

Creating a Local Future for Greater Essex

Local Government Reorganisation

The proposal for growth:
Five new unitary councils for Essex

September 2025

Executive Summary



Foreword

Keeping local government as local as possible

The people of Essex deserve councils that are local, accountable, and responsive, which is why the majority of councils in Greater Essex have worked together on this collaborative proposal for five new unitary authorities.

Reorganisation should promote growth by respecting the geography of this hugely diverse county and by bringing government closer to residents, not further away. This proposal reflects that principle, with a practical plan to modernise, reduce duplication, and build councils based on the places they serve.

Diverse groups coming together

As leaders from across Essex representing different councils, political traditions, and communities, we have come together to tackle the urgent need for change. We owe it to the people of Essex to provide a system that they can identify with and that is built for the future. The five unitary council model does this best.

Delivering growth and housing ambitions

It is much easier to deliver the growth agenda across the breadth of an area like Greater Essex when that is anchored in local communities and is based on places that people know. For example, coastal and rural Maldon is completely different from urban and growing Harlow. No single Council's growth plan could easily meet the needs of both, which is why five unitary councils, developing local partnerships with both the public and private sectors, are best designed to deliver the mission-critical growth agenda for Greater Essex. The five unitary plan is also a better fit with existing economies, housing market areas and Local Plans.

Recognising the geography

The five councils in our proposal reflect the geography on the ground. Each of the five proposed unitaries is anchored by a major conurbation, Basildon, Chelmsford, Colchester, Harlow and Southend and extends naturally to the surrounding communities and economies. Each

unitary recognises the strength of this geography and has secured and united local support for our proposal. They have natural economic and social ties with their surrounding areas, and already form the foundation for planning, services, and transport. At the same time, each proposed unitary authority would remain small enough to retain close links with residents, elected members, and local partners, preserving the civic pride and sense of belonging that define Essex.

Our proposal is about better public services and stronger communities. Critically, our approach avoids the disruption and risk created by any move to fewer than five unitary authorities. The five unitary authority model is built to simplify residents' access to local services. A model with fewer than five councils would produce some of the largest 'local' authorities in the UK – unwieldy, unresponsive, and disconnected from the people they serve. Only the five unitary authority model strikes the right balance between scale and identity, between efficiency and local control.

Partnerships

Our five unitary authority proposal reflects the structure of existing partnerships across Essex such as those with health, the police and the voluntary sector. The new councils will be better positioned to coordinate care, reduce demand pressures, and promote well-being. Five unitary councils will be better able to prioritise dignity, personal choice, and access to support within communities, strengthening local resilience and reducing inequalities.

An evidence- and resident insight-led proposal

Our work has been shaped not only by evidence and analysis but also by the voices of the people of Essex. Thousands of residents and stakeholders took part in our robust consultation, and their priorities for stronger services, local access, and clear accountability resonate throughout this proposal. We have listened to their concerns about governance that is too remote or too complex, and we have responded with a model that brings services under one roof, close to home, and ready to deliver.

Supporting devolution

By creating clear, fit-for-purpose unitary councils, we unlock the ability to develop the Mayoral Strategic Authority, drawing in new powers and investment for the whole of Greater Essex. Five unitary councils will provide stronger partners to support the devolution agenda – partners that are better able to secure infrastructure, drive economic growth, improve skills, and lead the net zero transition. The five unitary authority model ensures that each council is ready to play its full role, both locally and strategically, within a devolution framework.

This proposal comes from genuine joint working by a committed and well-led collaboration of leaders and chief executives from across Greater Essex. We evaluated all options in an open, evidence-led way. While some councils continue to hold different views, this proposal represents the clear and considered view of the majority. It reflects what we believe is best for the residents and businesses of today, and of future generations.

Five maximises the benefits and best meets Government's criteria

With five unitary authorities, Essex can modernise its governance while preserving what people value most: local voice, civic identity, and high-quality services. With Government's support, we are ready to lead this transition together, with our communities, and with ambition for the future.



Councillor Daniel Cowan

Leader of Southend-on-Sea City Council

Councillor Stephen Robinson

Leader of Chelmsford City Council

Councils in support of this proposal:

Cllr Gavin Callaghan, Basildon Borough Council
Cllr Barry Aspinell, Brentwood Borough Council
Cllr Dave Blackwell, Castle Point Borough Council
Cllr Stephen Robinson, Chelmsford City Council
Cllr David King, Colchester City Council

Cllr Dan Swords, Harlow District Council
Cllr Richard Siddall, Maldon District Council
Cllr Daniel Cowan, Southend-on-Sea City Council
Cllr Mark Stephenson, Tendring District Council
Cllr Petrina Lees, Uttlesford District Council

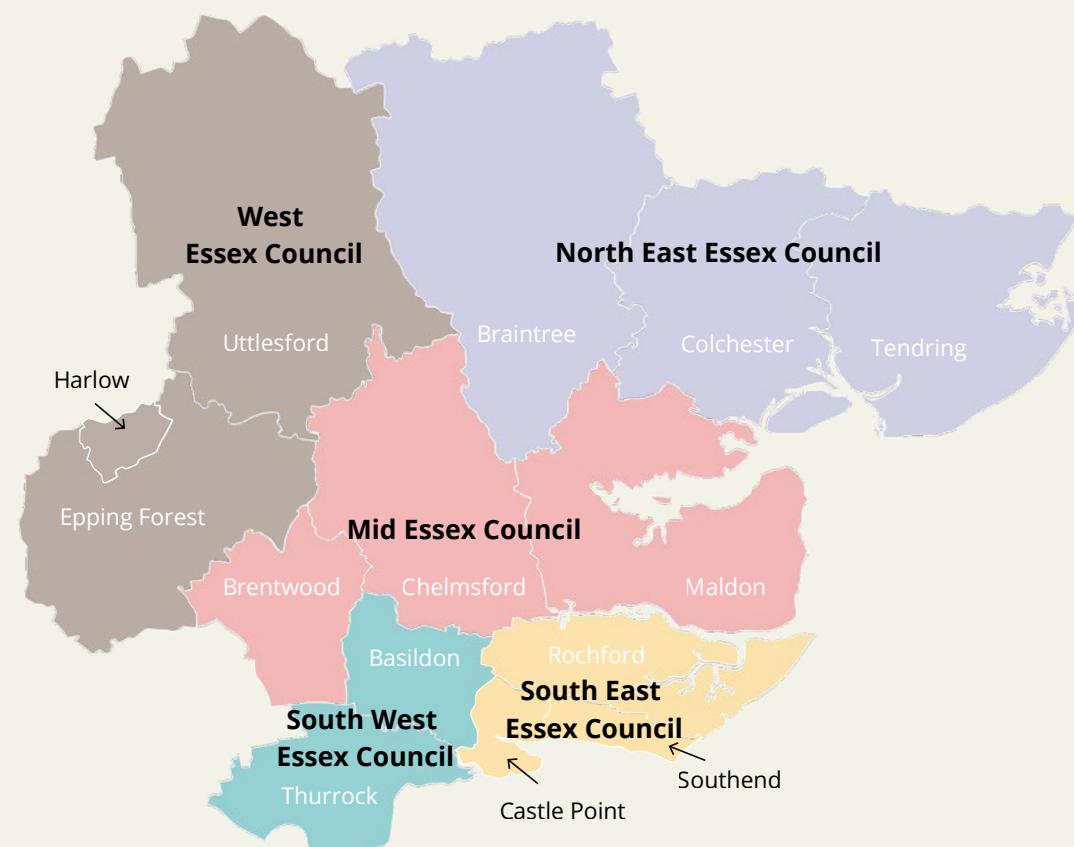
Executive Summary

A bold vision for local government reorganisation in Greater Essex

Greater Essex stands at a pivotal moment in its history: an opportunity to transform local government to meet the needs of a modern, dynamic, and diverse county. Our proposal for five new unitary authorities is a bold and balanced plan that responds directly to the Government’s welcome ambition for local government reorganisation (LGR). It provides a locally led, data-driven, and collaborative solution that simplifies structures, improves services, strengthens local identity and saves more money than any of the other options.

Our proposal presents five new unitary authorities which reflect real communities, travel-to-work patterns, shared economies, and service footprints, designed around the five major conurbations. Together, they offer a seamless, sustainable transition to a future-ready model of governance for Greater Essex.

This executive summary sets out the case for change, outlines the model proposed, and demonstrates how the model fully meets the six criteria from Government for LGR.



The Government’s invitation and criteria

The Government’s devolution and LGR agenda outlines a clear ambition for simplifying local authority structures, enhancing local democratic accountability, and driving economic growth. As part of the English Devolution White Paper, the Government has invited areas like Greater Essex to submit reorganisation proposals aligned to six criteria:

1. A single tier of local government.
2. Councils of a size that is efficient, sustainable, and local.
3. Delivery of high-quality, sustainable local services.
4. Strong local support.
5. Strategic leadership and commitment to devolution.
6. Local identity and strong community engagement.

The five unitary authority model for Greater Essex meets all six criteria. It offers a pragmatic path to long-term service improvement and democratic renewal without sacrificing what residents value most: local connection, high-quality services, and civic pride. The proposal gives comprehensive consideration to the transition and transformation to vesting day in 2028 and beyond.

A collaborative proposal rooted in local strength

Our proposal is the product of deep collaboration between Basildon Borough Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Castle Point Borough Council, Chelmsford City Council, Colchester City Council, Harlow District Council, Maldon District Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council, Tendring District Council and Uttlesford District Council. This collaboration has been built on shared recognition of the need for reform; data-driven understanding of service performance and cost; commitment to retaining strong local identity and accountability; and respect for established economic, social, and travel-to-work geographies. The breadth of collaboration, which has transcended politics, underscores that the proposal represents a consensus approach, not a unilateral plan by any single council. As upper tier local authorities, we have worked with Essex County Council and Thurrock Council to share data and common evidence.

The work to develop the proposal and shape the joint vision has been led by a cohesive and effective Programme Board comprising leaders and chief executives. The Programme Board has provided clear direction to working groups and workshops, and has commissioned independent expert analysis. At every stage, the process has been open and inclusive, with technical officers collaborating closely to build a robust shared evidence base.

Meeting the six Government criteria for reorganisation

The five unitary authority model is explicitly aligned to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s six criteria for reorganisation:

- 1. Proposals should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government:** The proposal abolishes all district/ city, county, and existing unitary councils, forming five new unitary councils covering the entire Greater Essex area in a single tier of local government with clear, contiguous boundaries.
- 2. Unitary local government must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity, and withstand financial shocks:** Each new authority would serve roughly 326,000–510,000 residents. This fits the Government’s population guideline and balances scale and proximity. Independent analysis shows that authorities of this size can deliver high service quality – indeed, most highly rated councils nationally have populations under 400,000. Any smaller number of councils would produce enormous councils with no centre, no sense of place, and reduced resilience. By contrast, the five unitary authority model avoids unmanageable scale while securing significant economies.
- 3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high-quality and sustainable public services to citizens:** By integrating county and district services within each local council, the proposal maintains continuity and improves outcomes. Place-based delivery enables quicker decisions and better local partnerships. There is no evidence that larger councils inherently yield better social care outcomes, and there is strong evidence that moderately sized unitaries deliver

significantly better value commissioning and market management outcomes; the five unitary authority proposal preserves local systems that drive high performance. Our model aligns new councils with existing service footprints, reducing the risk of transition and maximising the continuity of current high-performance services while creating the foundations for accelerating transformation and public service reform.

- 4. 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:** Essex councils have developed this proposal together in a transparent, evidence-led process. A task force of Basildon, Brentwood, Castle Point, Chelmsford, Colchester, Harlow, Maldon, Southend, Tendring, and Uttlesford Councils have worked collaboratively, hosting workshops and focus groups to test all options. The final proposal is endorsed by the majority of leaders across Greater Essex. Ongoing consultation has gathered public and stakeholder input to ensure that the proposal is built on local views.
- 5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements:** The model explicitly enables devolution by matching the unitary footprint to a new Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). Government guidance requires separate footprints for mayoral and unitary authorities. Our five unitary authority proposal leaves the MSA area intact and creates constituent councils below it. This separation of roles is by design: strategic planning and funding will sit with the MSA, while local services rest with the new unitary councils. Thus, it fully unlocks devolution ambitions while preserving local accountability.
- 6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment:** Smaller, community-focused councils increase democratic engagement and neighbourhood empowerment. By centring each council on a coherent place, the proposal respects Greater Essex's strong civic identity. Existing parish and town councils (nearly 300 across Essex) remain intact within the new

authorities. Each ward's electorate will remain comparable in size to today, maintaining parity of representation.

The five unitary authority model: Why it works

- The five unitary authority model emerged as the best option from a rigorous options appraisal, outperforming alternatives on cost, local fit, service resilience, and strategic potential. It provides:
- The right scale: Population sizes from 326,000 to 510,000, achieving economies of scale while maintaining strong local representation and importantly, with room to accommodate a maximised growth.
 - Continuity of services: Because the new councils align with existing service footprints, transitions are smooth and risk is reduced.
 - Lower transition risk: Reduced aggregation and disruption to existing service boundaries, means smoother implementation and less disruption to users.
 - Clear identity: Each authority is centred around recognisable communities, helping sustain pride and engagement.

By contrast, larger models with two to four unitary authorities would require complex and high-risk service disaggregation, especially in children's services, adult social care, education, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These would also lead to diminished local identity, increased bureaucracy, disengagement of residents and stakeholders, and increased costs and complexity.

The five unitary authority model is the only one that provides the right balance of structural simplicity, functional scale, and local legitimacy. It ensures equitable governance across diverse communities, from coastal towns to economic hubs and rural parishes.

Financial case for change

Essex councils are collectively facing well-documented fiscal challenges (driven by rising demand in social care, special education, homelessness etc.). The reorganisation outlined in this proposal is partly a response to those pressures. Detailed financial modelling by Grant

Thornton, informed by the work of leading analysts, underpins the proposal. For example, our adult and children's social care budgets have been analysed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence and Peopletoo, with their results showing that earlier intervention, prevention and pooled commissioning under a five-authority system could eliminate current deficits and achieve substantial annual savings. We have also considered capital assets and liabilities, as some districts hold historic debts (capital projects, pension deficits); the proposal includes strategies for addressing these in transition (e.g. equalisation grants, phased merger costs, exploring Government support). Our analysis clearly shows that the five-unitary model delivers better value for money and long-term efficiencies in comparison with other models proposed.

Our plan for achieving long-term efficiencies and financial savings is grounded in robust, evidence-based learning from other implementations. We are committed to accelerating the realisation of these benefits, aiming to deliver short-term gains wherever possible. Creating the right conditions will enable faster delivery, including securing a timely decision on the Greater Essex LGR proposal, staying focused on transition and implementation in the coming years amid planned regional and local elections, building strong support within the Greater Essex local government system, and maintaining a well-prepared, "oven-ready" implementation plan.

On all key metrics (service budgets, reserves, capital investment needs), the five-council model is robust. Moreover, by spreading risk, it ensures that no single authority is over-burdened with costs (any long-term savings are shared across the five).

Public and stakeholder support

Engagement has been continuous and multi-channel. A consultation across Greater Essex gathered over 7,000 responses; key themes included support for simplification of governance, protection of local services, and a desire for accountability and local representation.

Stakeholders from health, education, the emergency services, business, the voluntary sector and MPs from across the county have provided their letters of support for our proposal for five unitary

authorities, unanimously citing that they believe this model offers a unique opportunity to strengthen local governance, deliver improved services, and provide better value for residents and businesses while retaining the strong local identities that are so important to our communities.

In parallel, key stakeholders were consulted. Chief executives of health, police, fire, education, and voluntary sector bodies across Essex were invited to give their views on LGR. None raised major objections; indeed, local health partners noted that the five unitary authority map aligns with the Integrated Care Board's emerging locality divisions. The voluntary sector participated in a focus group, confirming that smaller, place-based councils would help build stronger connections between volunteers and local authorities.

A transformative opportunity

- This is not simply a redrawing of lines. The five unitary proposal for Greater Essex represents a profound opportunity to deliver:
- The optimal conditions for public service reform.
 - Stronger local democracy.
 - Simplified service access.
 - Efficient use of public funds.
 - Increased civic pride.
 - Strategic coordination with the MSA.

The five unitary authority proposal is a bold yet balanced solution. It meets Government requirements on every count, while clearly outperforming other configurations in our analysis. It has been crafted through genuine partnership among councils and the community, and is anchored in the real identities and economies of Greater Essex. By minimising service fragmentation and maximising local empowerment, it lays the foundation for more effective local government.

With Government support, the five new councils will bring simpler governance, sustainable finances, and closer services to the people, unlocking the full potential of Greater Essex for generations to come. This is a bold yet achievable reform – one that meets the future, aligns with national policy, and delivers for residents. We commend it to Government as the best way to unlock the full potential of Greater Essex.

Five new councils for Essex

Government Criterion 1: A proposal should seek to achieve for the whole of the area concerned the establishment of a single tier of local government.

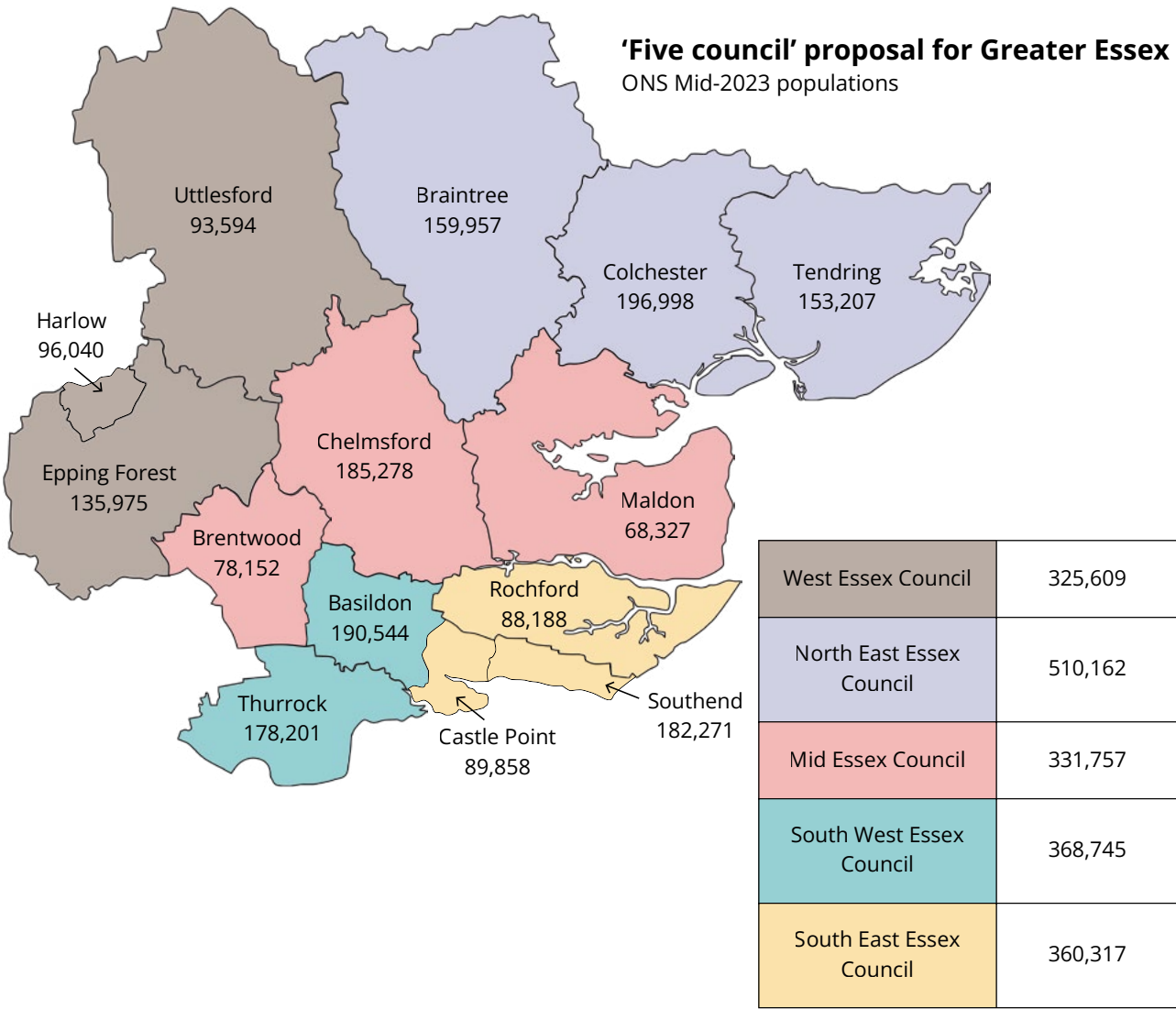
Our proposal establishes a single tier of local government by replacing the current two-tier system of 15 councils with five new unitary authorities. Each authority is centred around a major conurbation – Basildon, Chelmsford, Colchester, Harlow, and Southend – and the surrounding areas. This structure aligns with sensible economic geographies and enables more effective collaboration on large-scale priorities such as housing, infrastructure, and transport. We, along with our residents, are rightfully proud of the rich culture, heritage, and natural beauty of Essex, and our model preserves local civic pride and respects the identity of respective areas.

Our new councils respond to evidence, lived experience, and incorporate shared infrastructure, places of employment, and existing partner service areas within their boundaries. They also support representative constituent membership of the MSA, enhancing strategic coordination across Greater Essex. Our model creates a fair, effective governance arrangement with representative constituent membership whilst ensuring that councils are close to communities and align to lived geographies.

Essex is a county of distinct geographies in which its population lives, works, socialises, and shops. Its size and transport networks mean that in daily life, residents mostly remain in their localities. This creates different cultures between east, west, north, and south. It also creates strong local relationships and partnerships between adjacent sub-geographies.

Our vision is, therefore, for five unitary authorities which continue to reflect the unique and distinctive characteristics of their communities. The new

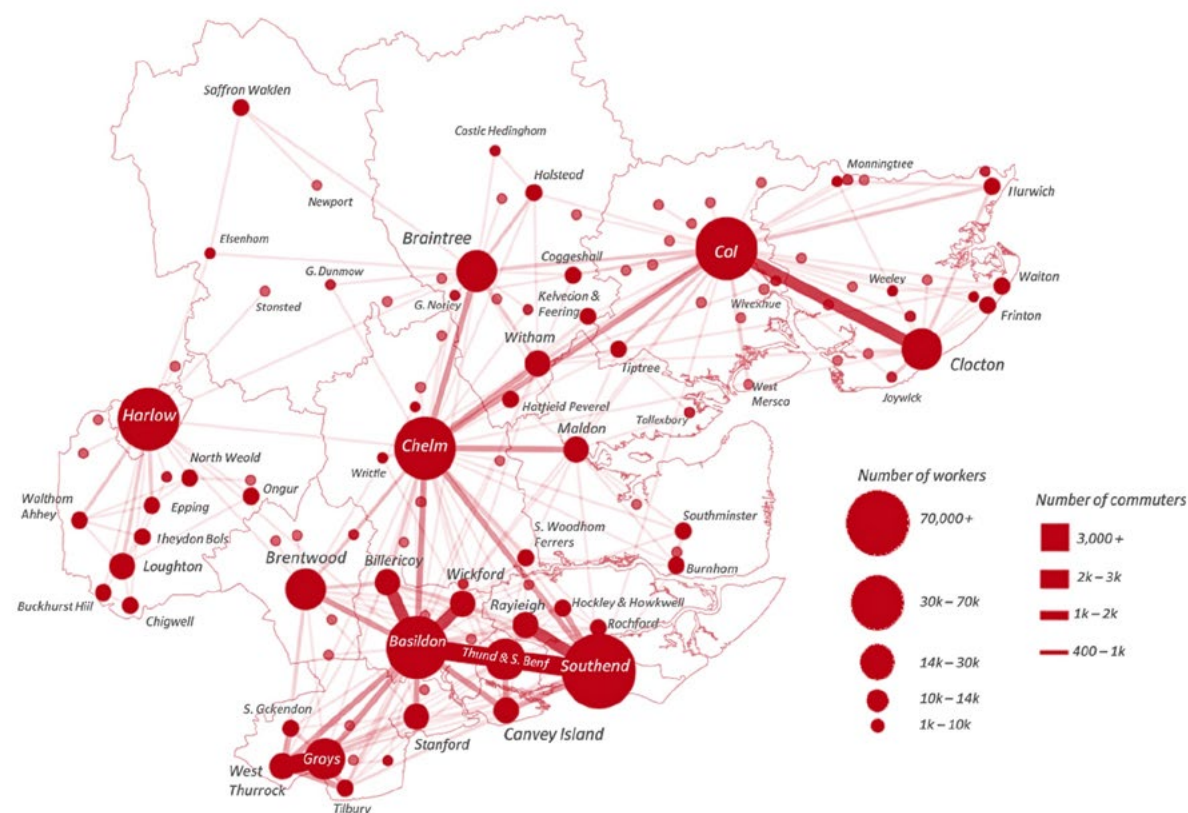
authorities will ensure ongoing and democratic representation through councils that are close to and recognisable to residents and that align with existing identities: as set out in the statutory invitation to participate in the devolution priority programme, our existing borough, district, and unitary areas are the building blocks from which we will form the new five unitary authorities. These will be better councils that do more with less and that harness the power of local communities to influence local, regional, and national leaders.



Five urban centres

Each of our five new councils hosts a primary town or city with significant numbers of residents and commuters. Our data shows that, based on a five unitary authority model, many workers travel to work at the largest conurbation within their respective home unitary authority. This is demonstrated by the travel flow map below,

showing the five major conurbations in Greater Essex – these are likewise the five main centres that people travel to for employment. While Greater Essex has retail hubs like Lakeside Thurrock, Chelmsford High Street and Braintree Shopping Village that draw visitors from across the county, the majority of leisure, shopping, and retail activity takes place within the proposed unitary authority locality of our residents.



There is a clear flow of travel in North East Essex, with people from both Tendring and Braintree heading to Colchester for work. Likewise, there is a clear movement of people across Mid Essex, with Chelmsford being the top place of employment for residents of Maldon. However, it is also clear that people in Chelmsford regularly head to Maldon and Brentwood for recreation and leisure purposes. There is a more reciprocal pattern of work travel flow across West Essex: Harlow is the top employment destination for residents of Epping Forest and vice versa.

Our five new councils ensure an even split of major conurbations across the Greater Essex footprint, reflecting the places where people live, work, and play and where children go to school. This allows each new council to act as an enabler for growth and transformation within its geography and to tailor its operating model to reflect the unique context and potential of its place.

The five do vary in size. However, this reflects actual economic geographies and enables more effective collaboration on large-scale priorities such as housing, infrastructure and transport. They all have ambitious growth and housing targets.

The division of conurbations promotes collaboration between the five new councils, which will assist the mayor and promote the opportunities of devolution. Given the Government's clear direction that councils should not cut across 'historical identity', any decision to bring two or even three of the county's major conurbations into one unitary authority will alienate residents and risks having a negative impact on these areas. Having fewer, larger unitary authorities would be an artificial arrangement and is unlikely to effectively serve the diverse needs of all communities within those expanded areas. Areas that already suffer from a lack of connectivity, such as the Dengie Peninsula, or high levels of deprivation, such as Jaywick or Clacton's Pier Ward, will struggle for representation in any larger unitary authority spread over too wide a region.

Identity

Our five new councils are based on firmly established local histories and identities that have been shaped by centuries of lived experience and government. Geography and lived reality are essential in shaping a sense of place and civic pride. Our proposal takes into account distances, rivers, forests, seas, major roads, rail routes, and country lanes.

Reflecting the differing personalities of community culture, our five new councils reflect their residents and their sense of belonging. Each part of Greater Essex offers something distinctive that reflects its heritage and cultural roots. This ranges from the original post-war New Towns of Basildon and Harlow through to Chelmsford's city energy with great shops and nightlife, the Roman history of Colchester, the picturesque market towns of Saffron Walden and Rayleigh, the peaceful villages of Coggeshall and Sible Hedingham, and the second-longest coastline in any county in England.

Essex embraces the whole spectrum of modern urban living, vibrant culture, historic charm, and peaceful rural life. This diversity creates a county of distinct geographies in which its population lives, works and socialises. Its size and transport networks mean that in daily life, residents mostly remain in their localities. This creates different cultures between east and west and north and south. It also creates strong local relationships and partnerships between adjacent sub-geographies.

Our five new councils respect these cultural differences and the existing strengths of partnership working, and represent new administrative boundaries which make sense to our residents.

Voice

Our five new councils ensure effective democratic representation for the people of Greater Essex, ensuring efficient delivery of the administrative function in terms of overall size without compromising the ability of councillors to be effective and accessible to their residents.

Our five new councils use existing district, city, borough, and unitary ward boundaries as building blocks for new electoral arrangements, grouped as necessary to provide new warding arrangements of approximately 6,000 electors (with two councillors representing) and 9,000 electors (with three councillors representing). The proportionate representation of the population is comparable within each new council, ensuring equity of representation at a local level. The two smallest

unitary authorities have ambitious growth plans and are likely to grow substantially in the future. Our proposal will ensure ongoing and democratic representation through councils that are close to and recognisable to residents and that align with existing identities.

Using recognisable electoral boundaries as building blocks will also provide clarity for voters, helping to support enfranchisement and ensure an effective transition to the new administrative arrangements. Our proposals for increasing community engagement and empowerment fit alongside these new arrangements and reflect the cultural identity of each place through area committees and harnessing the latent power of a local community network which is unique to its own place, ensuring that nobody is left unheard.

Essex for everyone

LGR must seek to balance efficiencies of scale alongside local responsiveness. Our proposal is designed to allow each unitary council to tailor its operating model to its local context while ensuring that it is appropriately aligned to deliver better value and outcomes for Greater Essex. We will ensure resilience and flexibility by creating a model that gives individual councils the ability to form a range of partnerships to respond to local needs. By taking account of local context and providing appropriate levels of proximity to our local communities, we will provide greater responsiveness.

Our five new councils will create a strong foundational layer that will underpin the work of the MSA and empower the mayor to champion the county and all its diversity. This will create better councils that do more with less and that harness the power of local communities to influence local, regional and national leaders.

The overviews provided below will introduce our five new councils and demonstrate why these areas, each based around the five conurbations of Greater Essex, are true to their regional identities and are best placed to drive sustainable, long-term growth across our county.

West Essex Council:

Where the future is built.

17th century Audley End House, near Saffron Walden, one of the finest Jacobean mansions in the country.

Factfile

Current population (ONS mid-year estimate, 2023)	325,609
2040 population estimate (ONS population projections, 2018)	340,230
Working-age people (% of total pop.)	61.5
Young people (% of total pop.)	19.8
Older people (% of total pop.)	18.7
Geographical area (hectares)	101,070
Population density (persons/hectare, 2023)	3
Dwelling growth Standard method (including transitional arrangements), 2023–2040	46,580
Major conurbation	Harlow
GVA per population (2023)	£29,655
Number of councillors (current)	141
Number of new councillors	83
Number of parish and town councils (current)	77 (53 Uttlesford, 0 Harlow, 24 Epping)
Number of businesses per 10,000 population	536
Housing need (MHCLG, 2025)	2,740
Number of schools	137

West Essex is a region where innovation, connectivity, and quality of life converge to create one of the UK's most forward-looking and investable areas. It is an area defined by its access to forest and green spaces, considerable rurality, and proximity to both London and Cambridge. From the groundbreaking 19th-century environmental preservation of the 'People's Forest' at Epping in the south to the historic charm of Audley End and Thaxted in the north, and with the burial site of the last Anglo-Saxon king, Harold II, at Waltham Abbey in the west and Harlow, one of the UK's first New Towns, designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd, at its centre, West Essex is rich in heritage and character. With Saffron Walden recently named the UK's best place to live in 2025, the region offers a rare blend of rural beauty, cultural depth, and access to diverse green spaces.

The home of innovation

There is a strong diversity of place across West Essex, yet with a central conurbation and a near-even spread of population distribution across the three existing districts, no one area dominates. Harlow, Epping Forest, and Uttlesford also make up the Essex section of the UK Innovation Corridor, linking east London to Cambridge. West Essex is home to Harlow Innovation Park and Chesterford Research Park, two nationally significant centres of research, life sciences, and enterprise. These hubs attract global talent and investment, positioning West Essex as a key player in shaping the future of health, technology, and sustainable development. The opportunities at North Weald, with the new Google Campus evidencing the latest expansion of the digital and tech sector in West Essex, confirm the area's potential. West Essex complements the Government's London, Oxford, and Cambridge growth triangle, and its unification and extended collaboration will leave it best placed to take advantage of ambitious national plans for growth and innovation.

People living in the various districts that make up West Essex already access employment opportunities across the wider area. For example, London Stansted Airport is the third-largest employer of Harlow residents, demonstrating the interconnected nature of the local labour



The Epping Ongar railway, originally opened in 1865, offers steam journeys through Epping Forest.

market. West Essex remains a leading region for employment today: Harlow College and Stansted Airport College are equipping the next generation with the skills needed to thrive in a knowledge-driven economy, while London Stansted Airport, undergoing a £1.1 billion expansion, is a global gateway and major employer that is poised to generate thousands of new jobs.

Connected places

The M11 motorway and the London–Cambridge train line are the backbone of this region, linking London in the south to Cambridge in the north. Alongside the West Anglia rail line, this creates a powerful north–south axis that binds Epping, Harlow, and Uttlesford into a coherent growth corridor. West Essex's transport links via rail, road, and air connect it seamlessly to London, Cambridge,

and global markets. The Central Line, Elizabeth Line, and West Anglia Main Line make commuting and commerce efficient, while Green Belt areas and forests ensure that growth enhances well-being and environmental quality. Unlike other parts of Essex, where east–west movement dominates, West Essex is distinctly aligned along this north–south trajectory, supporting a shared labour market, integrated commuting patterns, and coordinated investment.

There is an existing alignment with current health boundaries as well as shared health services such as a shared hospice and pulmonary arterial hypertension care. The West Essex boundary also fits largely across current parliamentary constituencies and is compliant with most national policy requirements, including in relation to local plans.

Over the coming years, West Essex is set to play host to a number of new developments of

considerable ambition and scale. For example, the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, one of the UK's most ambitious new communities with over 23,000 planned homes, integrated transport systems, and a commitment to green infrastructure, is designed to deliver inclusive, future-ready living and set a national benchmark for sustainable development.

West Essex is already working as one, and formalising that unity will ensure that its growth is managed sustainably and its voice is heard clearly in regional and national decision-making. With a shared identity, a powerful economic base, and a clear, deliverable vision for sustainable growth, West Essex is poised to become one of the UK's most dynamic and prosperous regions. This is a place where innovation thrives, where communities flourish, and where the future is being built, today.



North East Essex Council:

*Uniting coast, countryside,
and city for community
leadership.*

*The Atmospheric ruins of St Botolph's Priory,
founded in 1093 in Colchester.*

Factfile

Current population (ONS mid-year estimate, 2023)	510,162
2040 population estimate (ONS population projections, 2018)	557,989
Working-age people (% of total pop.)	59.8
Young people (% of total pop.)	17.9
Older people (% of total pop.)	22.3
Geographical area (hectares)	127,626
Population density (persons/hectare, 2023)	4
Dwelling growth Standard method (including transitional arrangements), 2023–2040	58,633
Major conurbation	Colchester
GVA per population (2023)	£22,759
Number of councillors (current)	173
Number of new councillors	100
Number of parish and town councils (current)	116 (35 Colchester, 54 Braintree, 27 Tendring)
Number of businesses per 10,000 population	368
Housing need (MHCLG, 2025)	3,449
Number of schools	206

North East Essex is geographically and economically diverse. It is bounded by the Tendring Sunshine Coast, the Colne Estuary, and the River Stour, which forms part of the Essex border with Suffolk. Britain's first city, Colchester, sits centrally, with Braintree, Halstead, and Witham to the west, and the resort of Clacton and the historic port of Harwich on the coast to the east.

A diverse and culturally rich region

The area's historic and cultural assets are well established. Highlights include the millennium-old Colchester Castle (built on the foundations of a Roman temple), the medieval barns at Cressing Temple, and Dedham Vale's Constable landscape. Harwich boasts a rich maritime heritage – from the

home of Christopher Jones, captain of the *Mayflower*, to the oldest depiction of the American flag – and is proud to have welcomed the Kindertransport. Leisure, sport, and tourism play an important role in the area's identity. Attractions include Colchester Zoo, coastal destinations such as Clacton with its famous Pier, and a growing creative sector. Local football clubs such as Colchester United and Braintree Town enhance community sports participation.

The population of North East Essex is both substantial and diverse. The new unitary authority will serve around 510,000 residents, with 22% aged over 65. Colchester has a relatively young demographic, influenced by its university population.

By contrast, coastal areas have a higher proportion of retirees, with over 30% aged 65 and over in Tendring. Coastal communities face significant socio-demographic challenges; the wider area contains some pockets of deprivation alongside more affluent neighbourhoods, reflecting the balance of the socio-economic landscape in North East Essex as a whole.

Strategic infrastructure and economic opportunity

Transport infrastructure across the future unitary authority is well established but under strain. Key road routes include the A12, A120, A133, and A131, providing links to London, Greater Essex, and other parts of the Eastern Region. The Eastern Main Line connects Colchester, Witham, and Manningtree to

London, Ipswich, and Norwich, while branch lines link Braintree, Harwich, and Clacton to the wider rail network.

North East Essex hosts a broad business base and workforce. The area supports 18,785 enterprises and approximately 190,000 jobs. Colchester accounts for nearly half of the region's employment, with concentrations of professional and digital services. Construction is prominent in areas outside the city, while the coast supports tourism-related sectors and the care sector.

There are bright future opportunities for economic growth. Offshore renewables, logistics along the A120 corridor, and the Freeport East initiative at Harwich are key areas of potential. Innovation centres in Colchester and surrounding towns are supporting growth in research and enterprise, while higher and further education institutions contribute to the region's skill base. The University of Essex is a nationally and internationally recognised centre for research and business engagement, and Colchester Institute delivers technical and vocational education across North East Essex, supporting access to training and employment.

There is a long history of joint working for place leadership across the three existing local authorities in North East Essex. This includes sharing Part 1 of their Local Plans outlining strategic ambitions across Colchester, Tendring, and Braintree.

There is also robust partnership working in North East Essex to respond to socio-demographic challenges. Local authorities work closely with the voluntary sector and health partners and demonstrate a track record of tackling inequalities and supporting residents through a preventative, early intervention approach. This joint work has helped to reduce suicide rates, which were some of the highest in the country, and has improved the overall health index in some of the most deprived areas.

North East Essex presents a strong and coherent foundation for unitary governance. Its well-established transport and economic links, history of joint planning and delivery, and shared public service challenges make it well placed for a single, accountable leadership model that can deliver effective, efficient, and locally responsive services.



Often referred to as the most beautiful village in England, Finchingfield is a picture-postcard gem of North East Essex.

Mid Essex Council:

Quality of life in the heart of Essex.



Hylands House and Estate, an iconic building that was used as a filming location for the television series The Crown.

Factfile

Current population (ONS mid-year estimate, 2023)	331,757
2040 population estimate (ONS population projections, 2018)	352,153
Working-age people (% of total pop.)	60.7
Young people (% of total pop.)	18.4
Older people (% of total pop.)	20.9
Geographical area (hectares)	84,970
Population density (persons/hectare, 2023)	4
Dwelling growth Standard method (including transitional arrangements), 2023–2040	42,551
Major conurbation	Chelmsford
GVA per population (2023)	£32,370
Number of councillors (current)	143
Number of new councillors	79
Number of parish and town councils (current)	69 (29 Chelmsford, 31 Maldon, 9 Brentwood)
Number of businesses per 10,000 population	483
Housing need (MHCLG, 2025)	2,747
Number of schools	122

Mid Essex is at the heart of Essex and combines rich culture and a strong economy and potential for growth with a commitment to quality of life for all residents. At its core is the city of Chelmsford, which is iconic as the birthplace of radio and the home of Guglielmo Marconi's first factory, and which continues to drive innovation today. Chelmsford has also been ranked as one of the healthiest places to live in the UK. Mid Essex is an area rich in heritage and legend, boasting one of the oldest intact stone churches in the UK, the seventh-century chapel of St-Peter-on-the-Wall at Bradwell, and the site of a 10th-century battle between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings which was immortalised in one of the most important Old English poems, 'The Battle of Maldon'.

Steeped in heritage, innovation, and natural beauty

From the remnants of the ancient Great Weald (forest) surrounding Brentwood to the historic parkland at Hylands Estate and from the peaceful RHS Garden Hyde Hall to the wildlife haven of Hanningfield Reservoir, Mid Essex offers beautiful green spaces on the doorstep of its conurbations. The river estuaries of the Chelmer, the Blackwater, and the Crouch offer essential intertidal habitats supporting nature and our coastal communities. Mid Essex enjoys the bounty of its waters with culinary delights from suppliers including the royal purveyors of sea salt, Maldon Salt, whose product is exported worldwide.

Mid Essex has excellent access to sports, leisure, and other recreational facilities ranging from Riverside Leisure Centre, with its ice rink, to Essex County Cricket Ground in Chelmsford and two long-distance walking paths, the Essex Way and St Peter's Way, that traverse Mid Essex. The region hosts several major music festivals and locations that have featured prominently in major television series including *The Crown* and *The Essex Serpent*. Chelmsford regularly scores highly in 'thriving places' rankings and was recognised as one of the best places to live in 2025. Maldon attracts over 4 million visitors annually.

Connectivity and strategic opportunity

Whilst Brentwood and Chelmsford enjoy excellent road and rail links to London and other areas,



Maldon is famous for its Thames barges. The sailing barge *Pudge*, built in 1922, is one of only four Dunkirk spritsail barges afloat.

connectivity is a major challenge for the Maldon region, and this limits employment opportunities for Maldon residents in less connected places such as the Dengie Peninsula and Tollesbury. This, combined with a lack of further education provision in Maldon, has led to a lower-skilled workforce, fewer opportunities for economic growth, and health problems through increased social isolation. A Mid Essex authority will be able to adopt a more strategic approach to these types of challenges through closer collaboration, which in turn will open the economic and life benefits enjoyed by residents in Chelmsford and Brentwood to other areas of the authority. Connectivity to Brentwood has been bolstered by the introduction of the Elizabeth Line, with its terminus at Shenfield. This has reduced travel times to Central London and has greatly improved connectivity to the rest of the UK,

with, for example, travel time to Heathrow Airport now just over an hour. Progress has been made in terms of connectivity and plans for significant new infrastructure in the region, including new rail stations to support the proposed Chelmsford Garden Community and the development of the Chelmsford North East Bypass. Mid Essex has already seen significant housing growth, and this is being complemented by investment in infrastructure such as the new station at Beaulieu. A major source of both growth and employment is the potential creation of Bradwell B, which remains a national designated site for new nuclear. This project would be transformative in leading to a major investment in skills, jobs, and the local economy. Mid Essex also has plentiful opportunity for solar and wind farm development, and Chelmsford continues to build on its legacy of

innovation and scientific technology with growth in aerospace and engineering, hosting companies including BAE systems. While connectivity is a challenge, Mid Essex has access to excellent educational institutions offering well-regarded schools provision, with Anglia Ruskin University and Chelmsford College delivering across the region of the unitary authority.

Mid Essex is a vibrant region that contains strong centres of innovation and thriving economies and embodies a strong sense of place. A Mid Essex authority will increase these opportunities for growth, improve quality of life, and ensure that shared place assets are available to all. The increased opportunity to deliver on key infrastructure and foster an ever-greater sense of partnership will ensure that the heart of Essex continues to thrive.

South West Essex Council:

Connected communities, thriving together.

Coalhouse Fort, reflecting the region’s historical role in maritime defence and trade, overlooking the Thames with the London Gateway Port in the background.

Factfile

Current population (ONS mid-year estimate, 2023)	368,745
2040 population estimate (ONS population projections, 2018)	406,344
Working-age people (% of total pop.)	62.8
Young people (% of total pop.)	21.8
Older people (% of total pop.)	15.4
Geographical area (hectares)	27,384
Population density (persons/hectare, 2023)	13
Dwelling growth Standard method (including transitional arrangements), 2023–2040	40,086
Major conurbation	Basildon
GVA per population (2023)	£33,224
Number of councillors (current)	100
Number of new councillors	82
Number of parish and town councils (current)	9 (9 Basildon, 0 Thurrock)
Number of businesses per 10,000 population	397
Housing need (MHCLG, 2025)	2,357
Number of schools	118

South West Essex is a dynamic hub of industry, connectivity, and cultural heritage. Defined by its relationship with the River Thames, it has always been a place of ambition and transformation, from the post-war creation of Basildon New Town to the globally significant port and logistics hubs of today. Its history is rich and nationally significant: Tilbury Fort, where Elizabeth I rallied her troops against the Spanish Armada, and Tilbury Docks, the landing site of the *Empire Windrush*, symbolise resilience, diversity, and the region's proud multicultural identity. Today, South West Essex continues to foster innovation, global connectivity, and cultural exchange.

Economic strengths with global reach

South West Essex is a strategically located economic powerhouse, home to the London Gateway Port – a global trade hub with Thames Freeport status that attracts international investment and creates thousands of jobs. Major employers include Ford, Leonardo UK in aerospace and defence, and the Costa Coffee Roastery, one of Europe's largest and most sustainable roasteries. The area also boasts one of the highest business start-up rates in the country, with strong business survival, alongside major retail and leisure destinations such as Lakeside Thurrock, the planned South

Essex Arena in Basildon, and regenerated high streets that drive local commerce. Logistics, manufacturing, and international trade are central to the area's prosperity, while regeneration plans for Basildon and Thurrock will deliver new housing, sustainable transport links, and major infrastructure improvements.

A region ready for regeneration and inclusion

South West Essex combines economic strengths with significant opportunities for improvement. The area faces challenges in health, environment, and urban vitality, including pockets of poor air quality, below-

average life expectancy, and declining town centres in need of reinvestment. Infrastructure constraints also limit housing delivery and the area's full growth potential, making targeted regeneration and inclusive development essential to unlocking its future.

A South West Essex unitary authority has the scale and focus to deliver targeted health interventions that reduce inequalities, drive town centre regeneration through coordinated planning and investment, and support sustainable housing growth. This includes the proposed New Town development, which would deliver over 16,000 homes, create 23,000 construction jobs, and generate £2.6 billion in gross value added (GVA), providing a transformational boost to the local economy and quality of life. A natural partnership for the future.

Basildon and Thurrock already share strong economic and cultural ties, underpinned by a proven track record of strategic collaboration. Their ambitious Local Plans are closely aligned on infrastructure, housing, and environmental priorities, creating a strong foundation for coordinated growth and development.

By unifying governance, South West Essex can integrate Local Plans to maximise economic and social impact, leverage strategic assets such as Ford Dunton, London Gateway, and West Horndon Station to drive growth and clean industry, and unlock national investment to deliver inclusive, sustainable communities. This approach aligns directly with the Government's missions for growth, opportunity, safer streets, clean energy, and improved health.

South West Essex is uniquely positioned to combine its industrial and logistical strengths with targeted regeneration and social investment. With single, integrated and accountable leadership, it can accelerate growth, reduce inequalities, and become a leading example of how LGR delivers real benefits for people and places.



Basildon, designated a New Town in 1949, is a symbol of mid-century urban planning now undergoing major regeneration in the 21st century.

South East Essex Council:

Coastal charm, urban energy.

The Prittlewell Priory is an iconic 12th century priory complete with stunning Victorian walled gardens in the heart of Southend-on-Sea.

Factfile

Current population (ONS mid-year estimate, 2023)	360,317
2040 population estimate (ONS population projections, 2018)	396,589
Working-age people (% of total pop.)	60.0
Young people (% of total pop.)	18.2
Older people (% of total pop.)	21.9
Geographical area (hectares)	25,344
Population density (persons/hectare, 2023)	14
Dwelling growth Standard method (including transitional arrangements), 2023–2040	47,515
Major conurbation	Southend
GVA per population (2023)	£17,676
Number of councillors (current)	139
Number of new councillors	90
Number of parish and town councils (current)	16 (1 Southend, 14 Rochford, 1 Castle Point)
Number of businesses per 10,000 population	386
Housing need (MHCLG, 2025)	2,795
Number of schools	112

South East Essex is an authority defined by its geographic boundaries with the rivers Thames, Crouch, and Roach and the North Sea, which are instrumental in the formation of the coastal identity of this culturally and historically rich region of Essex. Ancient origins abound, from Roman salt production on Canvey Island, an early East Saxon royal burial ground at Prittlewell, and famous historic battles at Benfleet and Ashingdon, to the final resting place of Darwin's ship, the *Beagle*, at Paglesham. The city of Southend-on-Sea, the central conurbation of South East Essex, boasts the 12th-century Prittlewell Priory, the medieval Southchurch Hall, the Focal Point Gallery, and the largest public art gallery in Essex, the Beecroft Art Gallery. As Sir John Betjeman said, "The Pier is Southend, Southend is the Pier", and this unique 19th-century marvel was recently voted the most iconic building in Essex. The 2020 Royal Society for Arts Heritage Index report, which ranks English councils, highlighted "the Thames Estuary for its heritage potential", with Castle Point ranking first, Rochford fifth, and Southend 16th in the country. A South East Essex unitary authority will be well placed to realise this potential.

Cultural identity

Tourism is key for South East Essex, and the region attracts over 7 million visitors per year. There are opportunities to encourage longer stays and build on the success of Southend seafront through the joint promotion of comparatively less visited areas in Rochford and Castle Point. South East Essex is also the home of Southend United Football Club, a National League club with a strong fan base and ambitions for future development. South East Essex is blessed with an array of natural beauty spots, from Hadleigh Country Park with its atmospheric 13th-century castle ruins and Olympic mountain biking course to the ancient woodlands of Hockley and Belfairs. South East Essex contains saltmarsh and mudflat habitats, a vital store for vast amounts of carbon and an essential habitat for migratory birds. Saltmarsh across Essex, as part of the wider East Coast Flyway, is being considered for World Heritage status. Wallasea Island has been part of an ambitious rewilding project which saw 3 million tonnes of earth from the Crossrail project relocated to create a rich new wetland habitat. Canvey Wick, an accidental landscape formed in the ruins of an oil

refinery, is a 'brownfield rainforest' and home to one of Britain's rarest bumblebees, the shrill carder bee.

Future growth potential

A shared sense of place already exists across Rochford, Castle Point, and Southend, with boundaries seamlessly crossed by residents daily. The city of Southend is the major conurbation, and many residents commute to Southend for employment from Rochford and Castle Point. The area scores highly with quality of school provision and further education institutions and is served by USP Seevic Campus, based in Thundersley, and South Essex College and Southend Adult Community College, based in Southend. The educational offer is further enhanced by the presence of the University of Essex's Southend campus. Southend boasts theatres including the Cliffs Pavilion and the Palace Theatre, and regularly hosts internationally recognised performers.

The authority is reminiscent of a London borough, with areas of affluence and prosperity existing near areas of high deprivation. Leigh-on-Sea was

in recent years voted the best place to live in the UK, yet the Kursaal ward is ranked in the top 20% most deprived wards in the UK. Children living on Canvey Island are twice as likely to live in income deprivation as children living just on the other side of the creek in Benfleet. It is vital that the powers to improve these imbalances are situated in a focused authority where existing learning can be shared and genuine change can be promoted.

The region is well connected, with two London-bound railway lines traversing South Essex and beyond. There are good road links, although these suffer from major congestion. Connectivity is good in terms of movement east to west, but the area suffers from less connectivity in terms of movement north to south. There is no direct rail service between Southend, as Greater Essex's largest city, and Chelmsford, as the third-most populous place in the county. London Southend Airport has been recognised as one of the fastest-growing airports in the country, with excellent customer satisfaction ratings. The airport is not only a global gateway for South East Essex but is also an inbound gateway

for international business and tourism. This brings inward investment to South East Essex and benefits local businesses, as evidenced by the creation of Southend Airport Business Park and the cutting-edge innovation facility hub, The Launchpad.

South East Essex is an area with an ingrained sense of identity and place and will feel familiar to residents who already live in close proximity and cross existing boundaries daily for work, education, and recreation. The South East Essex unitary authority will continue to respect the passionate local pride that residents have for their local town, village, or city while recognising that there are far more commonalities than differences across this area. South East Essex combines heritage, fantastic access to recreational and leisure activities, and a range of visitor attractions enjoyed by both local people and tourists. Economically, South East Essex is primed to expand, and the opportunity to unite the area and create a fit-for-purpose authority that can draw on the assets of the entire geography will be transformative.



The Labworth area of Canvey Island seafront offering panoramic views of the Thames Estuary.

Value for money: efficiency and cost savings: methodology and assumptions

Oaklands House, a Grade II historic property that houses the Museum of Chelmsford and Museum of the Essex Regiment.

The five unitary authority model delivers the highest savings for Greater Essex, outperforming all other configurations, both immediately and in the long term, while keeping local government truly local. The five proposed unitary authorities each have projected populations ranging from approximately 330,000 to over 557,000 by 2040, aligning with the Government’s guiding principle of 500,000 or more where possible, and providing a clear case for aiming at more optimally sized unitary authorities that will deliver better long-term benefits and efficiencies than other models.

This size allows for economies of scale, financial sustainability, and resilience to economic shocks. The model enables both short-term savings and long-term sustainability through improved commissioning, digital transformation, and workforce productivity. Independent, evidence-based analysis shows that it can achieve net annual savings of over £104 million, nearly £26 million more than four authorities and

nearly £50 million more than three, with lower transition risks and smoother implementation due to fewer mergers. With broad cross-party backing and the capacity to accelerate savings ahead of vesting day, the five-authority model represents the most financially sustainable, low-risk and community-focused option, securing better value, resilience, and responsiveness for decades to come.

	5 Unitaries	4 Unitaries	3 Unitaries
Ongoing Savings	£134.696m	£106.030m	£78.817m
Ongoing Costs	£30.365m	£27.329m	£24.212m
Total Savings	£104.331m	£78.701m	£54.605m
Pay Harmonisation +costs/-savings	-£0.504m	-£2.526m	+£28.804m
Risk Adjusted Total Net Savings	£104.835m	£81.227m	£25.801m

Conclusion

Our proposal for five new unitary authorities in Greater Essex represents a bold, evidence-led response to the challenges and opportunities facing the region. We offer a pragmatic and future-ready model that balances strategic scale with local identity, enabling more efficient, accountable, and responsive governance.

By aligning with the Government's criteria for reorganisation, the five unitary authority model ensures continuity of high-quality services, unlocks significant financial efficiencies, and empowers communities through stronger local leadership. It avoids the risks of over-centralisation, preserves civic pride, and supports tailored solutions to complex issues such as housing, social care, and economic growth.

With widespread collaboration, robust public engagement, and a clear roadmap for transition, this proposal lays the foundation for a simpler, stronger, and more sustainable system of local government. This proposal is rooted in place, driven by local needs, and equipped to deliver for the people of Greater Essex for generations to come.

RSPB Rainham Marshes stretch beneath the soaring span of the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge, which connects Essex to Kent.

*“Alone we can do so little;
together we can do so much”*

Helen Keller

With thanks to officers across Greater Essex and all those who have contributed to the development of this proposal.

For the full proposal please visit:

www.essexlgrhub.org/stronger-greater-essex