



## Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority

### Decision Report

**Report reference number:** 021-25

**Government security classification:** Not protectively marked

**Title of report:** Local Government Reorganisation in Greater Essex – Interim Plan

**Area of county / stakeholders affected:** Whole of Greater Essex

**Report by:** Pippa Brent-Isherwood (Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer)

**Date of report:** 10 March 2025

**Enquiries to:** Pippa Brent-Isherwood (Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer)

#### 1. Purpose of the report

The Government has signalled its intention to facilitate a programme of local government reorganisation for two-tier areas and unitary councils where there is “evidence of failure” or where their size and / or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver “sustainable, high-quality services”. This will see Greater Essex (Southend, Essex and Thurrock) moving from the current, two-tier model of county, district / city / borough and unitary authorities to fewer, larger unitary authorities across the county.

Although the invitation to develop proposals has been issued to local authority Leaders, the Government has been clear that the views of other public sector providers, including the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, will be crucial to understanding the best way to structure local government across Greater Essex. The PFCC has therefore been invited to be a co-signatory to the Interim Plan to be submitted to the Government by 21 March 2025, and this decision report seeks the PFCC’s approval of the draft document attached at Appendix 1.

## 2. Recommendations

That the PFCC approves, as a co-signatory, the proposed Interim Plan attached at Appendix 1, which is to be submitted to the Government on or before 21 March 2025.

## 3. Benefits of the proposal

The Government sees devolution and local government reorganisation as key vehicles through which powers will be transferred out of Westminster into local areas, and a simpler, more sustainable local government structure will be delivered that will increase value for money for council taxpayers.

Government officials will provide feedback on the Interim Plan to help support the development of final proposals to be submitted by 26 September 2025.

## 4. Background and proposal

On 10 January 2025, the Leaders of Southend-on-Sea City Council, Essex County Council and Thurrock Borough Council wrote to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution seeking inclusion in the Government's Devolution Priority Programme (DPP). On 5 February 2025, the Minister wrote to the Leaders of all local authorities across Greater Essex confirming that this request has been successful. The letter invited them to work together to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation and set out the criteria against which submissions would be evaluated and the timeline for this process. The latter included a requirement for local authority Leaders to submit an interim plan to the Government by 21 March 2025.

The criteria for unitary local government set out by the Minister can be summarised as follows:

### 1. Proposals should achieve a single tier of local government for the whole of the area

- Proposals should be for "sensible economic areas" (with an appropriate tax base) and for "a sensible geography" (which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs).
- Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and explain the outcomes they are expected to achieve (and how), including evidence of the estimated costs and benefits.

### 2. New unitary authorities must be "the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks"

- New councils should generally aim to serve a population of 500,000 or more. However, there may be certain scenarios in which this figure does not make sense for an area, in which case, the rationale should be set out in the proposal.
- Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and ensure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for money.
- Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition costs and future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including through the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects.
- For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and / or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support (such as Thurrock Borough Council), proposals must demonstrate how reorganisation will contribute to putting local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing and what area-specific arrangements may be necessary to make new structures viable.
- In general, there is no proposal for council debt to be addressed centrally or written off as part of reorganisation. For areas where there are exceptional circumstances, where there

has been failure linked to capital practices, proposals should reflect the extent to which the implications of this can be managed locally, including as part of efficiencies possible through reorganisation.

### **3. Unitary structures must prioritise the delivery of high quality and sustainable public services to citizens**

- Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services.
- Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money.
- Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children's services, SEND and homelessness, as well as for wider public services, including those relating to public safety.

### **4. Proposals should show how councils in the area have worked together to come to a view that meets local needs and is informed by local views**

- Proposals should consider "issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance."
- Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, along with an explanation of the views put forward and how any concerns expressed will be addressed.

### **5. New unitary structures must support devolution arrangements**

- Proposals will need to set out how the new Mayoral Strategic Authority (to be established in 2026) and its governance arrangements will need to change to continue to function effectively.
- Proposals should ensure there are "sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities."

### **6. New unitary structures should enable stronger community engagement and deliver genuine opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment**

- Proposals will need to explain plans to engage communities.

The above criteria will likely see the 15 local authorities that currently exist across Greater Essex replaced by between two and five unitary authorities, with 10 of the 15 local authorities having expressed a preference in principle at this stage for five unitaries.

The interim plan to be submitted to Government by 21 March 2025 is required to set out the county's progress on developing proposals in line with the criteria and guidance. Whilst there is no standard template to be completed, the interim plan is required to:

- a) Identify any barriers or challenges where further clarity or support would be helpful.
- b) Identify the likely options for the size and boundaries of new councils, along with indicative efficiency saving opportunities.
- c) Include indicative costs (including of future service transformation opportunities).
- d) Include early views as to the numbers of councillors in each of the new authorities that will ensure "both effective democratic representation for all parts of the area, and also effective governance and decision-making arrangements which will balance the unique needs of your cities, towns, rural and coastal areas".
- e) Include early views on how new structures will support devolution.
- f) Include a summary of any local engagement that has been undertaken and any views expressed, along with further plans for local engagement to help shape the final proposals.
- g) Set out the indicative costs of preparing proposals and standing up an implementation team as well as any proposed arrangements to coordinate potential capacity funding across the area.
- h) Set out any voluntary arrangements that have been agreed to keep all councils involved in discussions.

The draft interim plan for Greater Essex is attached at Appendix 1.

## 5. Alternative options considered and rejected

The PFCC could chose not to be a co-signatory to the Interim Plan. However, this option is not recommended as it may result in the PFCC and Essex County Fire and Rescue Service no longer being recognised in the proposal as “full partners” as they are now.

## 6. Strategic priorities

Through devolution, there is an opportunity to solidify the vital link between community safety and economic prosperity, in line with the PFCC’s vision that “Safe and secure communities are the bedrock on which we build success and wellbeing for all.”

Devolution and local government reorganisation can contribute to the achievement of several priorities and objectives within the Fire and Rescue Plan, as follows:

Priority	Objectives
Protect vulnerable people	<p>The service is a leader in data sharing across the county and actively seeks out new data and partnerships to build their understanding of the communities they serve and the risks they face.</p> <p>Risk and vulnerability are understood and mapped so every interaction by the service has maximum impact, from response to prevention and protection.</p>
Improve road safety and reduce road deaths in Essex to zero	<p>A service that works with Highways and other partners to encourage safety conscious planning and proactive, safe engineering design that can positively shape new developments and projects and guides Essex to becoming safer by design.</p>
Make buildings across Essex safer	<p>Where new residential and commercial developments are safe, and action is taken to keep them safe.</p> <p>Where we work together with developers, councils, and government to create a planning and development environment which recognises and promotes safety.</p> <p>A county where high-risk buildings are identified and inspected according to a risk-based programme.</p>
Adapt to our changing environment	<p>A service that works with developers, councils, and planners to shape a built environment that is more resilient and adaptable to the increased risk of extreme weather.</p> <p>A service that works with partners to prevent flooding or manage flooding when it occurs by taking a collaborative approach to managing this risk.</p>

## 7. Operational implications

Alongside devolution, local government reorganisation represents the most fundamental reform of local government in 50 years, and is likely to impact significantly on the capacity and capability of Community Safety Partnerships, local resilience teams etc.

The fire and rescue service already faces some operational challenges caused by differential approaches to key issues such as safeguarding / social care, road safety, building safety and resilience across the existing three upper tier local authorities. Such difficulties could be amplified if Greater Essex eventually implements a model of four or five unitary authorities.

Once a final proposal is submitted and agreed by the Government, there may also be a need to restructure the fire and rescue service to ensure the alignment of its sub-geographic boundaries with the new authorities, potentially at increased cost. It is also important to note that, due to the configuration of the strategic roads network, some of the options under consideration work better than others in terms of emergency response times, which will need to be fed into the options analysis and evaluation.

## **8. Financial implications**

As the Government is anticipating efficiencies to be achieved through reorganisation, it expects that areas within the Devolution Priority Programme will be able to meet the transition costs over time from existing budgets, including through the flexible use of capital receipts in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects. The Government's default position is also that assets and liabilities (including debt) will remain locally managed by councils as far as possible.

The continuing costs of preparing proposals and eventually standing up an implementation team will need to be funded by the Government and / or local authorities. Although the Government has committed to making capacity funding available, the quantum of this is currently unknown. The Interim Plan is currently seeking business case development costs from Government of between £5m and £7.5m, with the costs of an implementation team yet to be calculated. Any contribution that needs to be met from local authorities will likely need to come from reserves which, by definition, will then not be available for use by the institutions of the future.

## **9. Legal implications**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has invited the principal authorities across Greater Essex to submit a proposal for a single tier of local government in exercise of their powers under Part 1 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. In responding to this invitation, the principal authorities must have regard to the guidance from the Secretary of State set out in the invitation.

Once the final proposal for local government reorganisation has been submitted, it will be for the Government to decide whether to take it forward and consult publicly on the proposal, as required by statute. This will be a separate process to the statutory process undertaken in respect of mayoral devolution, which will be undertaken in parallel with local government reorganisation.

## **10. Staffing implications**

The proposed Interim Plan attached at Appendix 1 acknowledges that, as the only two institutions which will transfer into the new Mayoral Strategic Authority, the PFCC and PFCCFRA will provide "the backbone" of the new Greater Essex Combined County Authority (GECCA).

## **11. Equality and Diversity implications**

There are no equality and diversity implications associated with the proposal set out in this decision report.

## **12. Risks**

Devolution and local government reorganisation will not, on their own, solve the ongoing public sector funding challenge. The Government's expectations that the costs of transition will be managed locally, and that local government liabilities (including debt) will continue to be managed locally within the new arrangements, create clear risks in terms of the financial sustainability of the new institutions. The fact that local government reorganisation is currently progressing ahead of public sector funding reform renders it quite possible that reorganisation will not deliver any

cashable efficiencies (due largely to the level of demand in the system remaining unchanged whilst the capacity to address it reduces), and that any efficiencies generated will consist predominantly of cost avoidance.

In addition, devolution and local government reorganisation will require significant managerial and programme management capacity, with a clear risk of attention, capacity and capability being diverted from ongoing transformation work across the public sector that is designed to help address the fundamental challenges relating to public sector funding.

There are also risks to staff recruitment, retention, morale and future capacity across the public sector within Greater Essex as the proposals are developed and implemented.

### **13. Governance Boards**

Work to develop the Interim Plan and final proposal is being governed by Essex Leaders and Chief Executives (ELCE), on which the PFCC, their Chief Fire Officer and Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer are all represented. ELCE has stood up four workstreams on local government reorganisation, which collectively address the six criteria set by the Government:

- Scale and value for money
- Quality public services
- Identity and community
- Supporting devolution

This decision report was considered by the PFCC's Fire and Rescue Strategic Board on 18 March 2025, prior to approval.

### **14. Background papers**

Appendix 1 – Local Government Reorganisation in Greater Essex – Interim Plan

**Decision Process**

**Step 1A - Chief Fire Officer Comments**

(The Chief Fire Officer is asked in their capacity as the Head of Paid Service to comment on the proposal.)

.....I support the recommendation

.....

Sign:  .....

Date:.....12<sup>th</sup> May 2025.....

**Step 1B – Consultation with representative bodies**

(The Chief Fire Officer is to set out the consultation that has been undertaken with the representative bodies)


.....  
.....

**Step 2 - Statutory Officer Review**

The report will be reviewed by the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority’s (“the Commissioner’s”) Monitoring Officer and Chief Finance Officer prior to review and sign off by the Commissioner or their Deputy.

Monitoring Officer 

Sign: .....  
Print: P. Brent-Isherwood  
Date: 10 March 2025

Chief Finance Officer 

Sign: .....  
Print: .....Neil Cross.....  
Date: . . . 12<sup>th</sup> May 2025 . . . . .

**Step 3 - Publication**

Is the report for publication?      **YES/NO**

If 'NO', please give reasons for non-publication (Where relevant, cite the security classification of the document(s). State 'none' if applicable)

None

If the report is not for publication, the Monitoring Officer will decide if and how the public can be informed of the decision.

**Step 4 - Redaction**

If the report is for publication, is redaction required:

1      **Of Decision Sheet**                      **YES/NO**

2      **Of Appendix**                              **YES/NO**

If 'YES', please provide details of required redaction:

N/A

**Date redaction carried out:** .....

If redaction is required, the Chief Finance Officer or the Monitoring Officer are to sign off that redaction has been completed.

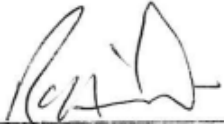
Sign: .....

Print: .....

Date signed: .....

**Step 5 - Decision by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner or Deputy Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner**

I agree the recommendations to this report:

Sign:  ..... (PFCC)

Print: ...Roger Hirst.....

Date signed: ...14/05/2025.....

I do not agree the recommendations to this report because:

.....  
.....

Sign: ..... (PFCC / DPFCC)

Print: .....