

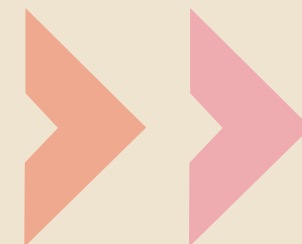
# Best4Essex

## Shaping Essex for the Next Generation Executive Summary

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



A proposal for local government reorganisation  
September 2025



# Foreword

We are proud to present this proposal for four new unitary authorities in Greater Essex. 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.

In doing so we have found the middle ground between the other proposals submitted for Greater Essex, being community centred, financially sustainable, and geographically coherent. Other proposals risk being too remote, covering geographies that don't relate to the functional economies of Greater Essex, and being too expensive.

The **Best4Essex** proposal strikes the right balance between these core criteria. In finding this middle ground, it 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.**

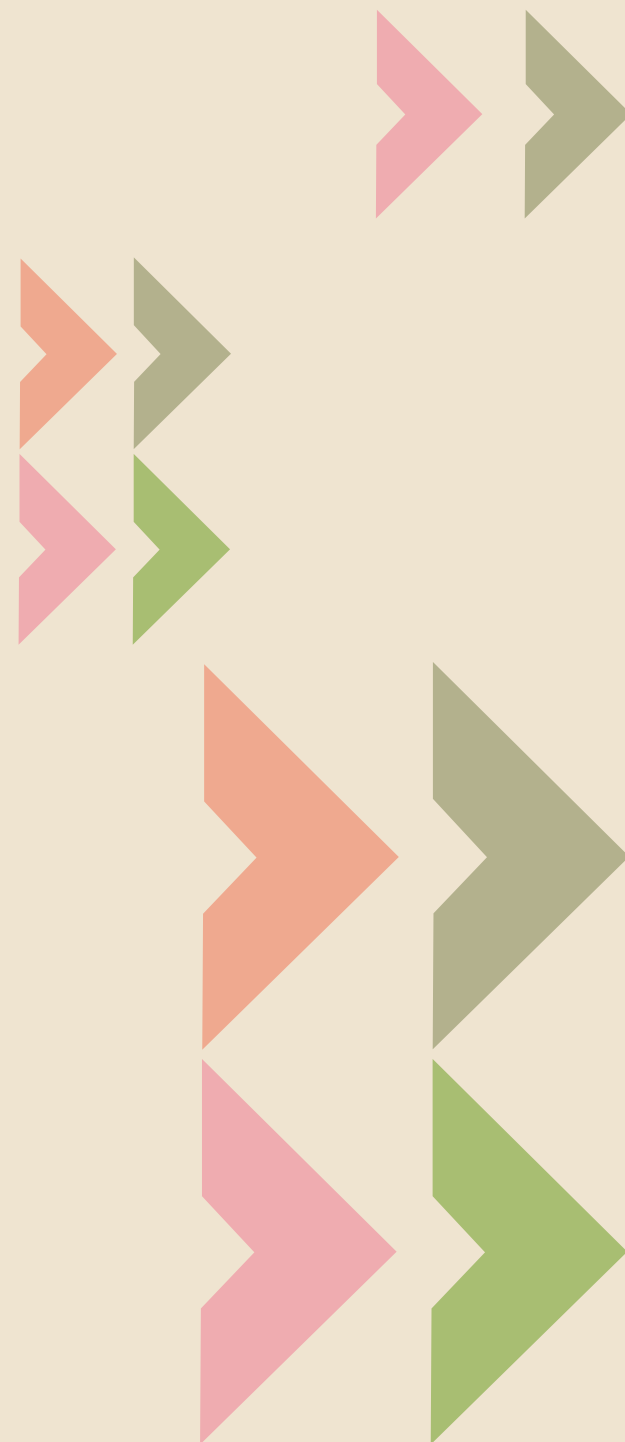
As Leaders across Greater Essex, we are putting forward a once-in-a-generation opportunity to create four new unitary councils to serve the people and communities across Greater Essex. Designed for Essex's communities, this plan replaces the current two-tier system with local government that

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.

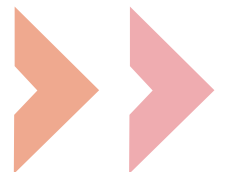
We commend this proposal to Government as the right choice for Greater Essex: **coherent, credible and compelling**, and the most deliverable path to sustainable local government.

**Best4Essex** is large enough to deliver, local enough to care, and ready to start now.

This proposal has been formally endorsed by Rochford District Council



Cllr Mrs D L Belton  
Leader of Rochford District Council



# Best4Essex - The only coherent, credible and compelling proposal for Greater Essex

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

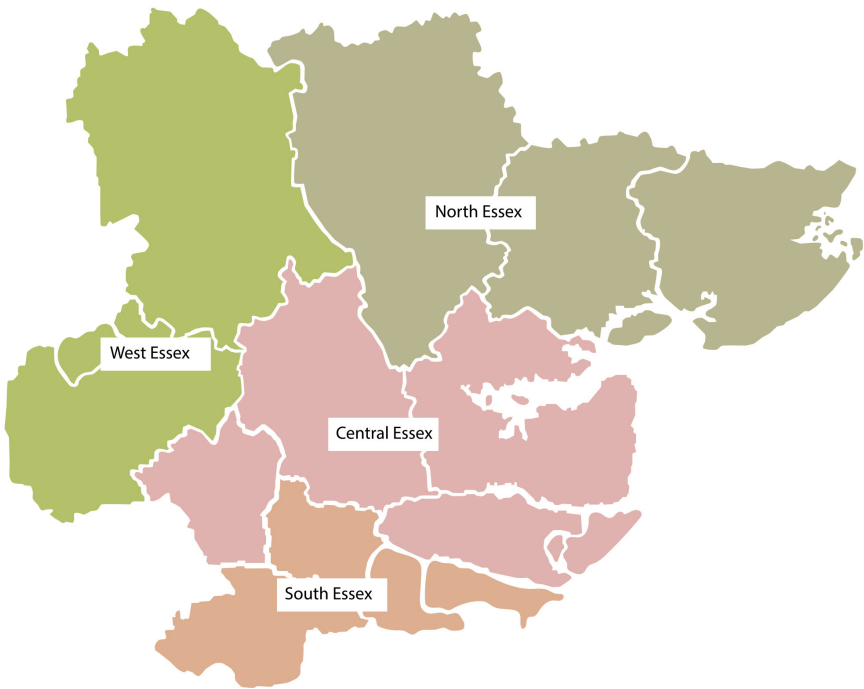


Figure 1 **Best4Essex** Four unitary map

**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.

# 01 | Executive Summary

“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

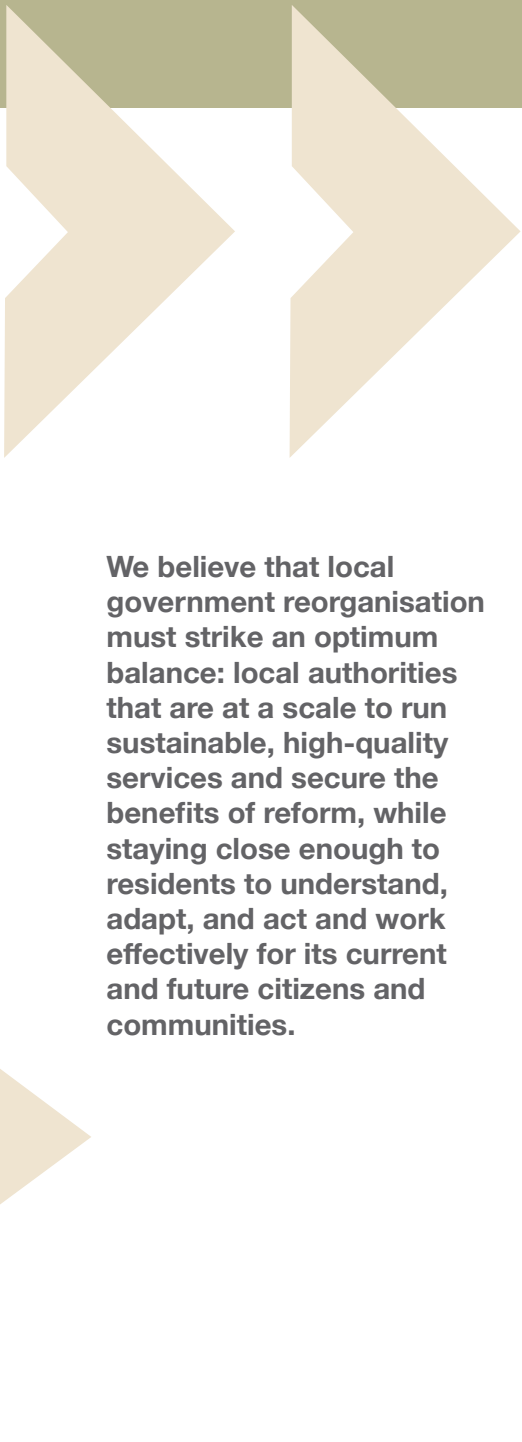
Local government is data rich and insight poor. Through our approach to digital transformation, building a strong data and insight ecosystem in new unitary authorities which is connected to the wider local government and public service ecosystem is not just a nice to have, it underpins the whole future 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 Care and 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.

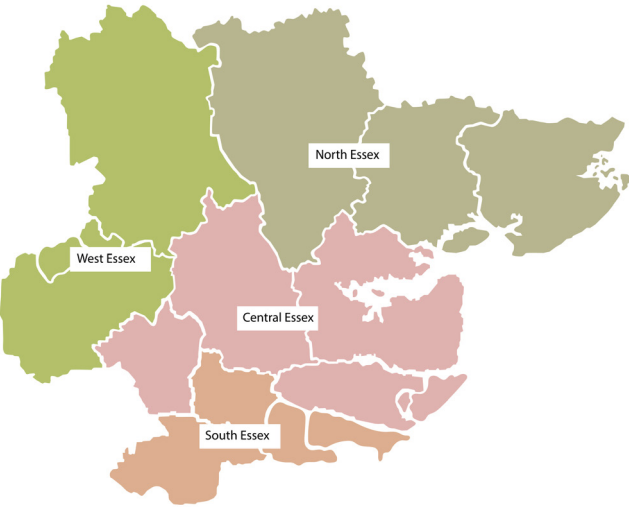


Figure 1.1 New unitary authorities’ geography

Unitary	Covers existing councils	Economic Corridors	Population 2023	Population 2040	Miles <sup>2</sup>
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

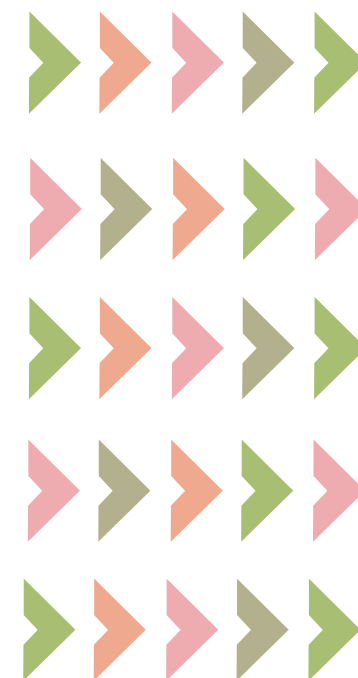
Table 1.1 New unitary authorities scale

## **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<sup>1</sup>. 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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	<b>Yes</b> , four councils replacing 15 based on existing district / unitary footprints (County, two unitary authorities and 12 districts). Our proposal respects, so far as is practicably possible, the way Greater Essex functions economically, aligning with four key growth corridors for the county.	3 <b>Best4Essex</b> Proposal
Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks	<b>Yes</b> , 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	<b>Yes</b> , 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	<b>Yes</b> , 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 <b>Best4Essex</b> proposal expands those natural and already key alignments.	5 Resident and stakeholder views
New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements	<b>Yes</b> , 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	<b>Yes</b> , 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.

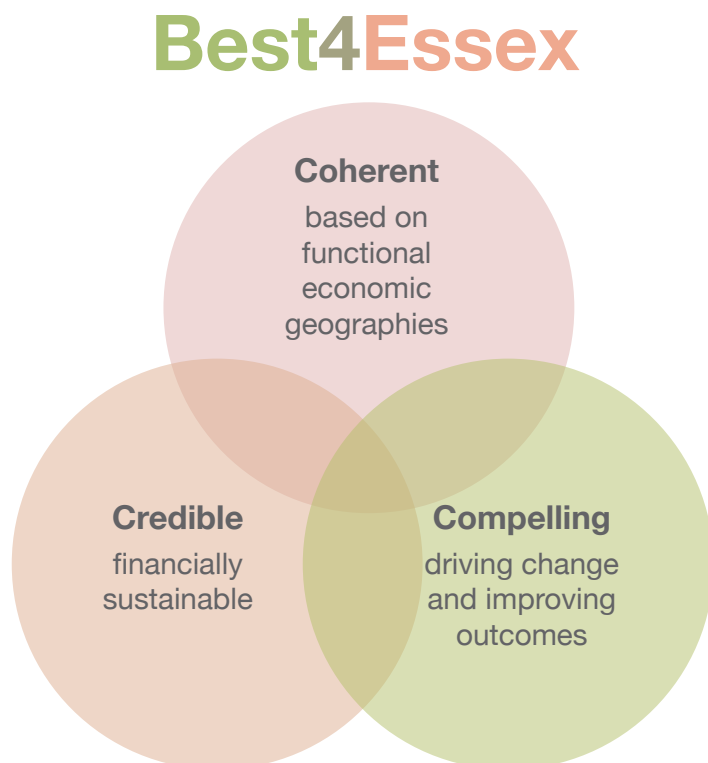
We are proposing to establish neighbourhood arrangements for Greater Essex through an open co-design process, working with our strong partner ecosystem and residents to develop, co-design, test and embed ambitious arrangements implemented swiftly following vesting day to ensure that they provide clarity 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.



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.**

