

Braintree District Council – Response to the Consultation on Proposals for Local Government Reorganisation in Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock

Formal Response from the Leader of Braintree District Council

Braintree District Council, as a named consultee in the consultation regarding proposals for local government reorganisation across Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock, hereby submits its formal response concerning the proposed model of three unitary councils for the Greater Essex area. This response is issued by the Leader of the Council, representing the collective views of the authority.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

We strongly agree that the proposed councils are founded on sensible geographies and economic areas. Structuring the unitary councils around the existing three cities within Greater Essex is a pragmatic approach that aligns with the key economic drivers in the region. Braintree District Council has a history of close collaboration with neighbouring authorities in North Essex; this proposal would maximise our strongest relationships, particularly with Colchester City Council and Tendring District Council.

The A120 corridor, spanning from Stansted Airport to Harwich International Port, presents significant potential for future economic growth. A single council covering this corridor would have the capability to remove barriers and expedite economic development. Stansted Airport, as the largest employer for local residents, is intrinsically connected to the area's economic future.

The proposed councils offer a balanced composition of affluent and deprived areas across Essex, preventing the concentration of deprivation within any single organisation and thereby mitigating capacity and demand pressures. This balance supports an equitable distribution of growth across communities, rather than limiting development to the more affluent sectors.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

We strongly agree that the proposed councils possess the capacity to deliver the outcomes described in the proposal. Their size, encompassing both urban and rural areas, will facilitate the provision of housing and the infrastructure needed to support both new and existing residents. With fewer partners involved, collaboration with agencies such as the Police,

NHS, and voluntary sector can be enhanced, resulting in more effective partnership working than is possible under the current system.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

We strongly agree that the proposed councils are of an appropriate size to promote efficiency, enhance capacity, and withstand financial shocks. The geographies proposed comprise both affluent and deprived areas, ensuring a balanced council tax base and strengthening financial resilience. There is scope for further growth within these areas, which will boost both council tax and business rate revenue.

The scale of the councils will enable economies of scale while maintaining agility. Reducing the number of councils will eliminate duplication and interface inefficiencies present in the current structure. The councils will be sufficiently large to deliver major infrastructure projects and necessary digital improvements, thereby supporting the broader ambitions for Essex.

This increased capacity will also allow councils to go beyond statutory service provision, safeguarding the viability of valued discretionary services. The organisational size will further assist in recruiting and retaining staff, particularly in key sectors such as care, education, and professional back office functions. Smaller organisations often struggle to provide career progression, leading to over-reliance on temporary staff.

The financial modelling for savings directly attributable to the establishment of unitary councils as opposed to potential transformational savings clearly shows a significant financial benefit in the three unitary model. Although we do not believe that the future sustainability of councils can be achieved through reorganisation alone, the financial benefits of reorganisation must be maximised.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in Best Value intervention and in receipt of exceptional financial support?

We strongly agree that this proposal will place local government across the area on a firmer footing. The establishment of three unitary authorities offers an opportunity to distribute debts, assets, and council tax bases equitably throughout the region.

The greater value of financial benefits associated with reorganisation in this proposal will also play a part in making the system more sustainable whilst we acknowledge it will not provide the definitive answer to ongoing financial issues for public services in Essex.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

We strongly agree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services. Fragmentation of social care has been identified as a significant risk associated with reorganisation, particularly concerning vulnerable residents. Maintaining the current number of social care organisations, as suggested by this proposal, is the best approach to mitigating this risk.

The proposed scale of the councils creates the capacity for innovative approaches to service design and delivery. This reorganisation presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape public services, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness as we approach the mid-21st century.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

We strongly agree that the proposal has been informed by local perspectives and will address local needs. Feedback from residents and businesses frequently highlights confusion caused by the two-tier model, and our own experience confirms that this has impeded effective outcomes for communities. Transitioning to unitary authorities will eliminate confusion and enhance council accountability.

The suggested model of three unitary councils offers the best possibility for delivering large-scale housing growth. The provision of affordable, high-quality housing is a central local need. Furthermore, situating the largest local employer within the same unitary council area will enable stronger partnership working to attract more skilled, well-paid jobs for the community.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements?

We strongly agree that establishing the councils as proposed will support devolution arrangements. The recommendation to form a County Combined Authority comprising two seats for each unitary council, alongside the Mayor, provides fair and balanced representation across Greater Essex. This sensibly sized group of constituent members, supported by non-constituent members, is well placed to drive meaningful change in the region.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

We strongly agree that the proposal will strengthen community engagement and empower neighbourhoods. The establishment of Neighbourhood Delivery Committees, provided they are properly resourced and granted genuine decision-making authority, will ensure that the local connections district councils currently maintain are preserved and further developed.

Additional Points

Braintree District Council strongly advocates for the adoption of the new Essex County Council divisions as the basis for electing councillors for the Shadow Authorities in May 2027, irrespective of the chosen proposal. These divisions have recently undergone independent review and update by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in 2023 and best reflect the current demographics for the majority of Greater Essex. In contrast, using district wards as the basis for elections is fundamentally flawed, as many wards have not been reviewed for considerable periods, and changes would need to be made by councils themselves rather than an independent body. This presents a genuine risk of undermining the democratic process, or at least the perception thereof, among the voting public.