA forward plan

Education and SEND – ECC remains the Local Education Authority (LEA) for the majority of Essex schools, carrying duties for admissions, school place planning, SEND and school improvement. It also has a significant backlog of ECHP applications which have been subject to media scrutiny. This has significant hidden costs as successful applications will require financial support for children subject to them and will impact education budgets and social care with

EHCPs transcending ASC/CSC as they apply from 0-25years, in addition there are significant backlogs in health in terms of assessment for complex needs such as Autism and ADHD which will also impact service demand. Key priorities will include:

- Equitable division of Dedicated Schools Grant and SEND High Needs Block, negotiated with DfE.
- Proper dependency mapping and forecasting of upstream demand and data sharing with health.
- Critical Continuity of admissions, appeals, and school improvement functions, embedded improvement plan in all disaggregated functions.
- Alignment of home to school transport, early help and SEND support with new unitary footprints.
- Maintenance of a county-wide Schools Forum during transition to provide stability.

Planning and Development Management – Currently divided between districts (development control and local plans) and county (minerals, waste, strategic planning). Challenges will include:

- Retaining specialist planning capacity for minerals, waste and environmental planning.
- Ensuring consistency and continuity of Local Plan preparation.
- Avoiding delay to major development schemes during transition.
- Development of interim joint planning frameworks and interdependencies with new MCCA

- New committee structures including cross boundary and strategic sites

Housing, HRA and Delivery – District councils currently manage HRAs, housing stock, and homelessness duties. Disaggregation will require transfer into new unitary structures. Key priorities will include:

- Legal transfer of housing stock, HRA balances, and associated borrowing.
- Tenant engagement and continuity of landlord services.
- Alignment of homelessness and temporary accommodation with wider safeguarding and support services.
- Development of unitary-wide housing strategies linked to regeneration and health outcomes.

Revenues and Benefits – Currently delivered at district level, with variation in systems and processes. Risks and mitigations will include:

- Migration and integration of multiple systems, supported by phased parallel running.
- Early consultation on harmonisation of council tax support schemes and universal credit to protect vulnerable groups.
- Application of consistent fraud and error controls across all new unitary authorities.
- Ensuring uninterrupted collection of council tax and business rates.

Commissioning and Procurement – ECC currently leads major commissioning for Adults, Children's, Public Health, Highways and Corporate Services. This will need to be disaggregated and realigned. Key priorities will include:

- Avoiding fragmentation of provider relationships and market instability.
- Establishing transitional joint commissioning boards for high-value contracts.
- Use of shared procurement frameworks to retain economies of scale.
- Phased novation of block contracts and frameworks to maintain service continuity.

Other statutory services Public Health, Highways, Waste Disposal, Trading Standards and Registrars will be mapped and transferred to ensure uninterrupted provision, using shadow authority structures to agree policy alignment before vesting.

Disaggregating county wide services (Adults, Children's, SEND, Public Health, ICT, HR) is one of the most disruptive and costly elements of reorganisation. Risks that the transition period will need to address include service fragmentation; loss of faith in the service; unpacking commissioning arrangements;

safeguarding; implications for partners, especially in the health and care sectors.

In addition to the county-wide services above, further areas such as Education, Capital Infrastructure Delivery, Planning, Housing, Revenues and Benefits, and Commissioning will also need to be disaggregated. The risks for these will need comprehensive dependency mapping as Delivery Plans are developed. Table 11.3 provides a high-level comparative assessment of disaggregation complexity across the four models.

Option	Key Disaggregation Risks	Overall Assessment
Best4Essex	- Adults, Children's and SEND must be divided into 4 new footprints. - ICT and HR systems require migration, but scale manageable. - Existing shared services (e.g. Rochford–Brentwood, North Essex partnerships) provide a base for smoother transition.	**Manageable** Costs are significant but offset by critical mass in each unitary; risks spread evenly.
3UA	- Disaggregation required across only 3 units, but each much larger meaning more technology rationalisation from existing district architecture - disruption especially with housing management, planning and Revenue |and Benefits. - Complex restructuring of large-scale ICT, HR, and finance systems. - Higher upfront costs from large-scale harmonisation.	Challenging Efficiencies achievable but transition more complex; risks of disruption during scale-up.
Alternative 4	- Similar disaggregation requirements to Best4Essex. - Fewer pre-existing shared services in some groupings. - More political/organisational misalignment across units.	Riskier Costs comparable to Best4Essex, but weaker baseline collaboration makes transition harder.
5UA	- Highest disaggregation requirements: 5 sets of ICT, HR, Adults, Children's, SEND, Public Health. - Smaller units struggle to absorb specialist services. - Cost multipliers from duplicating corporate functions.	Unmanageable Disaggregation costs outweigh efficiencies; high risk of service fragility.

Table 11.3 Disaggregation risk by proposed model

As shown above, Best4Essex spreads disaggregation risk evenly, while 3UA and 5UA models amplify disruption at either end of the scale. It's vital the opportunities for improvement and change are also harnessed, which will require staff to identify, capture, review and feed them into the broader transformation programme. In Somerset, a dedicated "service design team" worked alongside the safe and legal transition programme to test, challenge and embed innovation proposals, ensuring that ideas were systematically assessed and built into the longer-term transformation plan. In Buckinghamshire, the creation of Community Boards was accompanied by innovation funding to trial local projects, demonstrating how new unitary structures could deliver visible change from the outset. A similar function in Essex would provide the capacity and capability to ensure new councils move beyond structural change, capturing frontline ideas and service redesign opportunities and feeding them directly into the transformation portfolio. **This would build directly on the Essex LGR Hub and the NatCen engagement programme, which have already generated a pipeline of resident and stakeholder insight that can be tested and embedded through transition.** This approach ensures that innovation is not an afterthought but hardwired into the transition process from day one.

Council Tax and Pay Harmonisation

Variation in council tax bases and service costs means that harmonisation will require detailed financial modelling, phased implementation strategies, and clear communication with residents particularly for localities that embed Thurrock council.

Pay harmonisation is a critical enabler of successful reorganisation, particularly in ensuring fairness, consistency, and workforce stability across newly formed unitary authorities. The complexity of merging different pay structures, terms, and conditions across councils is a major challenge requiring careful planning and support.

Detailed analysis will be required on the following areas:

- Equal Pay to assess and mitigate risks of unequal pay practices.
- Job Evaluation and Equality Impact Assessments to ensure harmonised pay structures are equitable.
- TUPE considerations for managing staff transfers and harmonisation during reorganisation.
- Heads of HR Network for Combined Authorities: Facilitates sharing of best practices and peer support

Based on other LGRs, the best approach to address pay harmonisation is a phased harmonisation over several years to manage the cost and disruption. Some roles will see pay increases; others decrease (with pay protection applied). A range of approaches have been taken in other councils, as summarised below:

- Somerset is taking a structured and externally supported approach, with clear timelines and financial modelling.
- Buckinghamshire focused on performance-based pay and achieved early savings but faced cultural challenges.
- Dorset struggled with programme governance, delaying harmonisation efforts.
- Cumberland embedded pay harmonisation within a broader financial strategy but faced reputational risks due to senior pay levels.

11.4 | Phasing of service change

The transition to a four-unitary model will follow a proven safe and legal first approach within a fully road mapped transformation pathway, drawing on lessons from recent and proposed reorganisations in Northamptonshire, Somerset, Buckinghamshire, Surrey, and Norfolk as well as developing best practice through agile and iterative processes and embedded feedback loop. The approach balances service continuity, risk management, and early opportunities for reform.

Essex partners have already undertaken detailed financial modelling of transition costs, including redundancy, ICT migration, service disaggregation, branding, and programme management. Initial working groups have focused on:

- **Scale and Value for Money**, to ensure that our new structures can deliver great services and securing good outcomes at best value to taxpayers.
- **Quality public services**, to ensure that as we engage in the complex disaggregation and aggregation of sensitive service systems we do so without compromising our ability

to serve our residents effectively and maximise the opportunities to accelerate our transformation ambitions.

- **Identity and Community**, to ensure that our new councils continue to reflect the identities and communities of our residents to support their sense of control, agency and trust in local government.
- **Supporting Devolution**, to ensure that the new arrangements we put in place dovetail with the new Greater Essex Combined County Authority (MCCA) and enable us to capture the benefits of undertaking both fundamental change activities simultaneously.
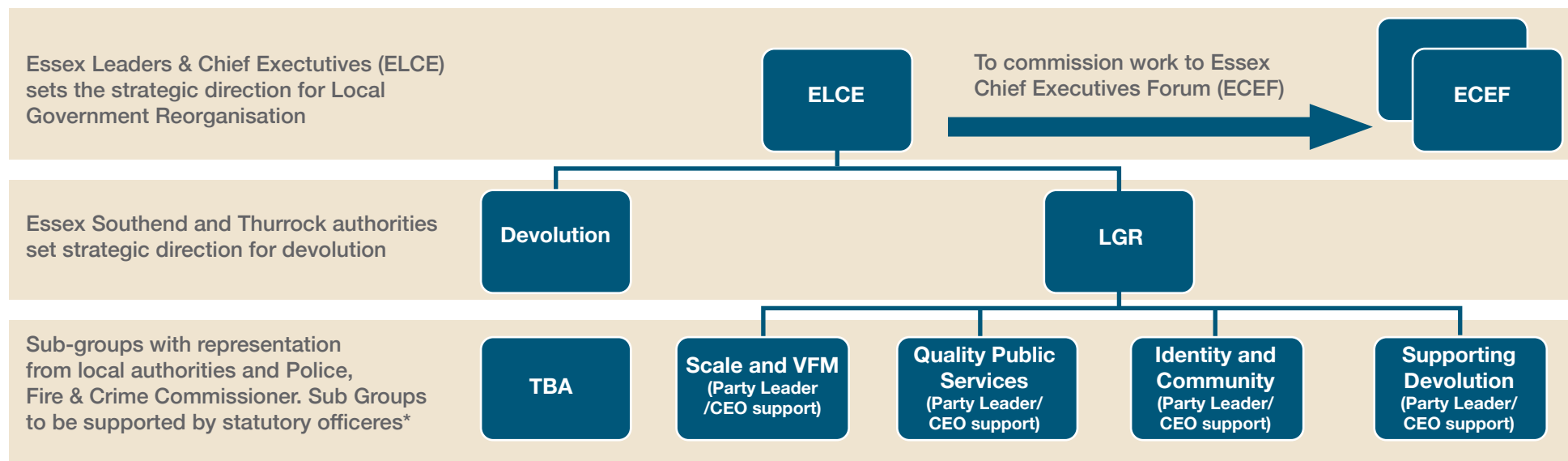

Figure 11.1 Current Governance for Devolution and LGR in Greater Essex

Working groups have already started to map out the type of insight and evidence we will need to manage the disaggregation/aggregation of key budgets; mitigate risk, particularly across social care and education, and maintain service quality. We have already started to explore the role of local councillors as the key conduit for community engagement and leadership for residents in their places; as well as how best to ensure future structures support local identities.

Following best practice from Somerset and North Yorkshire, we will separate immediate service continuity ("Day One safe and legal") from longer-term redesign ("Year Two onwards").

Day One priorities: statutory compliance, payroll, revenues and benefits, safeguarding functions, democratic governance, and critical ICT.

Year Two onwards: service redesign, new digital platforms, integration with MCCA strategic functions, and transformation of customer experience.

Service Area	Transition Type	Day One Requirement	Year Two+ Transformation	Key Risks	Mitigations
Back Office (ICT, HR, Finance)	Aggregation	Safe payroll, finance, ICT bridges	ERP system consolidation	ICT incompatibility	Phased migration, PMO oversight
Adult Social Care	Disaggregation	Continuity of existing care packages, access to placement and domiciliary care provider frameworks for purchasing packages of care. Safeguarding arrangements and partnership in place.	Extending service redesign to align with council housing functions and public health.	Rising demand, recruitment and retention of skilled workforce	During the shadow period we will put in place **joint commissioning protocols, a common DPS** for domiciliary care and supported living, and **shared quality assurance** (with escalation routes) across the four unitary authorities to give providers a single, stable market signal from day Maintaining current Safeguarding Board and partnerships. Risk based transition/ novation of contracts
Children's Services	Disaggregation	No disruption to casework. Continuity of placements and support for children in care and families in need. Commissioning teams and brokerage teams have capacity to secure packages of care and/or placements.	Expansion of preventative integrated early help. Family hubs in partnership with NHS and voluntary sector rolled out across all areas. Common/shared KPIs measuring effectiveness of family support services.	Rising demand, recruitment and retention of skilled workforce. Shortage of suitable placements for children with complex needs	Develop clear narrative and maintain a robust focus on outcomes. DfE agreement, shared protocols. Exploration of Regional Commissioning Co-operative approach across **Best4Essex** unitary authorities and other regional neighbours.
Education and SEND	Disaggregation	Safe, no disruption to SEND case work and wider critical education services including home to school transport	Clear data sharing agreements in place, new business processes mapping and digital roadmap aligned with health, social care and admissions. Transformation underway to understand	Rising demand, lack of integration with health, social care and academies	Develop clear narrative and maintain a robust focus on outcomes.

Service Area	Transition Type	Day One Requirement	Year Two+ Transformation	Key Risks	Mitigations
Homelessness & Housing	Aggregation + Integration	Duty continuity, aligned safeguarding, Commissioning and RP's statutory responsibilities in place, HRA	New unitary-led housing & prevention model, reform of housing management and delivery	Service duplication/ gaps/ Service delivery disruption	Joint planning, MCCA housing strategy, Technology risk register
Waste & Environmental and Transport. Inc Minerals and Waste Planning	Aggregation + Partial Disaggregation	Safe waste collection & disposal, no casework disruption and continue processing applications from day 1	Integrated countywide recycling strategy, Integrated within wider planning and transport	Contract misalignment, technology integration	Early novation planning Standardisation, comprehensive critical dependencies, alignment with wider planning reform support for specific functions
Public Health	Disaggregation	Maintain statutory public health duties. Determine which public health programmes to continue across new unitary boundaries.	Preventative model aligned to MCCA. Develop Joint Strategic Needs Assessment based on **Best4Essex** boundaries	Data/system splits	Shared protocols, digital health records. DPHs across Greater Essex to consider where alignment of programmes and contracts add value.
Planning and Regulatory Services	Aggregation	No disruption to case work applications and plan preparation timetables	Full technology integration, shared service model efficiencies and income generation model	Data/systems, culture, political sensitivities	Standardisation, comprehensive critical dependencies, alignment with wider planning reform support

Table 11.4 Transition planning for key services

Service Continuity Principles

To ensure a seamless transition and maintain resident confidence, the following principles will guide all service changes. Essex partners have already undertaken detailed financial modelling of transition costs, including redundancy, ICT migration, service disaggregation, branding, and programme management. Initial working groups have focused on:

- **Safe and Legal from Day One** statutory duties will be met without interruption, including safeguarding, care, benefits, and democratic functions.

- **Continuity First, Transformation Second** no immediate service redesign on vesting day; change programmes will follow once stability is assured.

- **Protecting the Vulnerable** Adults, Children's, SEND, and Homelessness services prioritised for continuity planning and additional risk oversight.

- **Resident Clarity** clear communication channels, branding, and access arrangements to minimise confusion about "who delivers what".

- **Data and Digital Integrity** secure transfer of records and interim ICT bridging solutions to avoid gaps in case management or payments.

- **Workforce Stability** TUPE and HR transition plans in place early, with strong engagement to retain skills and morale.

- **System Alignment** disaggregation and aggregation aligned with NHS, Police, Fire and MCCA programmes to ensure whole-system continuity.

This combined approach to aggregation and disaggregation ensures that residents will continue to receive critical services without disruption on Day One, while creating a platform for redesign in later years. By sequencing statutory continuity ahead of transformation, and by working with partners across health, police, and the voluntary sector, Essex can manage transition risks confidently and unlock the long-term benefits of a four-unitary model.

11.5 | Transition Costs

Managing the costs of transition will be a decisive factor in ensuring our proposal is financially credible and deliverable. Experience from Somerset, Buckinghamshire, and North Yorkshire shows that transition costs can be managed with clear phasing, use of capital flexibilities, and early investment in ICT and workforce retention.

The most visible form of transition costs is one-off implementation costs associated with programme management, ICT/data migration, rebranding, legal work, staff redundancy, and double running during the shadow year. These costs will occur in the short term.

In the medium term, we envisage transformation investment in the form of early redesign programmes, service, process and technology integration, and community empowerment initiatives that will generate savings and improvements to outcomes. We have not modelled these as they are subject to future review by the leadership of the new localities.

Government guidance (MHCLG, 2025) emphasises that transition plans should also demonstrate how councils will utilise the flexible use of capital receipts and other "invest-to-save" mechanisms to minimise the call on revenue budgets. This approach has been successfully deployed in both Somerset and Buckinghamshire, where capital receipts were earmarked for ICT harmonisation and redundancy costs.

The table below shows for each cost category the main elements within that category and estimated costs.

Cost Category	Illustrative Elements	Estimated Cost (£m)
Programme Management & Shadow Year	PMO staffing, legal & governance, comms, double-running costs	£4.8m internal PMO, £13.9m external support, £1.3m shadow year
ICT & Data Migration	System harmonisation, new platforms, licences, cyber & security upgrades	£45m ICT and data migration
Workforce & HR	Redundancy, TUPE, retention packages, recruitment	£7.8m on redundancy and pension strain
Estates & Assets	Rationalisation, legal transfers, branding, customer contact hubs	Not included in our calculations, but outweighed by value of assets released
Transformation Investment	Innovation labs, community governance, digital redesign	To be determined by leadership of new localities

Table 11.5 Transition costs

As noted in the table, we have not undertaken a review of transition costs and asset sales, as this will require detailed work. We would, however, expect that any additional costs in respect of rationalisation, legal transfers and branding would be greatly outweighed by prospects for assets sales releasing cash for re-investment.

The **Best4Essex** strikes a balance between efficiency and local legitimacy, delivering viability within a 6.4-year payback period. Importantly, costs will be actively managed through:

- Early establishment of a Transition and Transformation PMO to track and control spend.
- Use of capital receipts and invest-to-save approaches to reduce revenue impact.
- Clear sequencing of disaggregation and aggregation to avoid stranded costs.
- Alignment with the Essex MCCA, unlocking devolved funding streams and commercial or investment pipelines to offset transition costs.

This combination ensures that Essex will deliver councils that are not only safe and legal on Day One, but financially sustainable and ready for medium and long-term transformation.

11.6 Community & Local Engagement

We are entering a period of significant reform, grounded in deliberate design and focused execution. Our priority is to develop a clear target operating model for the new organisation, refine governance arrangements, and establish ways of working that enable staff to operate effectively and with purpose.

At the heart of this journey lies deep, genuine engagement: co-designing with residents, businesses and civic partners in every sector, ensuring that change isn't done to people, but with them.

As we progress into the next stage, we remain committed to robust consultation with all stakeholders. We recognise that the challenges ahead will require strategic foresight, sustained momentum, and alignment between partners and political leadership. We're confident in the clarity of our vision.

Effective community engagement and democratic representation will be essential to the success of the **Best4Essex**-unitary model. While vesting day will bring about new structures, the real test of reorganisation will be whether residents feel services remain local, accessible and accountable. Our approach builds on lessons from Surrey and Somerset, where new councils invested early in community level governance, as well as on the priorities identified by Essex residents through consultation.

Each of the four new unitary authorities will establish community-level governance structures from vesting day. These will act as the bridge between the unitary authority, the Essex MCCA, and local towns and parishes. As we have seen in section 11.4, options under consideration include:

- **Community Boards or Neighbourhood Area Committees** comprising unitary councillors and local representatives, operating at appropriate levels of communities, on a footprint that builds on the existing geography of electoral Divisions. Surrey tested a "Community Boards" approach during its LGR preparation, convening local councillors, partners and residents to agree shared priorities. Essex will adopt a similar "test, learn, adapt" approach in 2026–27, piloting Boards in selected areas before full roll-out.
- **Parish and Town Council partnerships** giving a stronger voice to existing parish structures and enabling delegation of specific local services and assets to a more local level where appropriate and which provide value for money.
- **Neighbourhood partnerships** involving voluntary, community, and faith groups alongside local NHS partners, building on the Integrated Neighbourhood Team model.

Clear and consistent communication will be vital to maintain trust. Key commitments include:

- A "no wrong door" customer contact promise – residents can use existing access channels during transition, with redirection handled behind the scenes.
- Early and simple branding – each new unitary will have a clear identity from day one.
- Transparent messaging on what is changing and what is not, so residents understand that essential services (e.g. waste collection, social care, housing) will continue without disruption.

Reorganisation is an opportunity to strengthen system-wide partnerships. Our model will ensure that:

- **Health partners (ICBs and NHS Trusts)** are embedded in neighbourhood and unitary governance, supporting integrated care and prevention.
- **Police and Fire services** continue to operate at scale but remain linked into local priorities via community boards.
- **Voluntary and community organisations** are involved in shaping local services, with dedicated officer support for co-production.

Structures will be aligned with the Essex MCCA, ensuring that local voices inform decisions on transport, skills, housing, and climate change. This dual layer of governance will ensure that residents see both the benefits of local responsiveness and the strategic strength of devolution.

By embedding community boards, strengthening parish and voluntary sector partnerships, and aligning with the Essex MCCA, the four-unitary model will deliver councils that are local enough to care while scaled to deliver. Residents will see continuity in vital services, a stronger local voice, and visible channels for democratic accountability. This approach ensures that the benefits of reorganisation are not only structural but genuinely felt in communities across Essex.

Risks and Dependencies linked to this section are summarised below. Full detail, including impact, likelihood and mitigations, is provided in the Risk and Dependency Log (Annex 3)

11 | Implementation & Transition

- **R3**: Delay in government approval/legislation creates slippage to vesting day.
- **R4:** Staff retention and morale issues during transition.
- **R5:** ICT and data migration complexity.
- **D1:** MHCLG invitation and Secretary of State approval required.
- **D2:** Primary legislation / Orders.
- **D7:** TUPE and HR frameworks.
- **D8:** ICT and systems migration.
- **D9:** Contract and asset novation.
- **D11:** Ongoing risk management oversight.

MHCLG Criteria:

✔ **01 | Single tier local government -** Four unitaries replace two tier system

✔ **02 | 'Right-sized' local government -** Each unitary should be of an appropriate scale and form coherent geographies

✔ **04 | Meets local needs -** Residents engaged; priorities: services, identity, resilience

✔ **05 | Supports Devolution -** Aligned to Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA)

✔ **06 | Local engagement & empowerment -** Neighbourhood Area Committees from vesting day

This section demonstrates that the case is clear. After deep analysis, community engagement, and financial testing, only the Best4Essex four-unitary model delivers a future-fit solution for Essex.

Best4Essex

It meets **every one of the government's criteria** as well as our own, resident-informed design criteria:

- **Single tier & coherent geographies** Our four new councils align with the natural sub-regions of Essex: Thames Estuary, Central-Essex, North-East Essex, and West Essex. Each reflects functional economic areas and existing community ties, avoiding the fragmentation seen in three or five-unitary proposals.

- **Right size & sustainable** Three of the four councils sit close to the 500k population guideline, with Central Essex (c.420k) offering a strong, viable pathfinder. This balance gives scale for efficiency while retaining identity.

- **Improved services** The model protects and enhances services that matter most children's services, adult social care, SEND, and housing by keeping them at a scale that is both resilient and responsive. Integration with housing, health and local services will allow us to go further in reform than the status quo ever could.

- **Financial resilience** Independent modelling shows Best4Essex pays back within six years, faster than alternative options. Fewer new councils mean lower transition costs, and shared services (already operating between Rochford and Brentwood) reduce risk.

- **Community voice & accountability** We will embed stronger neighbourhood arrangements area committees, local boards, and empowered parish/town councils ensuring decisions are rooted in local voice and that representation is brought closer to residents.

Oher proposals cannot match this balance. A three-unitary model risks creating unwieldy councils, diluting identity, and stretching services across geographies too wide to be responsive. A five-unitary model increases cost and complexity, with higher disaggregation risks and longer payback periods. Thurrock's London-centric proposal may suit one borough, but it fragments Essex and fails the test of coherence.

By contrast, Best4Essex is coherent, credible, and compelling. It creates councils that are:

- **Large enough to deliver** major infrastructure, housing, and economic growth.

- **Local enough to care**, protecting Essex's strong civic identities.

- **Financially sustainable**, with proven payback and resilience.

- **Future-focused,** designed to unlock devolution and deliver public service reform at pace.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Best4Essex is the only model that delivers certainty, sustainability, and ambition for every part of the county. It is the right plan for government, the right plan for partners, and above all the **right plan for the people of Greater Essex.**