



# The right balance

Creating financially sustainable councils close to communities in Greater Essex

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# Foreword



We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform local government for the people of Greater Essex. If we get this right, we will create councils that are tough enough to weather any storm, deliver excellent services and change the relationship between councils and communities into something more mature and empowering.

With opportunity comes risk. Getting this wrong means more councils doomed to failure before they even begin. In Thurrock we are still feeling the pain of the financial mistakes of the past, and so we know better than anyone the importance of creating strong, financially sustainable councils. We also know first-hand the importance of working with communities to build trusting relationships and focus public resources on delivering the services local people need.

It is not a time for political point scoring or plans that only work for the few. The stakes are too high.

Our proposal for four unitary councils in Greater Essex is driven by evidence and equity: evidence of what stacks up financially; evidence of what local people expect to see from their new councils and what they will need over time; evidence about how people move around the county; evidence of where the opportunities lie and how we can make sure everyone in Greater Essex benefits from the success these plans will bring.

Our role in shaping these plans is a privilege but also a huge responsibility. I have lived in Essex my whole life and I care deeply about its future. We must make sure we maintain what makes this place what it is, but also embrace the future and address the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead. We must create a system that drives prosperity for all and continues to protect the most vulnerable in our communities. We must step forward and think afresh what local government can and should be for the rest of this century.

Our proposal for four new councils is carefully thought through. All that matters to me is that it works for the people of Greater Essex, for the long term. I believe our plans create the right balance to secure a bright, prosperous and sustainable future for everyone.

**Cllr Lynn Worrall**  
**Leader of Thurrock Council**

# Introduction

**We don't live our lives according to council maps or public service boundaries. But we do need our public services to work well to keep our communities and lives running smoothly.**

On any given street in Greater Essex, the people charged with keeping us safe, providing schools for our children, caring for our loved ones as they age and ensuring our access to good medical care, work for a multitude of organisations. Our residents have told us that their identity is not defined by the boundaries in which their local council operates. But the continuation and quality of services are of paramount importance. This is why the future sustainability of local government has been the guiding principle in developing our vision and proposal for local government reorganisation.

## **A once-in-a-generation moment of change**

Local government reorganisation provides a once-in-a-generation chance to think again. We have a responsibility to simplify this picture, create long term sustainable services, ones which meet current and future demand, run smoothly and quietly in the background, supporting our everyday lives.

Thurrock's intervention journey should not be seen as a weakness. We are a council that has had to regain the trust of its communities. We know what it means to rebuild services and make difficult decisions. The lessons we have learned and the hard work we have undertaken in the toughest of times, makes us a strong partner in Greater Essex. This, combined with our experience and expertise of service delivery as a unitary, means we understand and can overcome the challenges of creating a new approach to local government in our region.

## **Getting the balance right**

Our analysis has focused on identifying the right environment to achieve strong foundations for sustainable local government which support the services communities want. We have been careful to consider the benefits of commonly held beliefs and approaches. We recognise the advantages to both smaller and larger authorities, but there is too much risk in going to the extremes. Size does bring financial stability but compromises service delivery and creates distance from communities. Favouring one priority over the other risks destabilising the foundations and purpose of local government.

## **Building on what works well**

Local authorities do not deliver in a vacuum. Our four new councils build on commonality in the way residents interact with travel, work and the local economy. The geographies are coterminous with police and health partners and are big enough to wield a strong, equal and influential voice in the governance of Greater Essex but are also sufficiently grounded in communities to remain attuned and responsive to residents and partners.

We have carefully considered the place-leadership role of local authorities. Each of the four authorities in our model has the right conditions to convene partners to support social cohesion and create capacity to generate meaningful collaboration in communities.

## **Delivering better outcomes for the people of Greater Essex**

These pragmatic groupings, with the right level of demand and geographical spread, provide the foundation for optimal service delivery and unlock the potential for early intervention and prevention. The balance of wealth and deprivation in each of the new councils, alongside the potential for economic growth, provides an equal footing for addressing the social determinants of health both at a local level and within the new Greater Essex (mayoral) Combined County Authority (GECCA). Each council has the conditions to marshal strong partnerships which will deliver the right housing, transport and employment infrastructure required for each place.

Our vision for local government in Greater Essex is based on what residents tell us are the areas of most importance to them: financial sustainability and improving services. The four-unitary councils in this model provide the best environment in which to achieve that vision, providing the optimal blend of financial sustainability, resilience, demand management and responsiveness to local needs.

Our model delivers the best opportunities for the people of Greater Essex. It is only this model which will deliver both financial sustainability and the services which people want and need. It is only this model which fairly distributes residents' needs, ensuring no one council carries too much burden and falls at the first hurdle. It is only this model which provides an equal playing field for the members of GECCA Board to deliver the strategic infrastructure which will enable all corners of Greater Essex to thrive.

### **Strong foundations**

Thurrock Council's financial history is well known. The lessons we have learned bring into sharp focus the importance of creating financially sustainable and resilient authorities. The challenge of sustaining good services within current budgets, however, is not unique to Thurrock. We recognise that to achieve our purpose, local government must be built on strong financial foundations. Each of the four-unitary councils in our model are financially viable.

Each council within the four-unitary model can achieve ambitious economic growth, shares a balance of GVA, council tax and business rates and has an international gateway to trade, as well as an equal say within GECCA.

### **Delivering on our purpose**

Delivering vital but effective services for people and businesses is best achieved when we understand the needs and challenges of local areas. Successful local democracy works when councillors who understand their local place use their knowledge to inform decision making. There is a balance to be struck through the economies of scale in larger authorities and delivering fit for purpose services. We believe we have struck that balance.

Each council within the four-unitary model is designed to create an even distribution of population and need, including health and social care outcomes. This avoids creating concentrations of demand, 'deserts' of service delivery and poor and weak relations among partner authorities. While the idea of creating 'mega' unitary authorities with high savings on paper may seem attractive, in reality this route is proven to risk the failure of care services, which would be an expensive mistake both financially and in the impact on the lives of individuals.

The four-unitary model helps to de-risk disruption to the continuation of support to our most vulnerable communities. It does this by taking full advantage of the existing good and outstanding capability in the current system. The existing upper tier authorities in Greater Essex will be leaders in this space and support two of the new councils. The county's upper tier capacity will support the remaining two new councils. This is particularly important when it comes to the continuance of statutory services, especially adults and children's social care, ensuring they are legal and robust from Day 1.

Our model provides the closest alignment to coterminous boundaries with local partners, making sure we elicit the biggest benefits when reforging partnerships.

### **Why these four?**

Because that is where the data points. Not only have we carefully considered a balanced distribution of key metrics and demographic characteristics of our residents. We have also considered the equal opportunity for growth through economic hubs, ports, housing growth, tourism and leisure facilities. We have grouped sensible geographic areas that share similar features and outlooks. These attributes, combined with the equal distribution of populations, means an even playing field when collaborating with the mayor and other partners, meaning no one corner of Greater Essex is immediately disadvantaged nor disproportionately powerful.



# Section 1: Executive Summary

## Purpose and Approach

This proposal sets out a four-unitary model for the future of local government in Greater Essex. It has been developed in response to the Government's February 2025 invitation to submit options for reorganisation alongside the issues which residents tell us matter the most.

The English Devolution White Paper set out the challenges facing local government and the experience in Greater Essex is no exception. The status quo is not a sustainable option and was discounted due to the scale and urgency of the challenges facing the system and the need for LGR to provide a platform for transformational change. A two-unitary solution was also ruled out due to large geographies not aligning with government criteria and presenting significant risks.

A four, five and three-unitary model has been evaluated against the six criteria set out by Government:

1. Establishing a single tier of local government
2. Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks
3. High quality and sustainable public services
4. Working together to understand and meet local needs
5. Supporting devolution arrangements
6. Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

The analysis finds that the four-unitary configuration provides the most balanced option, aligned with coherent geographies, with the right scale to deliver services effectively and support financial resilience.

## The Greater Essex Context

Greater Essex is a large and economically significant region, home to 1.9 million people and forecast to exceed 2 million by 2043. It includes a mix of urban centres, coastal communities and rural areas, with 72% of the land designated as rural. The region supports a £50 billion economy, anchored by major ports, two international airports and nationally important growth corridors such as the Thames Estuary and UK Innovation Corridor. Sector strengths include logistics, clean energy, advanced manufacturing and digital technology, supported by a growing network of innovation hubs and skills programmes. Strategic housing and regeneration schemes are in progress, alongside ambitious plans for green growth and inclusive development.

Despite these strengths, Greater Essex faces deep-rooted challenges. Pockets of deprivation, particularly in coastal and urban areas, limit life chances and drive demand for public services. Productivity is uneven, health inequalities persist and infrastructure is under strain. An ageing population is increasing pressure on adult social care, while housing delivery and homelessness vary widely across districts. Climate risks such as flooding and coastal erosion are growing and fragmented governance makes it difficult to respond at scale. Thurrock's financial position, alongside wider sustainability concerns, highlights the need for structural change.

The current local government setup is complex and fragmented, with 15 councils operating across two tiers including two unitary councils. This creates duplication, inconsistency and confusion for residents and limits the region's ability to coordinate services, plan strategically and respond to demand. The Devolution Priority Programme provides a clear opportunity to address these issues. The creation of the Greater Essex (mayoral) Combined County Authority (GECCA) and new unitary councils offers a route to simplify governance, unlock investment and deliver better outcomes for residents.

See Appendix 3: Strengths and challenges of Greater Essex for further detail.

## The Vision for unitary government in Greater Essex

A vision has been developed to provide a simple articulation of what the four-unitary model will provide for the people of Greater Essex. It sets out a shared ambition for transformational change, rooted in the priorities of communities and the strengths of place. The vision was shaped by what residents in Essex tell us is important to them and provides a clear strategic direction for the future of local government in Greater Essex.

**The residents of Greater Essex deserve councils that are strong and resilient, and that understand and respond to their ambitions and needs. Our proposal will deliver sustainable public services, focused on the priorities of our communities. By building on local strengths, removing duplication, and enabling joined-up delivery, we will support inclusive growth, tackle inequality, and ensure every corner of Essex can thrive. Together, we can build a new kind of local government, one that truly works for local people.**

Four unitary authorities representing the North, South, East and West of Essex are best placed to deliver this vision:

### West Essex (Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow and Thurrock)

- The abundance of forest and country parks compliments the urban areas of Harlow and along the Thames estuary.
- Connected by the M25 and strong transport links into London.
- Balance of wealth and deprivation within its communities.
- Looks to London for work, travel and leisure but with a strong and protective sense of pride in their distinct identity.

### North Essex (Braintree, Chelmsford and Uttlesford)

- Combines the economic strength of Chelmsford, the rural and historic character of Uttlesford and the industrial and logistical capacity of Braintree.
- Strong links to Hertfordshire and Cambridge
- Strong transport infrastructure and strong rail and road links to London, Cambridge and the wider East of England.
- High quality of life and capacity to deliver sustainable growth.
- Home to major employers in advanced manufacturing, logistics, life sciences, public services and Stansted Airport.

### East Essex (Colchester, Maldon and Tendring)

- Nationally significant heritage sites and a strong visitor economy.
- Strategic infrastructure such as Harwich International Port and the A12/A120 corridors.
- Enables further strengthening of Colchester-Tendring relationship.
- Joining with Maldon and its similar coastal terrain will enable a more strategic approach to infrastructure and unlock housing and employment growth.
- Strong links to Suffolk.

### South Essex (Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford and Southend-on-Sea)

- Framed by the sea and rivers to the north, east and south and served by the A13 and A127 and Southend international airport.
- Balanced mix of urban density and rural communities.
- Lively seaside resort in Southend-on-Sea supported by major centre of employment in Basildon.
- Brings together strengths in advanced manufacturing, health, logistics and tourism.

## How we have met the government's criteria to deliver for our residents


Criteria	Why the four-unitary model meets the criteria and offers the best option for residents of Greater Essex
<b>1 Establishing a single tier of local government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The design of four resilient and balanced single-tier authorities means that Greater Essex residents receive high-quality services, delivered according to their needs and how they live their lives, no matter where they live.</li> <li>✓ Economic balance (e.g. GVA, an international port in each area) means equal access to opportunity for all.</li> <li>✓ Residents can rely on a council that is close to their communities, equipped with the right experience and resources to respond effectively to local priorities.</li> </ul>
<b>2 Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The financial case makes prudent, realistic and evidence-based assumptions to show that residents can be assured that the four-unitary model offers the best possible value.</li> <li>✓ Residents can be sure that their council is fit to withstand financial shocks with the four-unitary model best-placed to deal with legacy issues, as well as meet future demand.</li> <li>✓ Continued access to crucial services will be safeguarded during the transition led by three high-performing top tier authorities.</li> </ul>
<b>3 High quality and sustainable public services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Making best use of strong service leadership and experience means that valued and crucial services to the most vulnerable adults and children will remain high-performing, are equipped to meet future demands and avoid the drop-offs in performance experienced by other unitarisations.</li> <li>✓ Postcode lotteries are eliminated through a model that spreads demand and service capabilities evenly.</li> <li>✓ The structure creates strong foundations for joint working and place leadership, aligning with health and police to ensure better integration of services and improved public safety for residents.</li> </ul>
<b>4 Working together to understand and meet local needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ All residents can see that local views from across Greater Essex have been listened to in the development of this proposal with clear links to outputs from engagement and joint working with partners.</li> <li>✓ The proposal is built to deliver the residents' priorities to keep decision-making local, financial stability and not disrupt the local towns and villages with which they identify.</li> <li>✓ Residents will recognise carefully considered geographic areas which share similar characteristics (such as sharing a unique coastline in the North, to sharing an outlook to London for work and play in the West) and match their travel habits.</li> </ul>
<b>5 Supporting devolution arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The model is best placed to unlock devolution and ensures that residents can benefit from a mayor who can champion their interests</li> <li>✓ No area is left behind with fair representation from balanced constituent councils with an equal voice.</li> <li>✓ Supports good, sustainable growth which will have direct benefit and opportunity to residents.</li> </ul>
<b>6 Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ All residents benefit from a balanced landscape across Greater Essex with a council large enough to ensure financial sustainability, while small enough to effectively hear and respond to them.</li> <li>✓ Residents have access to a Neighbourhood Area Committee that will actively connect with existing forums, partnerships, community networks and voluntary organisations to listen to and champion their needs to ensure that their views are central to council decisions.</li> <li>✓ The proposal has been developed from best practice, which demonstrates how to elicit strong engagement and coproduction of services with residents.</li> </ul>



Options Appraisal

To identify the most effective model, a structured options appraisal was undertaken. A long list of configurations was tested against red-line criteria covering geography, population scale, financial viability and implementation feasibility. This proposal reflects a refined shortlist based on objective evaluation. The four-unitary model emerged as the strongest option and is the focus of this business case, alongside evaluation of and comparison with three-unitary and five-unitary models.

### Four-unitary authorities




Unitary	Population
West	488,368
North	438,829
East	418,532
South	550,861

Assessment against government criteria 1 - 6		
1. High	2. Medium	3. High
4. High	5. High	6. Medium

**The only model that performs well across all criteria without requiring external financial support.**

- Provides the optimal environment to achieve residents' priorities for financial sustainability and quality service delivery.
- Most balanced population with each unitary close to the 500,000 population guideline, with sufficient scale to deliver services efficiently and absorb financial shocks.
- All four areas are coherent geographically and economically viable, with recognised hubs and ports supporting future growth.
- Reflects local identity and sense of place, enabling tailored, prevention-focussed services.

### Three-unitary authorities




Unitary	Population
South	729,062
Central	603,756
North	563,772

Assessment against government criteria 1 - 6		
1. Medium	2. Medium	3. Medium
4. Medium	5. Low	6. Low

**Most significant challenges relate to large geographic areas that do not align to sense of place or functional economic areas.**

- Potential to take advantage of greater economies of scale, with one unitary at c.730,000 population.
- Achieves balance across key metrics but does so by joining areas which do not align to functional economic areas and recognised geographies.
- Larger geographies over less established footprints risk distancing decision-making from communities
- Significantly larger South population and economy and creates imbalance in representation.

### Five-unitary authorities



Unitary	Population
Southwest	368,745
Northwest	325,609
Central	331,757
Northeast	510,162
Southeast	360,317

Assessment against government criteria 1 - 6		
1. Low	2. Low	3. Medium
4. Medium	5. Medium	6. Medium

**Most significant challenges relate to financial sustainability and increased fragmentation of crucial services.**

- Most councils fall well below the 500,000 population guideline, even factoring in growth up to 2047.
- Lack of scale risks financial sustainability and ability to invest in critical services.
- Performs poorly on efficiency and resilience.
- Smaller councils would struggle to absorb £4.1 billion in regional debt and may require £400–600 million in government support.
- Increased fragmentation risks reduced delivery capacity and therefore quality.

- Avoids the additional complexity of merging existing unitaries and provides a stable foundation for transformational change.
- Equal representation is built into the combined authority, with the mayor holding a tie-breaking vote, providing the best environment for unlocking devolution.
- Aggregating Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea while disaggregating county services introduces significant additional transition complexity and risk.
- Potential for decision-making deadlock within the combined authority.
- Creates an imbalance in representation of the combined authority, with a significantly larger North population.
- Faces a significant imbalance of need in the Southwest region due to combining Thurrock and Basildon.

## Case for Change: key arguments for the four-unitary model aligned to Government Criteria

Below are key reasons why a four-unitary model is best placed to deliver for the people of Greater Essex. In development of this proposal, we have directly considered the views of residents, partners, and other stakeholders and this is incorporated within arguments across all criteria (see Section 4: Criteria 4). We have also considered lessons from previous LGR submissions and the strengths of the models which were ultimately selected and implemented.

	The argument for four-unitaries	Comparison to other proposed models	Key Criteria
<b>1 Strong economic growth prospects for each unitary</b>	The four new councils are aligned to functional economic geographies and balanced in strength and potential. Each unitary has a recognised economic hub and international port (including airports), providing each with a gateway to trade, a key enabler of growth. There is balance in GVA, council tax base and business rates tax base, enabling long-term financial sustainability.	<b>3U</b> does not align to functional economic geographies, connecting areas without obvious links over large geographic areas. <b>5U</b> has highly uneven population and economic indicators with the greatest variance between councils.	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Recognisable and coherent council geographies</b>	All four councils are internally coherent, reflecting sense of place and with strong transport links, avoiding the need to travel outside authority boundaries to access core services.	<b>3U</b> or <b>5U</b> do not align to sense of place or functional economic areas. <b>3U</b> has weak internal public transport, high car dependency and limited internal connectivity across large geographic areas.	<b>1</b>
<b>3 Balanced and equal unitary population sizes</b>	Populations are equally distributed and close to the government guideline 500k figure and is best positioned once population growth projection.	<b>3U</b> is less balanced, with one unitary at c.730k significantly larger than the others. <b>5U</b> has four councils under 400k, well under government guidelines, with the added imbalance of one significantly larger authority at c. 510k.	<b>2</b>
<b>4 Financial sustainability</b>	Costs of LGR are expected to be paid back within 4 years and the long-running annual benefit is estimated to be £28.3m.	<b>3U</b> creates additional complexity and risk (and therefore cost) in implementation due to combining the two existing councils. <b>5U</b> will struggle to payback the upfront cost of implementation.	<b>2</b>

	The argument for four-unitaries	Comparison to other proposed models	Key Criteria
<b>5 The answer to the debt challenge</b>	Essex councils have combined external debt of £4.1billion, with Thurrock's well publicised financial challenges a significant element of this. All four councils have sufficient scale and strong growth prospects. With almost 500,000 people across Thurrock, Brentwood, Epping Forest and Harlow, the new West authority would be well connected to London, with nationally significant infrastructure projects and ability to deliver growth at scale across housing, employment and regeneration.	<b>3U</b> Over burden of debt in the new South authority creating an unequal playing field in the new configurations. <b>5U</b> combines Thurrock with Basildon and requires government support in the region of £400-600m for this authority to be financially viable.	<b>2</b>
<b>6 Avoiding unbalanced concentrations of need</b>	The model avoids over-concentration of need into a single authority, including for adult social care and children's services. We know that these services account for a major proportion of spend and it is too risky to over concentrate need, especially given projected increases in demand.	<b>3U</b> concentrates high-pressure districts such as Thurrock, Southend-on-Sea and Basildon into one authority, which could reduce responsiveness and increase long-term costs. <b>5U</b> may struggle to sustain complex services or respond to demand shocks given concentrations of need such as in the Northeast region which has both the highest SEND support levels and adults 18-64 accessing long-term support.	<b>3</b>
<b>7 Benefiting from capability of existing unitaries</b>	The model builds on the existing infrastructure, capability and skills within the existing Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea unitary authorities and therefore avoids unnecessary additional complexity and implementation cost.	<b>3U</b> includes Thurrock, Southend-on-Sea and three districts in one new unitary authority. We know from experience of recent LGR programmes (e.g. BCP Council in Dorset) that this added complexity can directly lead to major delivery challenges in critical services post-LGR.	<b>3</b>
<b>8 Creates the environment which best responds to resident priorities and local needs</b>	The model provides the best balance for responding to issues such as financial stability, service quality and local decision making, which residents tell us matter to them the most.	<b>3U</b> does not provide the optimal environment for local decision making which reflects community needs, given the size, scale and disconnected geographies of new councils. <b>5U</b> risks inadvertently creating artificial and impractical boundaries, and cannot meet residents' needs on ensuring financial sustainability	<b>4</b>
<b>9 Delivering public service reform and improved outcomes</b>	The model prioritises long-term outcomes, recognising that public service reform through outcome-focussed service delivery and prevention will reduce service demand and costs longer-term. Demand is so large in the system that neither efficiency nor prevention alone will deal with the growing pressures.	<b>3U</b> creates overly large authorities that dilute local responsiveness and complicate place-based and partnership working, particularly at the neighbourhood level. <b>5U</b> lacks the scale and capacity for strategic partnership and risks fragmentation and inconsistent performance of smaller authorities in delivering services and transformational change.	<b>3</b>

	The argument for four-unitaries	Comparison to other proposed models	Key Criteria
<b>10 Equal representation to unlock devolution</b>	The model creates four balanced new unitary authorities, enabling effective representation from all four corners of Greater Essex. Four authorities are more effective than three or five as it provides the mayor with tie-break power and the ability to unlock progress where it may otherwise stall or deadlock. Four balanced councils can build on existing district strengths to deliver locally while supported by the strategic scale of the combined authority to deliver major programmes across the region.	<b>3U</b> or <b>5U</b> models creates an imbalance in voting, exacerbated by having one unitary with a significantly larger population.	<b>5</b>
<b>11 Hardwiring community engagement into governance and delivery</b>	The four new councils will support a size of population and geographic area that allows for effective community and neighbourhood engagement.	<b>3U</b> creates councils across large, incoherent geographies, bringing challenges which meaningfully link local engagement with council operations.  <b>5U</b> brings the risk of excessive fragmentation, which could complicate the coordination of engagement across broader public sector systems.	<b>6</b>

# Financial Case for Change

The four-unitary model is the most fiscally secure approach for the future of Greater Essex. It will establish four financially sustainable authorities, each well-positioned to manage resources effectively, withstand financial shocks and deliver high-quality local services.

The financial costs and benefits associated with LGR have been estimated for the four-unitary model, as well as three and five-unitary models for comparative purposes. The four-unitary model performs strongly. It offers the best return on investment longer-term. This combination of four unitaries prevents the imbalances seen in alternative models and will enable stable, long-term delivery for all communities across the region.

The financial model is underpinned by realistic, prudent assumptions, developed in line with best practice, taking a similar approach to the County Councils Network (CCN) and PwC model. It draws directly on benchmarks and evidence from previous successful local government reorganisations and is tailored to the unique context of the 15 existing councils in the region.

Our financial modelling shows:

- The **four-unitary model** will have net annual savings of **£28.3m**, after one-off costs of implementation of **£80.8m**, meaning an estimated payback period of **less than 4 years**.
- A **three-unitary model**, whilst avoiding long-running disaggregation costs, introduces additional complexity and therefore implementation cost and risk by combining two current unitary authorities (Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea).
- A **five-unitary model** will result in a very similar cost of local government delivery to the current position and therefore may never deliver a return on the significant upfront investment in implementation costs.

The four-unitary model provides a credible structure to place local government in Greater Essex on a firmer financial footing, including in areas currently subject to Best Value intervention and Exceptional Financial Support. It enables a viable, place-based solution to legacy debt issues, while maintaining overall system stability.

The fundamental principle that reducing the number of councils lowers the cost base of local government is valid. However, it is essential to recognise the unique landscape of authorities within Greater Essex, as well as the experience of previous unitarisations. Any proposed model must build upon the strengths of existing top-tier authorities that are already delivering high-quality services. By doing so, savings will be sustainable, and the transition can be simplified at a reduced cost and minimal risk to service continuity.

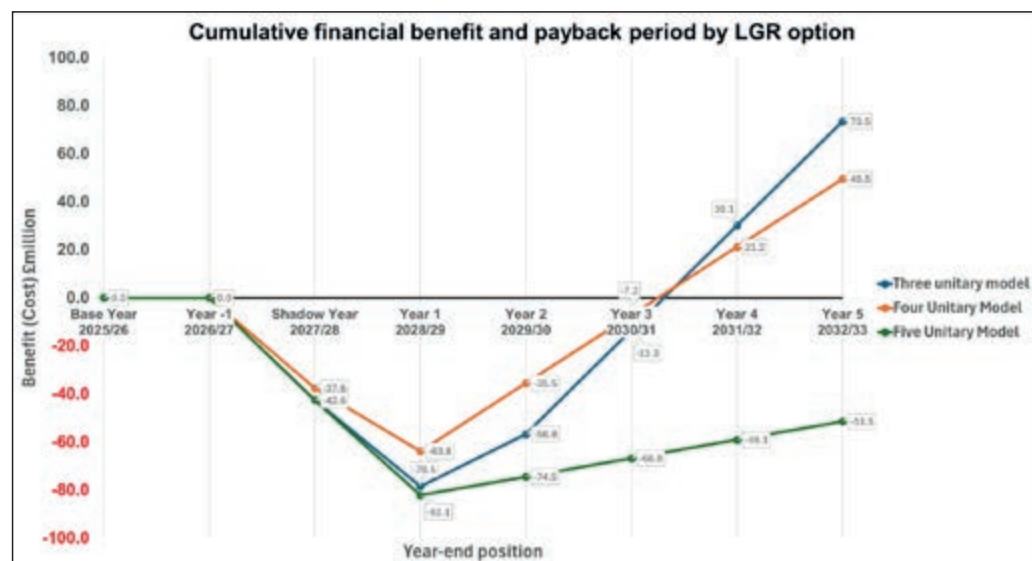
LGR is not a panacea for driving savings in service delivery. The experience of previous reorganisations show that the bulk of realised savings have been concentrated within administrative functions and improved buying power. Crucially, the four-unitary approach does not obligate future authorities to deliver unrealistic and potentially harmful short-term savings in service areas such as social care, but instead empowers them to make informed, sustainable decisions by providing a framework for a long-term solution to increasing pressures through early intervention and prevention.



## Summary of financial modelling

LGR option	Reorganisation savings (gross) (£m)	Disaggregation costs (£m)	Recurring revenue savings (£m)*	Implementation costs (one-off) (£m)	Net annual impact after five years (£m)	Estimated payback period
Three-unitary model	43.4	-	43.4	(93.7)	73.5	Within 4 years
Four-unitary model	55.0	(26.7)	28.3	(80.8)	49.5	Within 4 years
Five-unitary model	52.1	(44.4)	7.7	(86.7)	(51.5)	Over 10 years

\*Recurring revenue savings = gross reorganisation savings less disaggregation costs



# Implementation Plan

Delivering local government reorganisation in Greater Essex will require a structured, multi-phase programme supported by robust governance, targeted workstreams and active risk management. The programme is designed to ensure safe and legal Day 1 delivery while enabling long-term transformation.

The implementation programme will follow five defined phases:

1. **Discover (to Oct 2025):** Initiate stakeholder engagement, begin data collection and remediation, submit proposal.
2. **Prepare (Oct 2025 – Mar 2026):** Mobilise governance, define service requirements, baseline data and agree communications and engagement strategy. Develop the high-level implementation plan and critical path.
3. **Design (Mar 2026 – May 2027):** Expand programme delivery, develop service blueprints, plan elections and legal compliance and begin ICT and contract planning.
4. **Transition & Launch (May 2027 – Mar 2028):** Appoint leadership, finalise service and financial plans, test systems and governance and prepare Day 1 readiness.
5. **Go-Live (Apr 2028 – Onwards):** Launch new authorities, ensure service continuity, embed governance and begin post-LGR transformation.

A structured governance framework will oversee delivery. The LGR Programme Board will manage strategic oversight, supported by Unitary Delivery Groups, Shadow Authorities, District Area Representatives and a Day 1 Board focused on operational readiness.

Key risks include service disruption, staff retention, leadership clarity and missed transformation opportunities. These are actively managed through a programme-wide risk register, with mitigations embedded in governance and delivery plans.

Experience from Cumbria's successful LGR programme highlights the importance of early mobilisation, strong programme management, collaborative governance and clear accountability. These lessons have informed the design of Greater Essex's implementation approach. Critical success factors include:

- Starting early and planning proactively
- Maintaining service continuity
- Designing around residents and communicating clearly
- Establishing transparent governance
- Supporting staff and building inclusive culture
- Balancing technical delivery with cultural change
- Ensuring financial sustainability and rigorous assurance

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## Section 2: Purpose and Greater Essex context

This section includes:

**Purpose of this report**

**Greater Essex context**

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## Purpose of this report

This proposal outlines a proposed four-unitary model for the future of local government in Greater Essex. In line with the Government's letter and additional feedback provided, the report focuses on why the four-unitary model is best placed to deliver on the Government's six criteria.

### Responding to the Government's request

On 5 February, the then Minister for Local Government and English Devolution wrote to all leaders within Greater Essex inviting them to submit options for local government organisation (LGR).

The letter reiterated the government's ambition to see the current two-tier system replaced with larger unitary authorities that are better able to deliver services, support economic growth and operate effectively within a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA).

### The option being put forward: four unitaries for Greater Essex

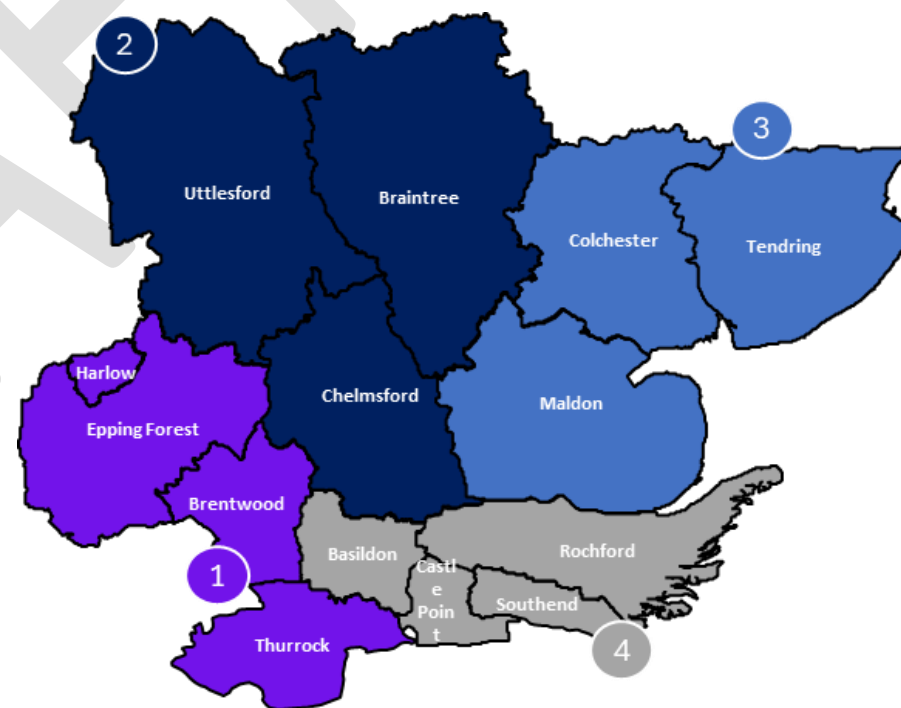
This submission sets out a proposal for a four-unitary model for Greater Essex, in response to the Government's invitation for local government reorganisation.

The status quo was discounted due to the scale and urgency of the challenges facing the system and the need for LGR to provide a platform and catalyst to help tackle them. A two-unitary model was also ruled out, as the large geographies do not align with government criteria and presented significant risks.

Three models were evaluated through a structured options appraisal process: a three-unitary, four-unitary and five-unitary model. The focus of this report is the proposed four-unitary model; however, the three-unitary and five-unitary options are referenced throughout this report, with full detail on each set out in Section 7: Options Appraisal.

Figure 2.1 – Four-unitary model for Greater Essex

Unitary	Areas	Population
West Essex	Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow, Thurrock	488,368
North Essex	Braintree, Chelmsford, Uttlesford	438,829
East Essex	Colchester, Maldon, Tendring	418,532
South Essex	Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on-Sea	550,861



### Why this four-unitary model

A range of four-unitary options were considered in our initial appraisal. This specific configuration was selected because it:

- Maintains a balanced population range around the 500k government guideline and avoids creating one authority which is almost double the size of another
- Maintains a balance of key metrics such as GVA and deprivation, supporting the economic growth potential of each new unitary area
- Avoids combining areas that lack functional alignment or natural geographic coherence
- Avoids the complexity associated with grouping two existing unitary authorities within the same new unitary
- Avoids groupings that create an unsustainable financial position due to the concentrated debt burden

The model provides the greatest balance and stability and avoids the structural, financial and service delivery risks present in other variants. It is the only four-unitary model that meets all government criteria consistently.

### How we have structured this document

This report sets out the context for Greater Essex, including strengths and opportunities LGR and devolution can build upon alongside challenges in the system and area that LGR and devolution can seek to resolve. The process of options appraisal and evaluation is summarised, which led to focus on the four-unitary model and the definition of the vision for unitary local government in Greater Essex. Finally, a high-level implementation plan highlights the key areas of consideration to get to Day 1 and beyond.

The six government criteria have been used to structure the key content of this report, providing a clear narrative as to why the four-unitary model is the best option for LGR in Greater Essex. Comprehensive evaluation of the model against each criteria can be found in Section 4 of this report. The full approach is set out in Section 7.



## Greater Essex context

Greater Essex operates one of the most complex local government systems in the country, with 15 councils across two tiers including two small unitaries. This fragmented structure creates duplication, inconsistency and limits strategic coordination. The area faces persistent challenges including deprivation, low productivity, health inequalities and rising demand for services. At the same time, Greater Essex is full of opportunity. Local government reorganisation, alongside devolution, provides a chance to simplify governance, strengthen leadership and deliver reform at scale.

### The Greater Essex place and economy

Greater Essex is a large and diverse region with a population of 1.9 million, forecast to exceed 2 million by 2043. It includes a mix of urban centres, market towns, coastal communities and rural areas, with 72% of the land designated as rural. The region is home to two international airports (London Stansted and London Southend), four international ports (London Gateway, Harwich, Tilbury, and Purfleet), two Freeports (Thames Freeport and Freeport East) and is served by nationally significant economic corridors including the Thames Estuary and the UK Innovation Corridor.

The economy is valued at £50 billion and supports over 94,000 businesses. Key sectors include advanced manufacturing, clean energy, construction, logistics, digital technology, and life sciences. Strong transport links to London, Cambridge, East Anglia and the wider Southeast support a highly mobile and skilled workforce.

Further detail on the key economic growth opportunities in Greater Essex is set out in Appendix 3. These opportunities are discussed in relation to the proposed four-unitary model in Section 4: Criteria 1.

### Local Government landscape in Greater Essex

Essex currently operates one of the most complex local government systems in the country. There are 15 councils: 12 district, borough and city councils, one county council, and two unitary authorities - Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council. This structure creates duplication, inconsistency and confusion for residents, with services split between tiers and varying delivery models across the county.

The mixed service delivery model presents challenges for strategic coordination, financial sustainability and service reform. In the two-tier areas, district councils are responsible for services such as planning, housing, waste collection and leisure, while Essex County Council delivers adult social care, children's services, education, highways and libraries. In contrast, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock operate as unitary authorities, delivering all local services directly.

### The Devolution Priority Programme

The English Devolution White Paper set out government's vision for simpler, more sustainable, local government structures, alongside a transfer of power from Whitehall to local mayors and combined authorities through devolution.

The Devolution Priority Programme will accelerate the transfer of powers from central Government to strategic authorities – empowering Greater Essex to take control of decisions that directly affect their economies, infrastructure and public services. Greater Essex is working towards the formation of the Greater Essex Mayoral Combined County Authority (GECCA) and election of a Mayor in May 2026.

GECCA will be a dynamic strategic organisation focused on driving economic growth and public service reform across Greater Essex. It will operate alongside new unitary authorities, providing scale and capacity that individual councils cannot achieve alone.

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### **Challenges to be addressed through LGR**

Greater Essex faces a complex set of challenges that impact residents, services and places. Pockets of deprivation, low productivity, health inequalities and ageing demographics place growing pressure on public services. Infrastructure is under strain and climate change is already affecting communities through flooding, coastal erosion and overheating.

Local government in the region is constrained by structural and systemic issues that limit its ability to respond strategically and sustainably. These challenges are long-standing and interconnected and while LGR is not a solution to every issue, it provides a platform for transformational change.

LGR can enable stronger governance, clearer accountability and more coherent service delivery. When combined with devolution, it offers the opportunity to convene partners, unlock new powers and take a more joined-up approach to economic growth, public service reform and place leadership.

This proposal sets out how LGR can support a more balanced, sustainable and strategic model of local government for Greater Essex. Further detail on the key challenges in Greater Essex is set out in Appendix 3. These challenges are discussed in relation to the proposed four-unitary model throughout Section 4: Case for Change.

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Figure 2.2 – Current boundary lines in Greater Essex

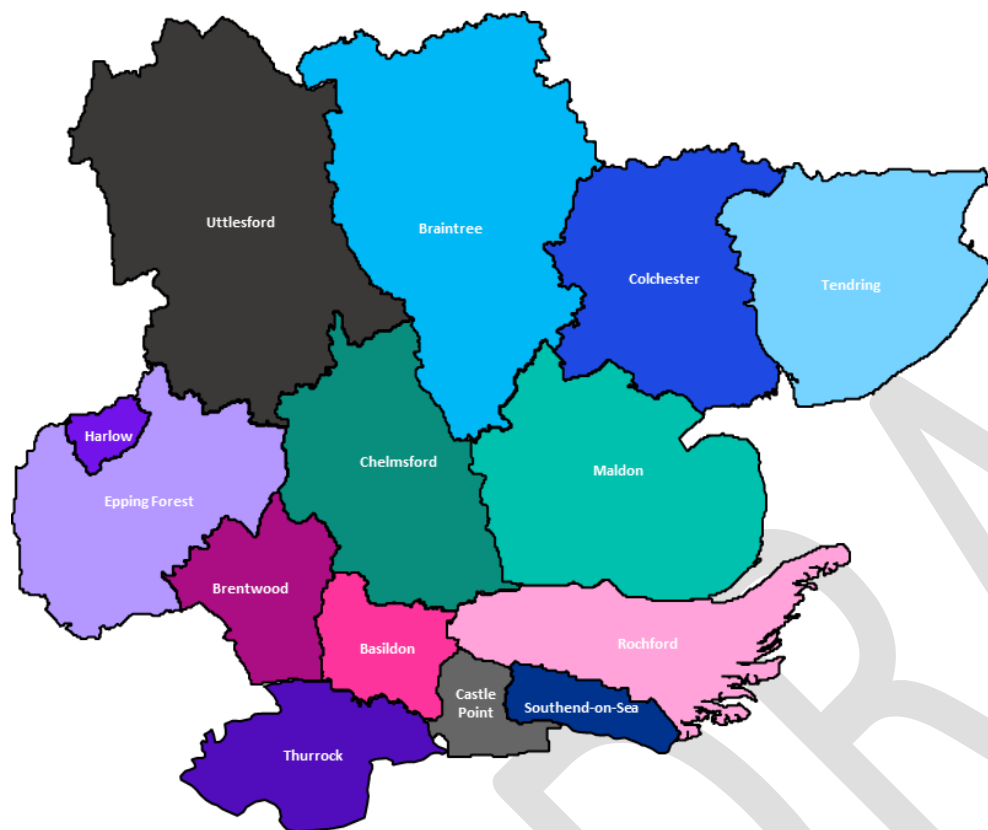


Figure 2.3 – Characteristics of areas in current boundary lines

Council	Population <sup>1</sup>	Geography <sup>2</sup> (sq km)	Councillors	Net Revenue Budget <sup>3</sup> (£m)
Basildon	190,544	110.46	51	38.0
Braintree	159,957	611.71	57	19.5
Brentwood	78,152	153.12	43	8.2
Castle Point	89,858	63.61	44	4.2
Chelmsford	185,278	342.99	66	28.9
Colchester	196,998	346.77	59	15.3
Epping Forest	135,975	338.98	61	18.7
Harlow	96,040	30.54	38	13.9
Maldon	68,327	428.03	34	10.7
Rochford	88,188	262.94	44	11.4
Tendring	153,207	366.18	55	21.7
Uttlesford	93,594	641.15	44	11.6
Southend-on-Sea	<b>182,271</b>	<b>67.97</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>156.7</b>
Thurrock	<b>178,201</b>	<b>184.44</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>177.2</b>
Essex County	<b>1,536,118</b>	<b>3696.48</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>1,016.3</b>

<sup>1</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/estimatesofthepopulationforenglandandwales>

<sup>2</sup><https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/da8590c5f55f4664b32ad4339f43419c/about>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2023-to-2024-individual-local-authority-data-outturn>

## Section 3: The vision for unitary government in Greater Essex

Our vision sets out what the four-unitary model will deliver for residents across Greater Essex: a system of local government that is financially sustainable, locally accountable and focused on delivering better outcomes for residents. It reflects what matters most to communities and provides a clear direction for future decision-making.

“The residents of Greater Essex deserve councils that are **strong and resilient** and that **understand and respond to their ambitions and needs**. Our proposal will deliver **sustainable public services**, focussed on the **priorities of our communities**.

By **building on local strengths, removing duplication** and **enabling joined-up delivery**, we will support **inclusive growth, tackle inequality**, and **ensure every corner of Essex can thrive**.

Together, we can build a **new kind of local government** - one that **truly works for local people**.”

### How this vision was developed

The vision for unitary government in Greater Essex has been shaped through local engagement, drawing on resident surveys, focus groups and consultation with partners to understand community priorities and ensure the vision is grounded in local needs and aspirations. Residents tell us that financial sustainability and service quality are top priorities for them.

The vision is consistent with national priorities, such as financial sustainability, public service reform and inclusive growth, but reflects the distinct challenges and opportunities of Greater Essex.

### How the vision will be used

This vision provides a clear strategic direction for the future of local government in Greater Essex. In the development of this proposal, the vision has provided a set of principles in which to evaluate the unitary model options alongside the government’s criteria. It will guide future design discussions, inform service transformation and tie in with the region’s approach to devolution.

It will be used to align decision-making, support engagement with residents and partners, and ensure that implementation remains focussed on outcomes for people and communities.

### Why the four-unitary model is best placed to deliver on our vision

The four-unitary model is best placed to deliver a system of local government that is financially sustainable, locally accountable and focussed on better outcomes. It scores highly across the six government criteria and represents a balanced configuration - large enough to operate efficiently and deliver at scale, but small enough to remain connected to communities. The detail behind this argument is set out in Section 4: Case for Change with detailed scoring and evaluation in Section 7: Options appraisal.

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## Section 4: Case for change

The Case for Change includes a section for each of the six Government criteria:

<b>Criteria 1: Establishing a single tier of local government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four thriving economies within Greater Essex</li> <li>• The most sensible council geographies for Essex</li> <li>• Effective structures for local government delivery</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria 2: Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The right population size</li> <li>• Delivering efficiencies to support council finances</li> <li>• Minimising transition complexity and enabling transformation</li> <li>• Managing debt and establishing a firmer financial footing</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria 3: High quality and sustainable public services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consolidating and improving service delivery</li> <li>• Delivering value for money through public service reform</li> <li>• Protecting crucial services</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria 4: Working together to understand and meet local needs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging to better understand priorities and needs across Greater Essex</li> <li>• Four authorities grounded in local identity, culture and history</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria 5: Supporting devolution arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlocking the devolution vision in Greater Essex</li> <li>• Equal representation from all four corners of Greater Essex</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria 6: Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong community engagement across Greater Essex</li> <li>• Building on best practice community engagement</li> </ul>



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## Criteria 1: Establishing a single tier of local government

This section includes:

<b>Four thriving economies within Greater Essex</b>	<b>Criteria 1a</b>
<b>The most sensible council geographies for Essex</b>	<b>Criteria 1b</b>
<b>Effective structures for local government delivery</b>	<b>Criteria 1d</b>

Criteria 1c 'Proposals should be supported by robust evidence and analysis and include an explanation of the outcomes it is expected to achieve, including evidence of estimated costs/benefits and local engagement' is delivered through all sections in this proposal, with the underpinning options evaluation exercise.

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## Four thriving economies within Greater Essex

**Criteria 1a.** Proposals should be for sensible economic areas, with an appropriate tax base which does not create an undue advantage or disadvantage for one part of the area

Each of the four new unitary authorities is economically viable, with balanced GVA and tax bases supporting long-term financial sustainability. The model brings together places with complementary strengths, ensuring no area is left behind. Each unitary has a recognised economic centre and international port (including airports), providing each with a gateway to trade and supporting future economic growth prospects. This creates a fairer and more resilient foundation for long-term growth.

### Balanced economy and tax base

Figure 4.1 – Economy and tax base metrics for four-unitary model options

	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
<b>Current authority areas</b>	Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow, Thurrock	Braintree, Chelmsford, Uttlesford	Colchester, Maldon, Tendring	Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on-Sea
<b>GVA<sup>4</sup></b>	£15,556m	£13,108m	£8,714m	£13,440m
<b>GVA per capita (productivity)<sup>4</sup></b>	£31,853	£29,870	£20,820	£24,398
<b>Council tax base (no. of band D equivalent properties)<sup>5</sup></b>	173,324	169,545	126,477	186,896
<b>Council tax average band D rate (exc. Fire, Police and Parishes)<sup>5</sup></b>	£2,086	£2,051	£2,060	£2,109
<b>Business rates tax base<sup>6</sup></b>	£115.0m	£76.5m	£43.8m	£67.8m
<b>Unemployment rates (Oct 2023 - Sep 2024)<sup>7</sup></b>	4.03%	2.86%	3.53%	3.36%
<b>Deprivation score (2019)<sup>8</sup></b>	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.12

The four-unitary model ensures balance between strength of key economic indicators and alignment to functional and recognised geographies which enable and support economic growth.

Each unitary has a sufficient council tax base to support service delivery, ranging from c.126,000 to c.187,000 Band D equivalent properties. Differences in average band D rates between councils within each proposed unitary are modest, ranging from £2,051 to £2,109, minimising disruption for residents and reducing administrative complexity during transition.

Business rates tax bases are also strong, with each unitary generating between £44 million and £115 million in retained business rates. All four authorities have the economic capacity to operate independently and sustainably.

Any minor imbalances between proposed councils are countered by strong growth potential, which will support longer-term economic growth and prosperity across the whole of Greater Essex. Each authority will be able to tailor economic and employment strategies to local needs, while aligning with the wider strategic ambitions of GECCA.

<sup>4</sup> [Regional gross domestic product: local authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>5</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority council tax webpages

<sup>6</sup> [National non-domestic rates collected by councils in England: forecast 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>7</sup> [L101 Regional labour market: local indicators for counties, local and unitary authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Mapping income deprivation at a local authority level - Office for National Statistics](#)

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### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model is relatively balanced on some metrics but creates this balance through joining up areas which do not align to functional economic areas and sense of place.

In the 5U model, the imbalance in GVA per capita is significantly greater, ranging from £35,032 in the Southwest to £17,035 in the Southeast.

### Growth and opportunity in Greater Essex

LGR brings an opportunity for Greater Essex to redefine geographies and boundaries and create the economies of the future that will benefit the people of Greater Essex for generations to come.

The four-unitary model brings together places with complementary economic profiles and infrastructure. It reflects the distinct economic geographies of the region but brings them together in a way that will support future growth and development.

Each new authority will benefit from its own gateway to international trade and tourism either through a major port or international airport. These gateways provide the new authorities with the opportunity to consider ambitious growth plans for the future so that increases in GVA can be made through assets (such as Freeports) achieving their full potential.

### Embracing the economic growth opportunity through GECCA

Each unitary has the scale and assets to set an ambitious and effective economic strategy, engage effectively with business and education partners, and align with devolved powers under GECCA. The model supports simplified engagement for investors, clearer branding of growth zones, and more consistent planning and regulatory frameworks across each area. Under the Devolution Priority Programme, GECCA will hold strategic functions across transport, housing, skills, economic development, public health and climate action.

The four-unitary model ensures each authority can contribute meaningfully to these functions, with clear local delivery responsibilities and equal representation on the GECCA board. This alignment enables joined-up planning across key sectors and supports the development of regional strategies such as the Local Growth Plan, Spatial Development Strategy and Skills Strategy. This structure enables Greater Essex to unlock the full potential of its sectoral strengths, while ensuring that all areas benefit from targeted investment and inclusive growth.

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**Growth opportunities across the four-unitary areas**

<b>West Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brings together nationally significant infrastructure and sectoral assets.</li> <li>• Thurrock's Thames Freeport and port logistics are complemented by Harlow's life sciences and innovation cluster.</li> <li>• Harlow's innovation assets include Kao Data and Charles River Laboratories, supporting its role in the UK Innovation Corridor.</li> <li>• Brentwood adds strategic connectivity via the Elizabeth Line and M25, supporting commuter flows and business access to London.</li> <li>• Epping Forest contributes green infrastructure and proximity to Harlow's growth zone.</li> <li>• The area is well positioned to lead on clean growth, digital innovation and infrastructure delivery, supported by the Lower Thames Crossing and supporting housing led growth such as at Harlow &amp; Gilston Garden Town.</li> </ul>
<b>North Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Includes Chelmsford, Braintree and Uttlesford, combining the county town's public sector and professional services base with advanced manufacturing and logistics capacity.</li> <li>• Stansted Airport provides international connectivity and supports a strong aerospace and engineering supply chain.</li> <li>• The area is also home to major employment sites such as Horizon 120 (Braintree) and Freebournes Industrial Estate.</li> <li>• Chelmsford's Garden Community will deliver 100,000 sqm of employment space and a new rail station in addition to new housing, enhancing its role as a public sector and professional services hub.</li> </ul>

<b>East Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on regeneration and inclusive growth, with a strong foundation of sectoral assets and place-based opportunities.</li> <li>• Colchester's Knowledge Gateway and university presence support digital and creative industries, while Harwich International Port and the coastal economy in Tendring offer potential in tourism, logistics and green energy.</li> <li>• Maldon contributes further through its Causeway employment zone and year-round tourism, with over 4 million visits annually and more than 1,000 historically significant sites.</li> <li>• While East Essex has a lower starting tax base than the other three proposed councils, it is forecast to experience the highest population growth, which will expand its tax base over time.</li> <li>• East Essex population growth may increase service demand, but the area's regeneration pipeline, including the Tendring-Colchester Borders Garden Community, Freeport East and Knowledge Gateway, positions it to attract investment, improve productivity and build long-term financial resilience.</li> <li>• The four-unitary model enables East Essex to pursue tailored strategies to address issues common to existing authorities that respond to local challenges and unlock its economic potential by giving the new authority a stronger platform and voice to engage at a regional level and with businesses.</li> </ul>
<b>South Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It has a diverse economy with strengths in health, advanced manufacturing and aviation.</li> <li>• Southend Airport and the A127 corridor support logistics and business growth, while Basildon's Centre for Digital Technologies and strong advanced manufacturing base, including employers like Leonardo and Ford position it as a key driver of innovation and employment.</li> <li>• The wider South Essex region will be able to learn from Basildon's success in enabling economic growth and generating one of the highest business startup rates in the UK.</li> </ul>

## The most sensible council geographies for Essex

**Criteria 1b.** Proposals should be for a sensible geography which will help to increase housing supply and meet local needs

The model creates geographies that make sense for how people live and work. It supports better planning, more consistent services and a more even spread of need. This helps councils respond to local priorities while working more efficiently.

### Geographies and population

The model achieves a balanced distribution of population, geographic area and population density across Greater Essex. This balance enables effective governance, manageable service delivery footprints and equitable representation.

Figure 4.2 – geographies and population in 2023 and 2032 forecasts

	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
<b>Population 2023 ONS<sup>9</sup></b>	488,368	438,829	418,532	550,861
<b>Geographic area (sq km)<sup>10</sup></b>	707	1,596	1,141	505
<b>Population density (people per sq km)</b>	691	275	367	1,091
<b>Forecast population 2032 ONS<sup>11</sup></b>	506,096	469,091	456,578	564,551
<b>Forecast growth</b>	4.7%	8.2%	10.4%	3.3%

### Sensible geographies

The model reflects the diversity of Essex's geography, from dense urban areas to rural and coastal districts. Areas range from 707 sq km (West Essex) to 1,596 sq km (North Essex). This avoids the creation of overly large rural authorities that would be difficult to manage operationally, or very small urban authorities that lack spatial flexibility.

Densities range from 275 people per sq km (North Essex) to 691 people per sq km (West Essex). This spread reflects the natural variation in settlement patterns across Essex, while maintaining a reasonable level of consistency. Other models show much wider disparities, with some areas exceeding 1,000 people per sq km and others falling below 300, which can create challenges in designing consistent service models.

The model avoids the pitfalls of fragmentation or over-consolidation. It ensures that each authority has a population size that supports financial sustainability and strategic capacity, a geographic footprint that is large enough to plan effectively but small enough to engage communities meaningfully, and a density profile that allows for consistent service delivery models across urban and rural areas.

<sup>9</sup> [Estimates of the population for England and Wales - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Standard Area Measurements for Administrative Areas \(December 2023\) in the UK](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Subnational population projections for England - Office for National Statistics](#)



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Travel infrastructure and travel to work in Greater Essex

Essex is served by a strong strategic transport network, including the A12, A13, A127, A120, M11 and M25, and two key rail lines: Greater Anglia and C2C Line. Additionally, some parts of the county are served by Transport for London through the Elizabeth line.

These routes connect major towns such as Chelmsford, Colchester, Southend-on-Sea, Basildon, Harlow and Grays to London and each other. However, east-west and cross-county travel can be less direct, particularly for those not commuting into London. There is a strong reliance on the road network and public bus transport when travelling between different district lines.

Further detail on travel to work patterns and connectivity is set out in Section 4: Criteria 4 in relation to understanding local needs and preserving local identity.

Supporting strategic connectivity through functional geographies

The Greater Essex devolution proposal identifies several systemic transport challenges. The current network is overly reliant on car journeys, lacks capacity on key corridors and suffers from poor integration across transport modes. North-south travel is particularly constrained and some of the most deprived communities are also the least connected.

Aligning unitary boundaries with Travel-to-Work Areas (TTWAs) will support the development of a more connected, resilient and inclusive transport system. This approach enables coherent economic planning and more efficient service delivery, while ensuring that residents can access services without needing to travel through other unitary areas. See Section 4: Criteria 4 for more detail on TTWAs.

Embedding the four-unitary model within the strategic corridor framework ensures each unitary area is positioned to benefit from targeted infrastructure investment, including rail upgrades, road improvements and mass transit

schemes. This strengthens the case for the four-unitary model and supports long-term connectivity and growth.

This approach also ensures that the new authorities are grounded in how people actually move around Essex, supporting both local responsiveness and regional coordination.

The model also aligns with strategic corridors identified in the Transport East Strategy<sup>12</sup>, which underpin regional movement and economic connectivity.

**What our residents have told us is important**

In the Thurrock survey, residents were asked where they travelled to most often to work or socialise. **52%** said London, **35%** said Basildon, **33%** said Southend and **29%** said Brentwood. The issue of proximity to London was raised many times throughout the engagement, with residents making it clear they enjoy living near London but do not want to become part of it, as they feel their identity is distinct living in Essex.

Strategic transport corridors across the four-unitary regions

West Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Harlow, Epping Forest, Brentwood and Thurrock border London and are supported by good road and rail links.</li><li>• The M25 runs through Thurrock and provides direct access to Brentwood and Epping Forest, supporting movement across the sub-region and into London.</li><li>• Harlow is served by the M11, which connects to the M25.</li><li>• The A128 connects Orsett to Chipping Ongar</li><li>• The proposed Lower Thames Crossing and Thames Freeport will further enhance connectivity and economic opportunity.</li></ul>
North Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The M11, A12, A120 and A131 corridors provide strong connections between Uttlesford, Braintree and Chelmsford.</li><li>• All districts have direct rail access to London.</li><li>• Excellent road links and efficient rail and bus connectivity between Braintree and Chelmsford.</li></ul>

<sup>12</sup> [Transport East: Transport Strategy 2023-2050](#)

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chelmsford is one of the best-connected districts in Essex. It's strategic geographical position and transport infrastructure have allowed it to grow as a key economic and residential hub and it will provide a key transport connector for the North Essex geography, supporting areas such as Uttlesford with rural transport issues.</li> <li>Uttlesford is strategically served by the M11, which provides direct links to London, Cambridge, and Stansted Airport</li> </ul>
<b>East Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maldon, Colchester and Tendring are connected by the A12, A120 and A133 corridors.</li> <li>The Greater Anglia rail network links Colchester to coastal destinations such as Clacton and Walton via the Sunshine Coast Line.</li> </ul>
<b>South Essex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes the A127 and A13 corridors, with Southend-on-Sea located at the eastern end and Basildon positioned centrally between the two.</li> <li>Rochford is served by the A127, while Castle Point connects via the A13. The area benefits from strong internal road connectivity and direct rail access to London via the c2c and Greater Anglia networks.</li> <li>Southend Airport is located on the Southend Victoria branch of the Greater Anglia line.</li> <li>East-west travel beyond the main corridors is more constrained, particularly for cross-district movement.</li> </ul>

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model creates large, internally disconnected geographies which do not align to transport and travel patterns.

- In Central Essex, rail infrastructure is predominantly radial, linking towns to London but not to each other. This results in weak internal public transport, high car dependency and limited connectivity, particularly for areas like Maldon, which lacks a rail station altogether.

- In North Essex, long journeys between extremities and poor direct links, such as between Uttlesford and Colchester, reduce internal cohesion and limit access to services.

The 4U model breaks up these disconnected groupings, aligning boundaries with functional travel patterns and enabling more coherent, place-based transport planning.

### The housing and homelessness challenge in Greater Essex

Greater Essex faces significant and complex housing pressures. While some areas have consistently met delivery targets, others are constrained by land availability, viability challenges or infrastructure gaps.

Residents across Greater Essex consistently raise concerns about the impact of new housing on local infrastructure, including roads, schools, health services and utilities.

While the South faces higher demand and more constrained land supply, the North has greater physical capacity to absorb growth. However, areas such as the A120 corridor already experience congestion at peak times, and further development will increase pressure on local transport networks.

Homelessness rates vary significantly, with some districts experiencing rates of up to 1.95 per 1,000 households<sup>13</sup>. Unemployment, which indirectly affects housing stability, ranges from 2.86% to 4.03%<sup>14</sup>, and pockets of deprivation persist across both urban and coastal areas.

Housing growth across Greater Essex is currently driven by the ambition and delivery capacity of some individual districts. Areas such as Harlow, Chelmsford and Colchester have driven growth. Braintree has the ambition but struggles with delivery, and Uttlesford has available land but a limited appetite for growth.

<sup>13</sup> [Tables on homelessness - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>14</sup> [L01 Regional labour market: local indicators for counties, local and unitary authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

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### Why the four-unitary model deliver on housing and homelessness

LGR provides the opportunity to think differently and more strategically, beyond current district boundaries. We must use this opportunity to learn from the areas with the strongest track record of delivery and apply best practices across the new councils.

The four new councils, with all authorities working with GECCA, will:

- Be ideally positioned to coordinate spatial planning, helping to ensure that growth is both deliverable and supported by the infrastructure residents expect.
- Provide a stronger platform for joined-up place-shaping and regional coordination, with balanced distribution of housing and infrastructure investment across the region.
- Reflect local housing markets while retaining sufficient scale to plan strategically and negotiate effectively with government and developers.
- Avoid the dilution of focus that can occur in overly large geographies.

- Avoid the fragmentation risks of a model with more, smaller councils, which may lack the capacity to manage housing pipelines or respond to homelessness effectively.

### Complementary housing profiles and challenges in the four-unitary model

Figure 4.3 – Housing and homelessness metrics for four-unitary model option

Metric	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
<b>Homelessness Rate (per 1,000 Households) (Apr-Jun 2024)<sup>15</sup></b>	1.20	0.99	1.26	1.46
<b>Housing Delivery Test 2023 Measurement (%)<sup>16</sup></b>	0.73	1.07	1.31	0.50

<sup>15</sup> [Tables on homelessness - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Housing Delivery Test: 2023 measurement - GOV.UK](#)

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	Current housing and homelessness challenges	Opportunities enabled by four-unitary model
West Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest average homelessness rate.</li> <li>• Housing delivery is below target, reflecting viability constraints and infrastructure pressures.</li> <li>• High house prices and availability challenges, driven by increasing demand and values across East London.</li> <li>• Capital spillover pushes up prices and limits affordability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A more coordinated approach to investment in affordable housing and regeneration, capitalising on planned infrastructure investment in the Thames Freeport and the Lower Thames Crossing.</li> <li>• A strategic approach to temporary accommodation to address overspill issues as part of a strategy for temporary accommodation procurement and tenancy sustainment across areas with similar urban pressures.</li> <li>• Take advantage of known growth opportunities in Epping Forest and Harlow, providing a strong foundation for future coordinated delivery and investment.</li> </ul>
North Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong housing delivery average.</li> <li>• Lowest average unemployment rate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic planning would support delivery of garden communities and unlock stalled sites through pooled infrastructure investment.</li> <li>• Better coordination of rural housing needs and affordability challenges in market towns and villages.</li> </ul>
East Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongest average housing delivery performance</li> <li>• Homelessness is relatively high.</li> <li>• Affordability and deprivation challenges, particularly in coastal areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted regeneration and housing mix strategies, with scope to align with clean growth and tourism investment.</li> <li>• More joined-up approach to homelessness prevention and outreach in areas with seasonal housing pressures and limited social housing stock.</li> </ul>
South Essex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most urbanised and densely populated area.</li> <li>• Weakest housing delivery average.</li> <li>• Homelessness is relatively high.</li> <li>• Largest population aged 65 and over.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinated brownfield development and infrastructure planning.</li> <li>• More effective management of housing pressures linked to ageing population, urban density and constrained land supply.</li> </ul>

### Comparison to other proposed models

Housing and homelessness pressures are concentrated in large authorities in the 3U, making them harder to manage effectively. Responsibilities are fragmented across smaller authorities in the 5U, limiting capacity to respond strategically. The 4U model enables each authority to tailor its approach to local conditions while benefiting from strategic coherence and shared capacity.

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## Effective structures for local government delivery

**Criteria 1d.** Proposals should describe clearly the single tier local government structures it is putting forward for the whole of the area and explain how, if implemented, these are expected to achieve the outcomes described

The four-unitary model simplifies governance by reducing duplication and clarifying accountability. It reduces the number of councillors and Cabinet roles while strengthening local leadership. This makes decision-making quicker, clearer and more effective.

### Efficient and locally focused democratic arrangements

The four-unitary model will create a new democratic model that is more efficient and delivers savings but remains at a scale that allows for local focus. It reduces duplication, simplifies decision-making and ensures that the right powers are held at the right level to deliver effective, accountable leadership.

Each new unitary authority will operate with a Cabinet system, with no more than 10 Cabinet members. This provides the opportunity to reduce the total number of councillors across Greater Essex by around 60%. This reduction would allow councillor-to-electorate ratios to be designed to remain within acceptable thresholds, maintaining democratic representation while improving efficiency. This reduction would achieve similar savings seen in previous LGR areas where the reduction is of the same magnitude.

Figure 4.4 – Councillor numbers of the four-unitary model

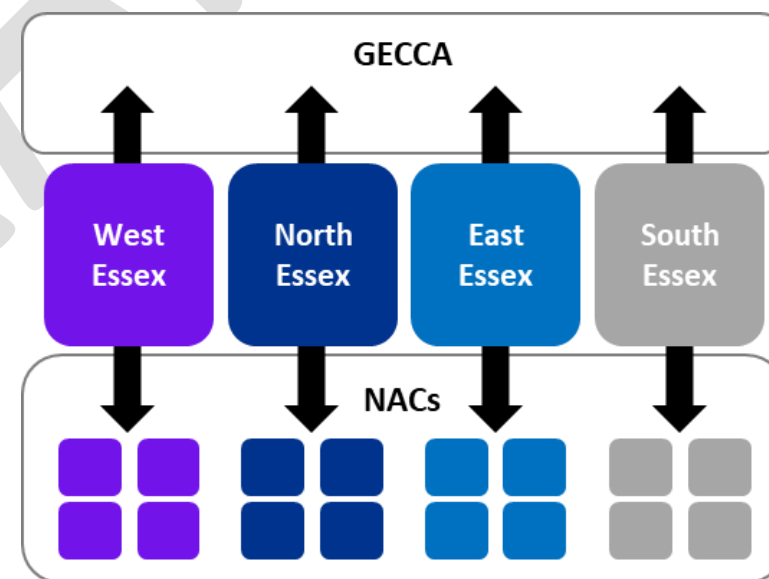
Unitary	Current councillors (District plus County)	Future councillors (estimate)	Current councillor to electorate ratio	Future councillor to electorate ratio	Net reduction in Members
West	190	69	2,008	5,001	64%
North	166	65	1,999	4,882	61%
East	150	63	2,382	4,813	58%
South	190	83	2,417	4,916	56%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>696</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>2,202 (average)</b>	<b>4,903 (average)</b>	<b>60%</b>

In accordance with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) guidance on how to determine council size, a full review by the new unitary authority will consider how to strike the right balance between strategic leadership, community leadership and accountability.

### Effective governance and decision making at each level

The model enables strategic thinking at the right scale, while maintaining a strong connection to local communities.

Figure 4.5 – Future Greater Essex governance structure



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**GECCA** aligns local governance with the wider strategic devolution agenda. The model ensures that local voices are represented in regional decision-making, while enabling councils to focus on local delivery and priorities. See *Criteria 5 for further detail*.

**The four unitary authorities** will have the powers and capacity to make decisions on key issues such as housing, infrastructure and public health, supported by a clear governance framework and strong officer leadership.

**Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs)** are expected to be embedded into each new unitary authority's governance framework, providing a formal role for ward councillors in local engagement and service influence. They are proposed to operate within the unitary structure, not as a new tier of government and be geographically flexible to reflect community identity. This approach aligns with emerging government plans for neighbourhood governance and complements existing parish and town councils. Ultimately, decisions about how the model will be implemented will be taken locally and informed by the councillors who represent and understand the local area. *Full detail on NAC design and implementation is set out in Section 4: Criteria 6 and joint working arrangements in service delivery are considered in Section 4: Criteria 3.*

#### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model risks creating councils that are too expansive to effectively govern and connect with communities, potentially becoming overly reliant on Neighbourhood Area Committees to address this democratic shortfall. Such committees are unlikely to be adequate and could inadvertently re-establish complex district-level structures, demanding substantial officer and member resources to function effectively.

A 5U model would significantly dilute strategic capacity by creating smaller authorities that lack the scale to effectively deliver complex services or attract senior leadership. It would also increase the number of Cabinets and governance structures required, reintroducing duplication and reducing the efficiency gains expected from reorganisation. This fragmentation risks inconsistent decision-making and weaker alignment with regional priorities.



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## Criteria 2: Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks

This section includes:

<b>The right population size</b>	<b>Criteria 2a and 2b</b>
<b>Delivering efficiencies to support council finances</b>	<b>Criteria 2c</b>
<b>Minimising transition complexity and enabling transformation</b>	<b>Criteria 2d</b>
<b>Managing debt and establishing a firmer financial footing</b>	<b>Criteria 2e</b>

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## The right population size

**Criteria 2a.** As a guiding principle, new councils should aim for a population of 500,000 or more

**Criteria 2b.** There may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal

Populations are well balanced across the four new councils, each close to the 500,000 guideline with room to grow. This ensures they are large enough to withstand financial pressures and deliver services efficiently, but small enough to stay connected to communities and support effective place-based service delivery. It strikes the right balance between scale and local focus.

### Balanced populations with room for growth

The government has stated that the population size of 500,000 or more is a guiding principle, not a target. Under the four-unitary model, all four councils will have between 418k - 550k starting population.

These new authorities are expected to be in place for the long term, and it is therefore appropriate to look to long term population growth estimates. The new West Essex unitary is projected to reach 500,000 by 2029, the year after vesting day, with the North and East Essex also growing over the next decade to c.469k and c.457k respectively.

The four-unitary model provides a balanced population distribution that supports resilience and strategic capacity. Each authority is large enough to deliver services efficiently, withstand financial pressures, and invest in transformation, while remaining connected to place. This balance ensures that no single authority is overburdened, particularly in areas with higher levels of need, and that each has the scale to attract and retain specialist expertise. The model is set up to absorb future shocks and manage demand in high-pressure services such as adult social care and children's services.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model creates a very large “mega unitary” in the South, with population exceeding 700,000, and approaching 800,000 by 2047. This scale risks democratic deficit, reduced responsiveness to local needs, and future cost escalation due to complexity and concentration.

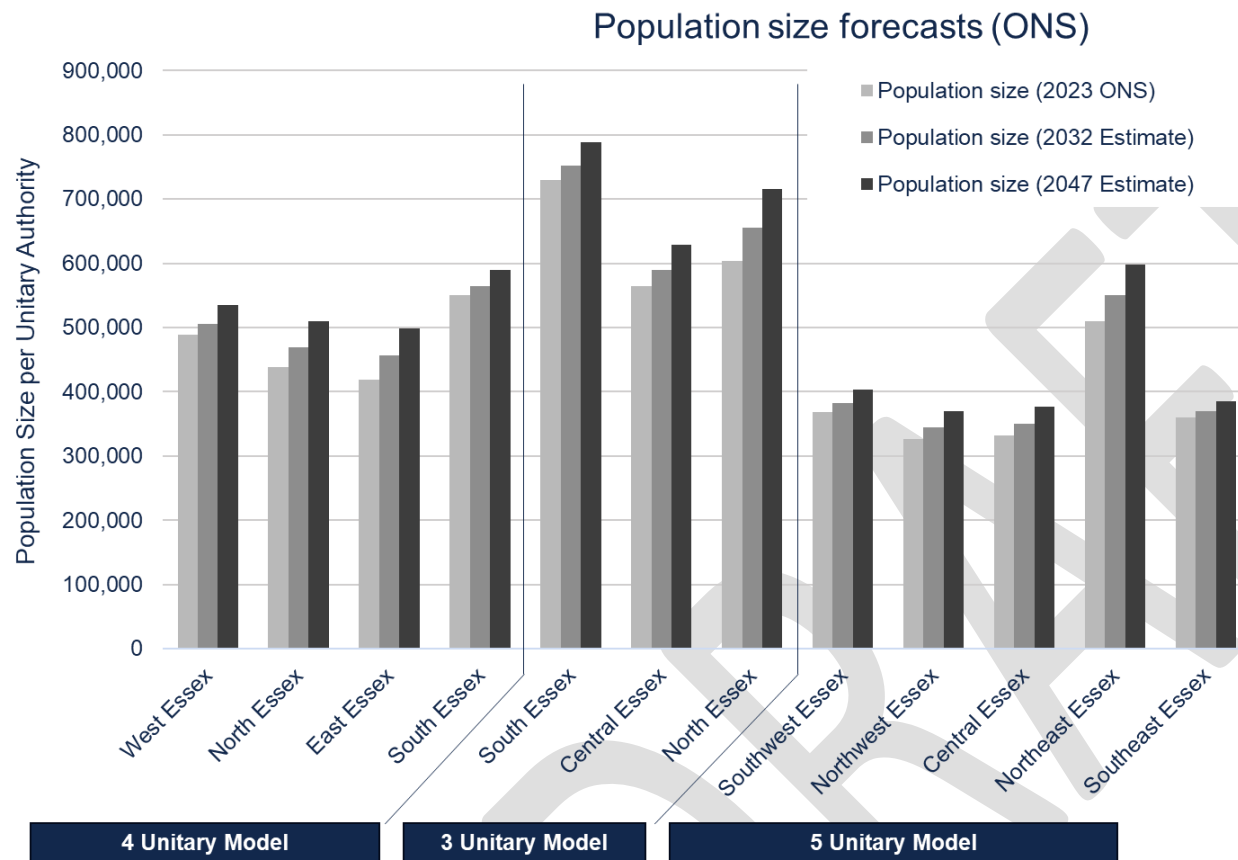
In contrast, the 5U model fragments the system, with four authorities under 400,000. These smaller units lack the scale needed to deliver manage demand and deliver crucial services such as adult social care and children's, absorb financial pressures, or invest in long-term transformation.

### The right size and balance to enable effective devolution

The four-unitary model also complements the strategic role of GECCA. GECCA will provide scale for regional infrastructure, transport and economic development, allowing the new unitary authorities to focus on local delivery and place-based reform. This dual structure ensures that strategic and local priorities are both addressed without requiring excessively large unitary councils.

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Figure 4.6 – Population size forecasts



	Unitary Authority	2023	2032	2023 – 2032 Growth Rate (%)	2047	2023 – 2047 Growth rate (%)
4 Unitary Authorities	West	488,368	506,096	3.6%	535,615	9.7%
	North	438,829	469,091	6.9%	509,451	16.1%
	East	418,532	456,578	9.1%	498,636	19.1%
	South	550,861	564,551	2.5%	589,668	7.0%
3 Unitary Authorities	South	729,062	751,987	3.1%	789,031	8.2%
	Central	563,772	589,574	4.6%	628,670	11.5%
	East	603,756	654,755	8.4%	715,669	18.5%
5 Unitary Authorities	Southwest	368,745	382,754	3.8%	403,323	9.4%
	Northwest	325,609	343,960	5.6%	370,284	13.7%
	Central	331,757	350,481	5.6%	376,402	13.5%
	Northeast	510,162	549,888	7.8%	597,653	17.1%
	Southeast	360,317	369,233	2.5%	385,708	7.0%

## Delivering efficiencies to support council finances

**Criteria 2c.** Efficiencies should be identified to help improve councils' finances and make sure that council taxpayers are getting the best possible value for their money

Financial modelling shows the four-unitary model will deliver recurring savings of £28.3m a year, which can be enhanced further through post-LGR transformation. It also has the lowest one-off implementation cost of the options considered, given it limits transition complexity through avoiding the combination of existing unitary authorities. This makes it the most cost-effective and financially sustainable model.

### Calculating the financial impact of LGR: our approach

Refer to Section 5: The financial case for change for assumptions and benchmarking approach underpinning the financial model.

The approach taken utilises evidence and data as a basis for making well-informed and prudent assumptions. Analysis carried out by the County Councils Network generally assumes that efficiencies are best achieved by moving to the smallest possible number of unitary authorities. The financial case takes a similar approach to the PwC model, with estimated savings and implementation costs calculated with reference to a series of benchmarked LGR programmes and the local reality of LGR in a Greater Essex landscape consisting of twelve districts, two unitaries and one county council.

The fundamental principle that reducing the number of councils lowers the cost base of local government is valid. However, it is essential to recognise the unique landscape of authorities within Greater Essex, as well as evidence from the experience of previous unitarisation, so the answer is not so straightforward. Any proposed model must build upon the strengths of existing top-tier authorities that are already delivering high-quality services. By doing so, savings will be more sustainable the transition can be simplified and costs reduced, minimising the risks associated with combining multiple top-tier authorities.

LGR alone is not a panacea for driving savings in service delivery. Empirical studies show that the bulk of realised savings from previous reorganisations have been concentrated within administrative functions and improved buying power, rather than reducing the cost of frontline services<sup>1718</sup>. In alignment with this evidence, our modelling takes a prudent approach by assuming no savings will be drawn from social care budgets.

This methodology ensures that the new unitary authorities are created with a stable platform from which to design and adapt their operating models in response to the priorities and characteristics of their communities. Crucially, this approach does not obligate future authorities to deliver unrealistic savings in areas where efficiencies are unlikely to be realised, but instead empowers them to make informed, sustainable decisions for the long term.

### The results of our financial modelling

Our financial modelling shows:

- The **four-unitary model** will have net annual savings of **£28.3m**, after one-off costs of implementation of **£80.8m**, meaning an estimated payback period of **less than 4 years**.
- A **three-unitary model**, whilst avoiding long-running disaggregation costs, introduces additional complexity and therefore implementation cost by

<sup>17</sup> Rhys Andrews, "Vertical consolidation and financial sustainability: evidence from English local government", Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 2015, 33, p1538

<sup>18</sup> Lord (Michael) Heseltine, No Stone Unturned in pursuit of growth, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2012, p.52 [Link](#)

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combining two current unitary authorities (Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea).

- A **five-unitary model** will result in a very similar cost of local government delivery to the current position and therefore may never deliver a return on the significant upfront investment in implementation costs.

#### **What our residents have told us is important**

In the Greater Essex research, more than half of respondents (**52%**) said that ensuring public funds are spent efficiently and prioritised was their top priority for LGR. Only **44%** of Greater Essex respondents said they would support service improvements through slightly higher council tax. In The Greater Essex and Thurrock qualitative engagement, concerns about increased council tax as a result of LGR were raised regularly by residents. These findings highlight the importance of efficiencies and economies of scale in LGR plans.

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Figure 4.7 – Financial modelling summary of the three unitary model options

LGR option	Reorganisation savings (gross) (£m)	Disaggregation costs (£m)	Recurring revenue savings (£m)*	Implementation costs (one-off) (£m)	Net impact after five years (£m)	Estimated payback period	Key features of each option driving level of costs and benefits
Three-unitary model	43.4	-	43.4	(93.7)	73.5	Within 4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No recurring disaggregation costs because there are the same number of 'upper tier' authorities as currently.</li> <li>Implementation complexity and costs are highest due to need to integrate two unitaries and some County functions into a single unitary, as well as disaggregate the remainder of the County into two.</li> <li>Does not make best use of the current existing capability in the existing two unitary authorities creating an opportunity cost.</li> <li>Delivery across larger, less coherent geographies is unlikely to deliver efficiencies as effectively due to increased complexity in management.</li> <li>Timing of benefits realisation within the three-unitary model would be further delayed due to the complexity of delivery.</li> </ul>
Four-unitary model	55.0	(26.7)	28.3	(80.8)	49.5	Within 4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some recurring disaggregation costs exist due to four-unitary authorities rather than three.</li> <li>Implementation complexity and costs are still relatively high due to need to integrate and disaggregate to form four authorities, but lower than other models.</li> </ul>
Five-unitary model	52.1	(44.4)	7.7	(86.7)	(51.5)	Over 10 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant recurring disaggregation costs exist due to the formation of five authorities.</li> <li>Implementation complexity and costs are high due to the number of new authorities being created.</li> </ul>

\*Recurring revenue savings = gross reorganisation savings less disaggregation costs

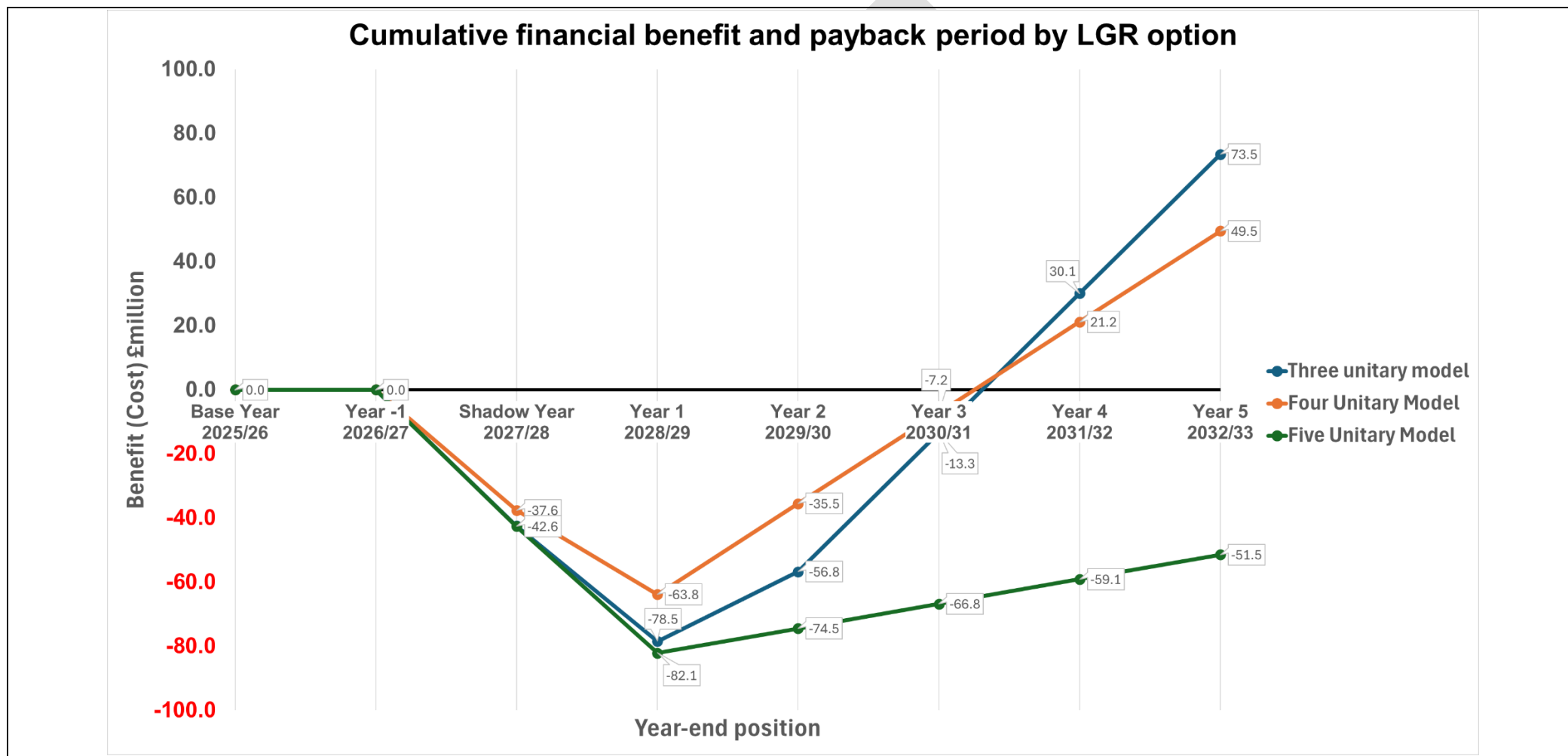


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### Payback period

As shown in Fig 4.8, the four-unitary model is estimated to pay back within four years, not factoring in the potential benefits from transformation.

Figure 4.8 – Cumulative financial benefit and payback period by LGR option



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**Avoiding the costs of additional implementation complexity**

Greater Essex has two existing unitary authorities in addition to the County Council, reducing the overall implementation complexity and risk, as there is increased capacity and capability in the system.

Generally, implementation costs are likely to rise as the number of future unitary authorities increases. However, this assumption is complicated when additional complexity is introduced, for example where existing unitary authorities are combined. *See the following sub-section for further detail on implementation complexity.*

**Assumptions on financial modelling**

Assumptions within the model have deliberately focused on what we know now and have not tried to pre-empt decisions that will be taken by the new councils. However, there is a strong argument that effective long-term delivery, grounded in a sense of place and the ability to deliver meaningful public service reform, will ultimately impact demand and therefore the long-term financial health of future authorities. The four-unitary model is best placed to deliver at scale whilst remaining grounded in local identity with manageable geographies for service delivery.

The model does not attempt to reflect the potential impact of the Fair Funding Review, which is expected to significantly affect council finances. While this has been considered, it is too complex and uncertain to model accurately at this stage. Importantly, it does not alter the overall narrative or strategic case for local government reorganisation. The implications of the review will continue to be monitored and assessed as further detail emerges.

The model also does not include detailed consideration of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) pressures. Demand and cost in this area are growing and will require careful balancing. The DSG funding picture is evolving and may have implications for future financial planning, but it is also too fluid and complex to reflect meaningfully in the current modelling.

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## Minimising transition complexity and enabling transformation

**Criteria 2d.** Proposals should set out how an area will seek to manage transition costs, including planning for future service transformation opportunities from existing budgets, including from the flexible use of capital receipts that can support authorities in taking forward transformation and invest-to-save projects

The model builds on existing strengths in Essex County, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea. This reduces transition risk, particularly around critical services such as Adult Social Care and Children's Services and allows new councils to start strong. It provides a stable base for transformation from Day 1.

**Note: this section sets out some key elements of Transition and Transformation. Refer to Section 3 for further detail on how this impacts service delivery.**

### Simplifying transition complexity by building on existing structures

It has become apparent that reorganisation can damage public service performance in the short term. Councils preparing for unitary status in 2006-8 saw a significant drop in scores on the comprehensive performance assessment and there are more recent examples of impacts on service continuity (see Dorset case study below). This is hardly surprising, as councils that are spending time focussed on reorganisation have less capacity to focus on improving services.

The four-unitary model is designed to minimise transition costs and implementation risk by building on the stability of existing systems. It avoids the complexity of aggregating current unitary structures in Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea and instead builds upon existing capacity, capability and infrastructure. Change is still inevitable in the formation of four new authorities, but this approach reduces the need for wholesale restructuring and allows the new authorities to start from a position of strength and focus on transformation from Day 1.

There is a net increase of one upper-tier authority, but a reduction from 15 to 4 in the number of organisations delivering services across Greater Essex. This consolidation enables long-term efficiencies while avoiding the disruption and cost of entirely dismantling functioning systems. It also allows the new authorities to retain experienced leadership and operational teams, reducing the need for interim structures and costly consultancy support.

### Case Study: Dorset Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The Dorset LGR programme, and particularly the creation of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) Council in 2019, was one of the most complex reorganisations for decades. The new BCP Council combined two former unitaries - Bournemouth and Poole - with Christchurch, previously a district of Dorset County Council, culminating in a single authority needing to unify three diverse structures, cultures and systems.

The challenges of this highly complex integration significantly hindered progress post-merger at BCP Council:

- Staff continued to identify with their former employers, delaying the emergence of a coherent 'BCP Culture'.
- For over three years, BCP lacked a single system for Children's Social Care, leading to underdeveloped quality assurance and operational inconsistencies.
- It took until 2024 to align pay structures for frontline staff, meaning qualified social workers worked on different terms for years, undermining recruitment and retention.
- It took four years post-LGR to establish a unified finance and HR system. Until April 2023, the council relied on manual processes for key functions - hampering budget monitoring, forecasting and staff management.
- The council faced difficulties in establishing the true cost base for the new authority, particularly, for Children's Services. For several years post-LGR, budget setting was inaccurate, evidenced by a £7 million overspend in Children's Services in 2022. DSG deficits increased to £92m in 2024/25.

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- In December 2021, Ofsted judged BCP's Children's Social Care as "Inadequate". A further statutory direction in SEND services was also imposed.
- BCP was issued with a Best Value Notice in August 2023, and in principle £20 million of financial support. The DfE also awarded several million pounds of exceptional grant funding for Children's Social Care and SEND improvement work.

New councils in Greater Essex should seek to avoid the unnecessary additional complexity and cost associated with combining existing unitary authorities. Under a potential three-unitary model the level of complexity would be greater than in Dorset.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model proposes to merge Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea into a single new unitary authority while simultaneously disaggregating services from Essex County Council. This dual process of aggregation and disaggregation introduces significant additional complexity, particularly for critical services such as Adult Social Care and Children's Services. The experience of BCP Council in Dorset illustrates the risks: loss of control over agency costs, unclear workforce deployment, and service delivery failures that led to financial shocks and long-term instability.

The 5U model requires the creation of three entirely new unitary authority structures and the disaggregation of county services across all areas. This represents the highest transition cost and complexity of any model under consideration.

### Accelerated opportunities for transformation

The four-unitary model provides a strong foundation for transformation, but with the opportunity to design new organisations that are modern, efficient and fit for the future. It enables councils to build on proven capabilities in Essex County, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea, while creating space to rethink delivery models, embrace digital transformation and drive long-term efficiency.

Drawing on experienced management teams and tested operating models through the process of forming new unitary authorities, particularly in Adult Social Care and Children's Services, reduces implementation risk and allows transformation to begin earlier.

Transformation must be embedded from the outset, not treated as a secondary phase. The model supports prevention-led, place-based operating models that integrate services around neighbourhoods. It enables each authority to design services around the lives people lead, rather than inheriting legacy structures. With 15 councils currently taking different approaches, the model offers a clear opportunity to consolidate best practice, simplify access to services through a single front door, invest in digital platforms and embed neighbourhood governance that supports early intervention and prevention.

### Case Study: Thurrock Council

Thurrock Council has undergone significant transformation following government intervention. In response to financial and governance challenges, the council redesigned its operating model, reshaped services and embedded more sustainable practices. This included strengthening internal controls, improving transparency and rebuilding organisational capability.

This experience offers valuable lessons for the new unitary authorities. It shows how transformational change can be delivered while addressing legacy issues and provides a tested blueprint for managing risk and driving change from day one.

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### Continuation and acceleration of modernisation and digital transformation

Like all local authorities, all councils across Greater Essex have taken steps to modernise and introduce digital approaches to service delivery. The ability to invest in and accelerate digital transformation is a distinct advantage of the proposed approach:

- **Investment at scale:** With robust resource bases and manageable transition costs, the four-unitary authorities have the scale to invest in digital infrastructure, including shared customer platforms, data analytics, artificial intelligence and cloud-based service management systems.
- **Modern customer experience:** Using LGR as a catalyst, residents will benefit from simplified access to services across all channels, with unified digital portals, real-time case tracking, AI assistance and self-service tools – removing the barriers created by the current patchwork of systems.
- **Enabling service redesign:** Digital transformation provides the foundation for new models of care and support (e.g., remote monitoring, virtual consultations, predictive analytics for early help), supporting both efficiency and improved outcomes.

### Potential for further service integration

Integration between current two-tier services and other public services can open up further transformation opportunities, for example in supporting the elderly and vulnerable to live independently, reducing demand for expensive social care support (see Criteria 3). The four-unitary model provides a stable platform for integration of services and will enable the future administrations to take decisions based on the needs of their residents to improve service

delivery. The opportunities here are infinite and as such it is not prudent to model savings based on this potential.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U configuration, despite potentially greater aggregate savings, faces much higher transition complexity and risk – particularly when merging or disaggregating existing unitaries with legacy systems.

The 5U structure, on the other hand, lacks the scale to invest meaningfully in digital modernisation, risking technological stagnation and digital exclusion.

### What our residents have told us is important

When asked to place different aspects of new councils in order of importance, **99.3%** of respondents to the 5U survey said efficient use of council tax and public funds was most important.

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## Managing debt and establishing a firmer financial footing

**Criteria 2e.** For areas covering councils that are in Best Value intervention and/or in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support, proposals must additionally demonstrate how reorganisation may 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

Essex councils have combined external debt of £4.1billion. Thurrock's financial challenges are well known and their debt is a significant proportion of the overall position. The new West Essex authority, which includes Thurrock alongside Brentwood, Epping Forest and Harlow, has the scale and economic potential to manage this risk. West Essex would be well connected to London, with nationally significant infrastructure projects and ability to deliver at scale across housing, employment, and regeneration. This ensures all four councils are financially viable and able to invest in the future.

### The overall financial context

Councils across Greater Essex are facing sustained financial pressures. Rising demand in adult social care and children's services, rising costs and legacy debt placing significant strain on budgets. The current two-tier system contributes to inefficiencies through duplication in democratic arrangements and overlaps in service delivery across county and districts.

### The financial position of Thurrock

Thurrock Council's challenging financial position is well understood by Government and across Greater Essex.

The estimated capital financing requirement (CFR) of Thurrock is £1.1billion as at 31 March 2026. £297m of this CFR relates to the HRA, leaving £803m as non HRA CFR<sup>19</sup>. However, as shown in Fig 4.9, the Thurrock CFR, whilst significant, makes up only 27% of the total debt in Greater Essex authorities.

Figure 4.9 – debt modelling

	Thurrock	Rest of Greater Essex (excluding Thurrock)	Greater Essex
Total external debt including HRA debt (2024/25) (£m)	1,100	3,000	4,100

### Debt analysis

The authorities across Greater Essex have jointly commissioned CIPFA to undertake an analysis of debt under different unitary options with reference to latest available 2024/25. Headline results from this analysis are shown below.

The CIPFA analysis shows that in all models there will be two authorities expected to start with a debt in excess of £1billion. However, in the three-unitary model, the authority including Thurrock has external debt of over £2billion, prior to any debt support, which is almost half the total debt for the region.

<sup>19</sup> CIPFA Essex LGR – Debt and Non-Current Assets July 2025

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Figure 4.10 – Debt modelling of the unitary model options<sup>20</sup>

Three-unitary model			Four-unitary model			Five-unitary model		
Unitaries	External Debt (£m)	Financing costs (£m)	Unitaries	External Debt (£m)	Financing costs (£m)	Unitaries	External Debt (£m)	Financing costs (£m)
South Essex*	2,130	166	West Essex*	1,830	144	Southwest Essex*	1,653	133
Central Essex	1,092	70	North Essex	548	50	Northwest Essex	1,051	61
North Essex	900	70	East Essex	484	39	Central Essex	405	32
			South Essex	1,261	73	Northeast Essex	536	47
						Southeast Essex	478	33

\*Includes Thurrock prior to any government debt support

### Modelling scenarios for Thurrock debt

Conversations are ongoing with Government regarding financial support that may be provided. The outcome of these conversations is unknown, and the scenario below of 50% debt support is for illustrative purposes only.

Under the four-unitary model, where Thurrock combines with the current Brentwood, Epping Forest and Harlow authorities into a 'West Essex' authority, different scenarios would leave the below estimated starting positions in terms of debt, reserves and financing costs. Potential debt support is calculated as a percentage of external debt, excluding HRA debt.

Figure 4.11 – Scenario modelling of potential Thurrock non-HRA debt support

	Starting position of non-HRA debt	Assuming 50% debt support of non-HRA debt
External debt of Thurrock pre LGR (£m)	803	401.5
External debt of unitary including Thurrock (West Essex) (£m)	1,533	1,131.5

### Four unitaries driving long term financial sustainability

The four-unitary model provides a credible structure to place local government in Greater Essex on a firmer financial footing, including in areas currently subject to Best Value intervention and Exceptional Financial Support. In particular, the new unitary authority including Thurrock's legacy debt has higher financing costs, but this is offset by a strong tax base and economic capacity. Council tax bases are sufficient across all four authorities and while reserves vary, they remain within a manageable range.

The model ensures that this challenge is contained within a single authority, allowing for targeted financial planning and transparent risk management. By contrast, other configurations would either dilute accountability or create unsustainable financial pressure across multiple new authorities. The four-unitary model enables a viable, place-based solution to legacy issues, while maintaining overall system stability.

All four proposed authorities have sufficient council tax bases to support service delivery. While reserves vary, they remain within a manageable range. Financing costs are generally low, with the exception of one authority affected by legacy debt. This is addressed transparently within the proposal and does not undermine the overall financial sustainability of the model.

<sup>20</sup> CIPFA Essex LGR – Debt and Non-Current Assets July 2025



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Figure 4.12 – Key financial metrics for the 4 unitary option

	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
<b>Total GVA (£ million) (2022)<sup>21</sup></b>	15,556	13,108	8,714	13,440
<b>GVA per capita (£) (2022)<sup>19</sup></b>	31,853	29,870	20,820	24,398
<b>Council tax base (number of band D equivalent properties) (2025-26)<sup>22</sup></b>	173,324	169,545	126,477	186,896
<b>Council Tax band D average (exc. Fire, Police and Parishes) (£) (2024-25)<sup>20</sup></b>	2,086	2,051	2,060	2,109
<b>Retained Business Rates (£m) (2024-25)<sup>23</sup></b>	115.0	76.5	43.8	67.8
<b>Non-Earmarked Reserves (£m) (2023-24)<sup>24</sup></b>	44.9	43.4	32.0	37.7
<b>Net revenue expenditure (£m) (2023/24)<sup>22</sup></b>	423.2	350.4	324.6	454.3

### Linking growth and financial sustainability

“The returns to the public purse from growing economies, building housing, preventing future needs and restoring trust are far more significant than the short-term savings that accrue from consolidating existing functions.”<sup>25</sup>

The four-unitary model is designed to respond to and embrace growth across Greater Essex, not simply to accommodate it. Growth is already happening through housing delivery, population increases and business investment and the role of local government is to ensure that this growth is planned for, shaped and leveraged to deliver long-term sustainability residents, communities and local businesses.

Economic growth is not a standalone objective. It is the foundation for financial resilience. A growing economy expands the tax base, increases business rates income and supports higher levels of employment. These are the core revenue streams that underpin sustainable public services. Without a governance model that can plan for and manage growth effectively, councils risk being overwhelmed by rising demand without the fiscal tools to respond.

The four-unitary model enables this by aligning governance with functional economic areas and travel-to-work patterns. It creates the right scale to plan infrastructure, housing and services around growth corridors, while maintaining local accountability. This is critical to ensuring that growth is not just absorbed but actively used to strengthen the financial position of each authority.

<sup>21</sup> [Regional gross domestic product: local authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Respective district council and unitary authority council tax webpages](#)

<sup>23</sup> [National non-domestic rates collected by councils in England: forecast 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Respective district council and unitary authority Non-earmarked Reserves webpages](#)

<sup>25</sup> [ICC/DCN - Creating places that deliver the promise and potential of local government reform](#)

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**Comparison to other proposed models**

In contrast, the 3U model risks diluting this connection. Larger geographies may struggle to reflect local economic dynamics, weakening the link between growth and reinvestment.

The 5U model, while more localised, may lack the scale to capture the full economic potential of key growth areas or to deliver the infrastructure required to support them.

Financial sustainability is not just about managing costs. It is about building the capacity to withstand future pressures, rising demand in adult social care, SEND, housing and homelessness and to invest in prevention and transformation. The four-unitary model provides the scale and coherence to deliver efficiencies, but also the flexibility to reinvest in local priorities. It enables councils to manage current pressures while preparing for the next wave of demand.

**What our residents have told us is important**

In the Thurrock survey, **97%** of respondents said it is important that a council is financially stable and when asked about priorities for the new councils, the top priority for respondents is 'value for money' followed closely by 'council finances'.

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## Criteria 3: High quality and sustainable public services

This section includes:

<b>Consolidating and improving service delivery</b>	<b>Criteria 3a</b>
<b>Delivering value for money through public service reform</b>	<b>Criteria 3b</b>
<b>Protecting crucial services</b>	<b>Criteria 3c</b>

## Consolidating and improving service delivery

**Criteria 3a.** Proposals should show how new structures will improve local government and service delivery, and should avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services

The model supports high-quality, place-based services by aligning structures with how people access support. It avoids unnecessary fragmentation by building on the existing capacity of the current top-tier authorities Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea, while ensuring that all newly created authorities are operationally viable. It equitably distributes resources aligned to an even distribution of demand. Residents will get consistent services wherever they live.

### Meeting the needs of the people and communities across Greater Essex

The four-unitary model reflects the needs of people across Greater Essex. It is built around the principle that local government should be able to respond flexibly to where need and demand for services is highest, particularly in adult social care, children's services, and public health.

The four-unitary model spreads demand across new authorities, avoiding over concentrations of deprivation and complex service demand on a single council. It balances areas of higher need with areas of relative strength, creating more sustainable units that can plan and deliver services effectively.

The model is designed not only to respond to areas of high deprivation, but also to tackle the less visible but equally important service delivery challenges in more affluent communities. In places like Brentwood, high housing costs and limited availability of affordable accommodation make it difficult to recruit and retain care staff, teachers, and other frontline workers. These pressures are often overlooked in traditional deprivation metrics but have a direct impact on service resilience.

By balancing areas of higher need with areas of relative strength, the four-unitary model creates units that are better equipped to manage both ends of the spectrum. It enables strategic workforce planning across a wider geography, supports targeted investment in housing and transport to improve access to jobs, and allows for more flexible commissioning of services. This approach ensures that councils can respond to the full range of local needs, whether that's tackling entrenched deprivation in Tendring or addressing workforce shortages in Brentwood.

The four-unitary model also supports councils to pool resources, share expertise, and plan for long-term prevention, rather than reacting to crisis. This is essential for managing pressures in Adult Social Care, Children's Services, and Public Health, and for ensuring that services remain viable across diverse communities.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model would concentrate the region's most significant areas of need (for example, by clustering Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea with Basildon and other high-pressure districts). Similarly, the smaller and less resilient 5U model, risks fragmenting capacity and leaving the smallest councils ill-equipped to absorb shocks or deliver complex services. The 4U structure deliberately avoids extreme concentrations.

The figure below shows scoring against wider determinants of health across Greater Essex. The areas in the green are performing better than their peers, with red areas being notably lower performers.

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Figure 4.13 – Wider determinants of health (homelessness, employment, average attainment, and violent crime)<sup>26</sup>



Average Rank	Wider determinants of health
Basildon	11.6
Braintree	7.4
Brentwood	3.2
Castle Point	8.2
Chelmsford	3.6
Colchester	7
Epping Forest	5.2
Harlow	12.2
Maldon	6.2
Rochford	4.6
Tendring	12.4
Uttlesford	3.6
Southend-on-Sea	8.8
Thurrock	11

The table below shows scoring against a range of public health metrics, including the same wider determinants of health metric shown in the previous figure. Lower scores are positive and show stronger performance against each metric.

The chart clearly shows a strong balance across the four-unitary areas, with the only outlier being North Essex which is an outlier in the positive direction. The worst performing four areas, Tendring, Harlow, Basildon, and Thurrock are well distributed into three separate unitary areas. Thurrock and Harlow are within the same unitary; however, Harlow is much smaller in size than any of the other low performing areas.

Figure 4.14 – Public health metrics across the four-unitary model

Metric	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
Wider determinants*	7.90	4.87	8.53	8.30

#### Comparison to other proposed models

In the 5U model, the Southwest region has a wider determinants of health score of 11.30 due to the pairing of Thurrock and Basildon, each with significant deprivation and inequality issues. The 3U model also scores poorly in the South region with 8.84 due to the grouping of Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, and Southend-on-Sea. These areas are only counteracted by the inclusion of Rochford who score strongly.

<sup>26</sup> [Life expectancy for local areas of Great Britain - Office for National Statistics](#)

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#### Four balanced unitaries with the ability to meet local needs

	Areas of relatively higher need	Areas of relatively lower need
<b>West Essex</b>	<b>Thurrock</b> has some of the highest levels of need in Greater Essex. It records below-average healthy life expectancy, elevated rates of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and significant levels of child poverty and digital exclusion. This is reflected in its higher scores for child health (7.63), inequalities (7.50), and wider determinants of health (7.90).	<b>Brentwood</b> scores well across most indicators, with a higher proportion of residents in good health, lower unemployment, and stronger educational outcomes.
<b>North Essex</b>	<b>Braintree</b> has a mixed socio-economic profile, with pockets of deprivation, lower educational attainment, and higher need in areas such as child health and wider determinants.	<b>Chelmsford</b> , one of the least deprived areas in Essex, contributes strong outcomes in health, education, and employment.
<b>East Essex</b>	<b>Tendring</b> has some of the highest deprivation levels in Essex, including the lowest male life expectancy and high rates of long-term illness. This is reflected in East Essex's high scores for behavioural risk (8.20) and inequalities (8.11).	<b>Colchester</b> which is growing rapidly, has stronger health outcomes and a more diversified economy.
<b>South Essex</b>	<b>Southend-on-Sea</b> faces challenges around health inequalities, housing need, and concentrated deprivation in urban wards.	<b>Rochford</b> has lower levels of deprivation, higher life expectancy, and a more stable housing market.

#### Balanced and equitable funding and expenditure

Grounded in the principle of financial resilience and fairness, the four-unitary model, provides more uniform distribution of tax base, business rates, GVA, and service delivery costs, supporting equitable access to resources and minimising the risk of fiscal disadvantages by any one authority.

The model's geographies ensure that expenditure on statutory and discretionary services can be planned on a fair and sustainable basis. Disaggregation of budgets and reallocation of grant funding becomes simpler, avoiding previous examples of poor reallocation of resources, such as in the Berkshire reorganisation, and the creation of Plymouth and Torbay Councils. Grant funding, such as Public Health funding, can more easily be allocated according to need.

Predicted spending on education has not been modelled in detail in this proposal. While DSG allocations are expected to shift in response to growing demand and cost pressures, the current DSG picture is too fluid to reflect accurately. This will need to be kept under review as the funding landscape evolves.

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Figure 4.15 – Total expenditure on Social Care

<b>Total Expenditure</b> <i>(based on 23/24 spending)<sup>27</sup></i>	<b>West Essex</b>	<b>North Essex</b>	<b>East Essex</b>	<b>South Essex</b>
<b>Education (£m)</b>	215,029	214,577	204,652	258,979
<b>Children's Social Care (£m)</b>	100,714	68,523	65,354	105,799
<b>Adult Social Care (£m)</b>	195,124	183,471	174,985	220,643

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model creates pronounced inequalities in size and resources, with one unitary (covering South Essex) exceeding 700,000 residents and carrying a disproportionate share of the region's debt and service demand. As a result, disaggregation of budgets and grant funding on the basis of need risks would create poor partners, and postcode lotteries for residents.

The 5U model would fragment the region into five smaller units (significantly under the Government's recommended 500,000 threshold), sacrifices economies of scale and exposes each authority to greater financial instability, risking higher ongoing costs and the need for significant government support to remain viable.

<sup>27</sup> [Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2023 to 2024 individual local authority data - outturn - GOV.UK](#)



## Delivering value for money through public service reform

**Criteria 3b.** Opportunities to deliver public service reform should be identified, including where they will lead to better value for money

By combining scale with local knowledge, the model enables meaningful public service reform across Greater Essex. By drawing on the strengths of existing service delivery arrangements across Greater Essex and aligning with partner agencies, a four-unitary model is best placed to unlock devolution potential, greater efficiency, higher service standards, and better value for money. It provides a balance of sufficient scale to invest in digital transformation and commissioning reform, with strong localism that supports the joined-up delivery of a step-change in prevention and early-intervention. This creates the right conditions for long-term improvement and better value for money.

### Removing duplication and levelling up performance

A central tenet of LGR is the removal of duplication across a fragmented system, but the four-unitary model does so with a purposeful focus on not "levelling down" to the lowest common denominator, instead driving all services upwards to the highest standards. The model enables:

- **Streamlined delivery:** Services previously split between county and district tiers (such as housing, social care, waste management, and public health) can be integrated, eliminating overlaps in management, procurement, and frontline provision.
- **Consistent standards and efficient deployment of resources:** The proposed model provides the ideal scale for benchmarking, sharing best practice and deployment of resources based on intelligence, ensuring that exceptional performance (e.g., in children's services or digital access) becomes the baseline everywhere, rather than the preserve of a few localities.
- **Greater purchasing power and economies of scale:** By levelling up authority size and enhancing opportunities for joint commissioning, all authorities will have the ability to commission and procure services on an optimum level. For example, some contracts in the smaller top-tier authorities and district councils do not attract suppliers due to the contract size. This will result in a better offering (e.g. in areas such as child mental health services (CAMHS)) as well as efficiencies from economies of scale.
- **Service improvement and unified customer experience:** Residents will enjoy streamlined, consistent access to services via single digital portals, AI-assisted support, and self-service options. Early findings from Thurrock's use of AI show measurable value and efficiency gains which can be replicated across the region.
- **Simplified processes:** The move to a unified CRM system and consolidated customer contact platforms reduces complexity, improves response times, and enables a single view of the customer – eliminating the need for agents to navigate multiple systems.
- **Equitable access:** Digital inclusion efforts – tailored to local contexts – will bridge gaps in broadband, confidence, and accessibility. Rural communities and those with low digital skills will benefit from targeted support and robust outreach.
- **Data-driven decision making:** Integrated digital platforms will allow councils to use real-time feedback and analytics, driving evidence-based improvements and more responsive service design.
- **Innovation and modernisation:** The four-unitary model supports investment in advanced technologies – AI for call handling, cloud-based systems, automated workflows – accelerating digital transformation and future-proofing services.
- **Enhanced staff capability:** Rationalised systems and targeted digital skills training empower staff to operate efficiently, focus on complex needs, and innovate in partnership with residents.

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### Comparison to other proposed models

Unlike the 5U model, which risks fragmentation and inconsistent performance due to reduced scale, or the 3U model, which may create overly large and impersonal authorities that dilute local responsiveness, the 4U model achieves a balanced configuration. It is large enough to leverage economies of scale while maintaining footprints that communities recognise and trust.

### Case Study: Somerset Council's Local Government Reorganisation and Financial Crisis

Somerset Council was created in April 2023 through the merger of Somerset County Council and four district councils, forming a single unitary authority. The reorganisation aimed to simplify governance and deliver long-term savings. However, the council inherited complex systems, rising service demands, and significant financial pressures. Delayed Transformation Programme. The council launched a transformation programme to modernise operations and achieve financial sustainability. Phase 1 involved workforce reductions, saving £34 million. However, Phase 2, focused on deeper structural reforms, was delayed due to operational complexity and lack of a unified framework.

Failure to deliver LGR-related savings and deal with rising demands for services. Despite the promise of savings from local government reorganisation (LGR), Somerset Council struggled to realise them or deal with rising demands, particularly in social care. By early 2025, the council faced a £52.2 million budget gap for the upcoming financial year, even after identifying £48 million in savings. The Medium-Term Financial Strategy projected a cumulative deficit of £190 million by 2029/30. Exceptional Financial Support and Council Tax Rise. To avoid issuing a Section 114 notice the council requested Exceptional Financial Support (EFS). The Government granted a Capitalisation Direction of £43 million, allowing Somerset to borrow or sell assets to fund day-to-day operations. Somerset Council was permitted to raise council tax by 7.49%, exceeding the usual 4.99% cap. This increase generated approximately £9.2 million in revenue, helping to reduce the budget gap. For residents in band D properties, this meant an annual increase of £129.43.

**Somerset's experience highlights the risks of delayed transformation and insufficient structural planning in single-unitary reorganisations. In contrast, the four-unitary model enables earlier transformation by building on existing upper-tier structures, reducing operational complexity and avoiding the disruption Somerset faced. It also allows for distributed financial risk and more targeted investment, helping to avoid the scale of financial crisis Somerset encountered.**

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### Prevention and early intervention delivered through stronger public sector partnerships

The four-unitary model is intended to deliver prevention and early intervention by fostering stronger, locality-focused partnerships with key strategic organisations across Essex and the wider region - such as the NHS, Police, Fire and Rescue, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), schools, and the voluntary sector.

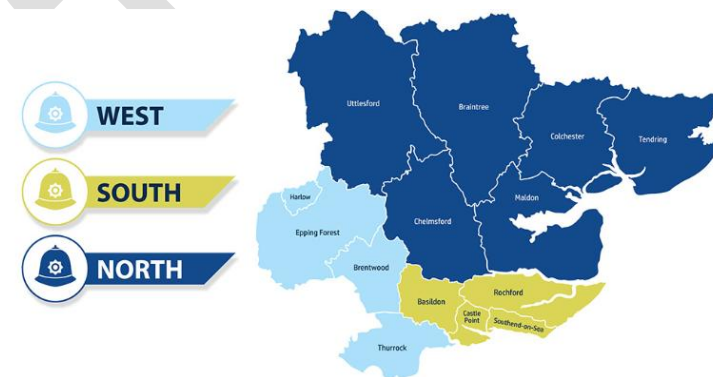
By reducing the current 15 councils to four strategic unitaries, the model aims to transform engagement, joint working, and the sharing of data and intelligence. Integrated collaboration across health, education, and social care will support more targeted interventions and help deliver national reforms, including the Government's 10 Year Health Plan and the Families First Partnership Programme.

#### Key benefits of the four-unitary model:

- Each unitary has the scale to lead place-based partnerships with the NHS, Police, schools, and voluntary sector, co-designing services around real-life communities and shared challenges.
- Direct alignment to the Policing boundaries enabling seamless collaboration.
- Four equal partners in the Greater Essex ICB facilitating simplified collaboration with health services.
- Supports joint commissioning and co-located neighbourhood teams (e.g. social care, public health, mental health), enabling wraparound care and holistic responses to complex needs.
- Enables strategic data sharing and intelligence, supporting targeted interventions in areas such as rough sleeping, school absenteeism and health inequalities.
- Enables delivery of the Domestic Abuse Strategy for Greater Essex, with four balanced unitaries aligned to policing boundaries able to strengthen partnership working and enhance data sharing to reduce offending.

- Strengthens market development for social care, housing and community support, with shared procurement capacity and consistent engagement with providers.
- Enhances the voice of authorities in cross-boundary partnerships, such as West Essex's increased influence with the Metropolitan Police on child protection and safeguarding.

Figure 4.16 – Policing boundaries<sup>28</sup>



#### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model's larger scale complicates partnership working, particularly at the neighbourhood level, and it may lose the granularity needed for effective place-based partnership. The 5U model lacks the scale and capacity to be a strategic partner for major regional initiatives and engage strategically across all partnership platforms. There are both shortcomings the 4U model overcomes.

<sup>28</sup> Policing in Essex | Essex Police

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**A solid platform for sustainable transformation**

The four-unitary model stands apart as the optimal route for public service reform across Greater Essex. It uniquely combines the advantages of scale, local connection, and operational coherence – removing duplication, levelling up services to the highest standards, and enabling modern, digitally enabled delivery. By aligning with public sector partners and embedding a culture of prevention and early intervention, it creates the right conditions for both immediate improvement and long-term transformation.

Building on the strong foundations already present within Greater Essex, the four-unitary model offers a stable, resilient, and opportunity-rich platform for

the future – delivering better value for money, harnessing the power of partnership, and placing the needs and aspirations of residents at the heart of change.

**What partners have told us is important**

Businesses and service partners value existing relationships and see opportunities to streamline services and reduce duplication. The four-unitary model simplifies engagement by consolidating multiple councils into a single point of contact, supporting strategic planning and service co-design.

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## Protecting crucial services

**Criteria 3c.** Consideration should be given to the impacts for crucial services such as social care, children’s services, SEND and homelessness, and for wider public services including for public safety

Ensuring the delivery of high-quality, sustainable services – particularly in areas such as adult social care, children’s services, SEND, homelessness, and wider public safety – stands at the heart of the proposed four-unitary model for Greater Essex. All four authorities face similar demographic pressures, including ageing populations and rising demand for specialist services. Homelessness rates are relatively balanced, supporting consistent and coordinated responses. Each authority can deliver services at a manageable scale, while maintaining the flexibility to tailor provision to local needs. The four-unitary model provides “service continuity through simplicity” offering a robust platform for safeguarding the most vital services while enabling transformation and innovation that makes services fit for future demand and pressures.

Social Care	✓	With four equal authorities that balance strategic scale with local insight and delivery, the 4U model creates a framework for partnership with health to enable effective integrated and preventative services.
Children’s Services	✓	The four-unitary model builds on the strengths of three top-tier authorities delivering high quality services to ensure a smooth transition, mitigating the risks that led to the failure of Children’s Services in past unitarisations.
SEND	✓	The 4U model proposes four financially stable authorities that offer the best answer to the debt challenge and rising DSG deficits.
Homelessness	✓	Geographies are planned to ensure balanced need, distribution of housing and infrastructure supporting joined-up place-shaping and regional coordination.
Public Safety	✓	Crime is falling in Greater Essex. The model aligns boundaries with the Police which will create opportunities to further enhance public safety.

Wider Public Services



The 4U model is best placed to tackle issues with recruitment and retention. Geographies aligned with travel patterns facilitate service delivery.

### Bigger is not always better

Evidence from local government across England demonstrates that larger unitary authorities do not reliably deliver better outcomes in critical services. The well-publicised problems of Birmingham City Council (the country’s largest local authority) demonstrate that. In fact, smaller or mid-sized unitaries consistently achieve “outstanding” ratings for services such as children’s social care and perform equally well on adult social care.<sup>29</sup> Excellence is often rooted in proximity to communities, local responsiveness, and the ability to tailor services to diverse needs, rather than in the pursuit of ever-larger authorities.

### Minimising risk of disruption to critical services

Failure of critical local government services are not only highly damaging and risk the safety of the most vulnerable residents, but they can also cause unintended financial costs across the system. Previous local government reorganisations have been noted to be the cause of disruption in crucial

<sup>29</sup> [DCN-Bigger-is-not-better-Report.pdf](#)

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services in the new unitaries formed from Cheshire County Council and at BCP Council:

- Difficulties in implementing shared finance and HR systems across multiple authorities. These crucial corporate systems enable services to forecast, monitor budgets, and manage staff. This proves to lead to spiralling costs through inefficient use of agency staff and poorly managed sickness.
- Complexity of merging multiple top tier authorities leading to lack of single client index system for social care and education services. Without a functioning single view of care clients there are enhanced safeguarding risks, problems in quality assurance, and inability to intervene early and prevent high cost, high complexity care placements.
- Equal pay problems. Difficulties in harmonising terms and conditions in overheated labour markets creates problems in recruiting and retaining staff, leading to a loss of skills and increased use of agency staff at increased cost.

By building on the existing, stable capacity of top tier authorities (Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea's unitary authorities and Essex County Council), the four-unitary model minimises disruptive change. It avoids some of the complexities of merging or disaggregating large existing structures, systems and processes, as would be required by the three-unitary model. Instead, it preserves continuity in the delivery of crucial services like adult social care, children's services, and SEND, ensuring uninterrupted support for the most vulnerable. At the same time, it prevents the dilution of expertise and operational resilience that would threaten the smallest units in a five-unitary structure.

### **Strong leadership and governance**

The four-unitary approach enables each authority to operate at a scale that supports strategic oversight and operational agility. With a manageable number of councillors each unitary can ensure strong leadership, focused Cabinet structures, and clear accountability. Skilled leadership teams in children's, adults and public health services within each of the top tier authorities would be retained. This supports rapid decision-making, effective

performance management, continuity of service leadership, and greater accessibility for residents and partners.

In contrast, the three-unitary model risks leadership being remote from local communities and disruption from the merging of two top-tier authorities. While the five-unitary model may struggle to attract and retain senior leadership, skilled Directors of Adults, Children's or Public Health Service are a rare commodity.

### **Fit for the Future: Reform and Resilience**

The four-unitary model is designed not only to protect the current quality of critical services, but to create a platform for ongoing transformation and improvement. It enables collaborative commissioning, place-based partnerships, and resource pooling – critical for innovations such as digital transformation, integrated health and care, and neighbourhood delivery. The model is future-ready, enabling authorities to adapt to demographic change, rising demand, and the evolving expectations of residents. It avoids the implementation risk, governance confusion, and capacity dilution that could hinder transformational change in both the larger and smaller models.

### **Comparison to other proposed models**

The 3U model creates a 'mega-unitary' in the south, bringing together services from three top-tier services. Experience elsewhere suggests this presents a high-risk to crucial services due to complex implementation, risking failures in Adult Social Care, Children's Services and SEND services that damage outcomes for vulnerable service users, as well as creating high costs. This could also lead to 'delivery deserts' in the north and centre of the county due to inequitable resources and challenges in recruitment and retention of staff.

A 5U model does not have the scale to integrate services and sufficiently address future demand pressures.



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## Impacts on Crucial Services

Figure 4.17 – Children's and Adults Social Care<sup>30</sup>

Metrics	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex
Total SEN support	9,019	7,161	7,503	10,387
Total EHCP support	3,452	2,398	2,145	3,696
Number of children in care	426	187	347	532
Number of children with a CP Plan	406	459	462	390
Number of children with CiN Plan	523	178	211	352
18 – 64 Accessing long-term care	1,625	1,582	2,105	2,133
65+ Accessing long-term care	3,109	2,565	2,881	3,759

The four-unitary model is grounded in service delivery data, providing a clear and balanced view of demand across the proposed authorities. Our approach has specifically used total numbers rather than rates per population, to ensure true visibility of overall demand pressure points, avoiding the masking effect that averages can create.

The distribution of demand across the proposed authorities is broadly even, with no single unitary disproportionately burdened across all metrics. For example, while South Essex shows higher demand in SEN and adult social care, West Essex has elevated levels in EHCPs and children in care, and East Essex leads in child protection plans. This balance supports a fairer allocation of resources and enables each authority to plan and deliver services at a manageable scale.

### Comparison to other proposed models

3U concentrates high-pressure districts such as Thurrock, Southend-on-Sea and Basildon into one authority, which could reduce responsiveness and increase long-term costs.

5U may struggle to sustain complex services or respond to demand shocks given concentrations of need such as in the Northeast region which has both the highest SEND support levels and adults 18-64 accessing long-term support.

The preferred four-unitary model deliberately avoids the pitfalls of over-centralisation seen in some 3U configurations and the fragmentation risks inherent in the 5U model.

<sup>30</sup> Data provided by ECC, Southend-on-Sea City Council, and Thurrock Council



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Area	Challenges for crucial services	Addressing needs through the proposed model
<b>Demand</b>	<p><b>Growing demand from changing demographics, health challenges and inequalities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As of 2023, the region's population is both growing and ageing, with three of the four proposed unitary areas having 20% or more of their residents over the age of 65, and East Essex reaching 23% – well above the national average.</li> <li>Locally, public health indicators reveal a disproportionate burden of chronic conditions – particularly cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and respiratory illnesses. At both a local and national level, demand for SEND services are increasing and facing unprecedented pressures.</li> <li>Concentrated deprivation in areas such as Thurrock, Tendring, Basildon, Southend, and Harlow, and high levels of homelessness in South Essex.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Balance of strategic scale with local insight and delivery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This model would be large enough to absorb cost shocks and enable strategic commissioning, while remain close enough to communities to maintain local insight and respond to community needs.</li> <li>These community-focused councils allow for preventative service models, closer engagement with local providers, and rapid responses to emerging needs.</li> <li>Residents will experience more consistent access to high-quality services, regardless of where they live, with each authority containing a major hospital and a broad range of education providers, ensuring local points of access and reducing out-of-area placements.</li> </ul>
<b>Integration</b>	<p><b>Fragmented delivery, complex systems and market failure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial constraints and market fragility, coupled with fragmented commissioning in care services. The misalignment and imbalance in purchasing power between Essex County Council and existing unitary authorities, hinder strategic planning and service delivery.</li> <li>The current structure struggles to respond flexibly to nuances, and without transformation, the sustainability and quality of services, particularly adult social care services in Essex are at risk.</li> <li>Slow decision-making, inconsistent planning between services (e.g. transport and housing), and the vulnerability to climate risks like flooding and heat stress. The duplication, inefficiencies and limited strategic coordination undermines coherent spatial strategies, slows infrastructure investment, and hinders the ability to respond collectively to economic shocks, social challenges, and environmental threats.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Integration of services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This model supports integrated services, e.g. health and social care, through stronger place-based partnerships and joint commissioning arrangements.</li> <li>It encourages collaboration and breaking down silos across housing, health, and care, allowing for tailored solutions which involve partners in health and voluntary sectors.</li> <li>Deprivation and challenges are balanced across the four councils which prevents overburdening any single authority and spreads risk more evenly.</li> <li>By aggregating resources, the model builds resilience to demand spikes.</li> <li>This model aligns with existing partner geographies, such as the police, and will create the right balance of challenges and scale to work with partners to tackle challenges. That can create the</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are inconsistencies in eligibility criteria, thresholds, and outcomes, in addition to disparity of academisation. This leads to the persistence of postcode lotteries in access to services, especially education, inclusion programmes, and SEND support.</li> <li>• A number of different organisations providing a variety of services across different footprints, including within councils such as trading standards and other regulatory services. This is especially true with regards to homelessness, which can be one of many area residents require support with, which is made harder by the fragmented system.</li> <li>• There are currently 14 waste collection authorities and 3 disposal authorities. This legacy structure results in duplication, inefficiency, inconsistent service standards, and strategic disconnection between planning and delivery.</li> </ul>	<p>opportunity for place-based neighbourhood teams and joint commissioning to strengthen collaboration across health, housing, and social care, improving outcomes and user experience. The configuration supports regional alignment with NHS, policing, and voluntary sector partners, essential for holistic support to vulnerable service users.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residents across all four authorities can expect consistently high-quality services, for example waste, recycling, and green services, designed to meet both local priorities and national mandates.</li> </ul>
<b>Prevention</b>	<p><b>Focus on core provision at the expense of prevention</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preventative spending has dropped sharply. The July 2025 Association of Directors of Adult Social Services' member survey showed only 5.6% is now spent on prevention, down from 8.4% in 2019-20. Nearly three quarters of directors doubt they can meet legal prevention and wellbeing duties.</li> <li>• Despite ECC, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea all having highly rated Children's services (Outstanding, Outstanding and Good, respectively), the wider environment for services represents the pressures seen nationally, driving an urgent need for transformational change.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sufficient scale bringing purchasing power, strong leadership and consistent practice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient scale improves commissioning flexibility and the ability to invest in early help, innovation and prevention.</li> <li>• Existing strengths of each of the three top-tier authorities are preserved and built upon, while avoiding the key risks in implementation experienced elsewhere. For example, this structure allows for consistent, high-quality social work practice, embedded local knowledge, while local teams develop targeted responses to the specific needs of their communities.</li> <li>• A more consistent use of local health data will enable preventative approaches and personalised care delivery, further enhancing service effectiveness.</li> </ul>

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<b>Workforce</b>	<b>Recruitment and retention</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workforce instability and challenges to recruit in both rural and affluent areas puts tremendous pressure on services, particularly in care.</li> <li>• Acute shortages of specialists, e.g. social carers and educational psychologists, results in services users experiencing delays in receiving the right level of care they need.</li> </ul>	<b>Workforce planning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic workforce planning, supported by partnerships with education providers and flexible employment contracts, will address recruitment challenges and support sustainable staffing.</li> <li>• Tailored workforce strategies on a wider scale increase recruitment and retention, particularly in rural and high-cost areas.</li> </ul>
<b>Transport</b>	<b>Transport pressures</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 5,000 miles of roads and 58 rail stations connect communities. Car dependency is high (84% of households own at least one vehicle) and public transport is unevenly distributed, leaving rural and coastal areas with “public transport deserts” and persistent congestion along strategic corridors such as the A12, A13, A120, and A127.</li> </ul>	<b>Coherent governance and coordination</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligning transport management to functional economic areas and travel-to-work patterns, each unitary authority gains the scale and coherence to plan, commission, and deliver transport services strategically opening up improvements in service provision.</li> <li>• It enables consistent standards in infrastructure, housing, and skills delivery, as well as more effective engagement with national government, investors, and regional partners.</li> </ul>

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### Continuity through simplicity is a guiding principle of the proposed model

By striking the optimal balance between scale and localism, this structure protects and strengthens the delivery of Greater Essex's most vital services, guards against disruption, and creates the conditions for long-term public service reform. In a landscape where "bigger is not always better"<sup>31</sup>, and where fragmentation breeds risk, the four-unitary model offers a stable, resilient, and future-ready platform for public service excellence.

Across all services, the case for change is clear. The current fragmented system cannot reliably meet the needs of Greater Essex's residents, respond to local pressures, or deliver efficiency, equity, and innovation. The proposed four-unitary model offers a strategic solution – balancing scale with local responsiveness, enabling integrated service delivery, unlocking investment, and laying the foundation for sustainable, high-performing public services throughout Greater Essex.

### Summary Benefits

- Local responsiveness and community engagement: Smaller, community-focused units enable tailored, preventative service models and closer engagement with local needs and voices.
- Strategic capacity and integration: Larger scale supports strategic commissioning, investment, and integration across health, social care, housing, and digital services.
- Consistency and equity: Elimination of postcode lotteries ensures all residents access consistently high-quality services, regardless of location.
- Operational efficiency and value for money: Streamlined governance, unified systems, and contract consolidation unlock economies of scale and reduce duplication.

- Resilience and risk management: Aggregating resources, infrastructure, and contract risk mitigates shocks, ensures legal compliance, and supports long-term sustainability.
- Workforce sustainability and development: More strategic workforce planning, education partnerships, and flexible staffing address recruitment and retention challenges.
- Innovation and digital transformation: Larger, coherent authorities can invest in advanced technologies, data-driven decision making, and modernised service delivery.

### What our residents have told us is important

In the Greater Essex research, **85%** said they would agree with LGR if it led to better services, and **42%** of respondents rated improved quality of public services as the main opportunity of LGR for the wider community. **65%** of respondents to the 5U research placed high quality services that work well as their top priority for their new council.

<sup>31</sup> [DCN-Bigger-is-not-better-Report.pdf](#)

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## Criteria 4: Working together to understand and meet local needs

This section includes:

**Engaging to better understand priorities and needs across Greater Essex**

**Criteria 4a and 4c**

**Four authorities grounded in local identity, culture, and history**

**Criteria 4b**

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## Engaging to better understand priorities and needs across Greater Essex

**Criteria 4a.** It is for councils to decide how best to engage locally in a meaningful and constructive way and this engagement activity should be evidenced in your proposal

**Criteria 4c.** Proposals should include evidence of local engagement, an explanation of the views that have been put forward and how concerns will be addressed

Councils across Greater Essex engaged widely with residents, partners and businesses including surveys, focus groups and consultation exercises. People want better services, financial stability and a stronger local voice. The four-unitary model is designed to deliver on these priorities by balancing scale with proximity to communities.

### Co-ordinated engagement across Greater Essex

Councils across Greater Essex undertook coordinated engagement to understand the priorities, concerns and expectations of residents, businesses and partners. This included Essex-wide research, local engagement activity, and targeted consultation with stakeholders. Over **10,000** responses were received across multiple strands of engagement.

A county-wide survey of **1,477** residents was jointly commissioned across Greater Essex, alongside focus groups and a partner survey. The councils backing the five-unitary model also ran their own survey of **7,391** residents across Essex, more than half of whom were from Basildon, Southend and Chelmsford.

Thurrock Council also ran its own engagement programme, including resident surveys, public meetings and drop-in sessions at local events and libraries. Almost all the respondents were from Thurrock. Businesses and service partners across Essex were invited to share views on current performance and future priorities.

### Key themes from the research

#### 1) Resilient and efficient finances

The most dominant and consistent theme across all the research was the importance of ensuring council finances are resilient and offer value for money.

- In the Greater Essex research, more than half of respondents (**52%**) said that ensuring public funds are spent efficiently and prioritised was their top priority for LGR.
- When asked to place different aspects of new councils in order of importance, **99.3%** of respondents to the 5U survey said efficient use of council tax and public funds was most important.
- In the Thurrock survey, **97%** of respondents said it is important that a council is financially stable, and when asked about priorities for the new councils, the top priority for respondents is 'value for money' followed closely by 'council finances'.

*See Section 4: Criteria 2 for further detail on the four-unitary model supports resilient and efficient finances.*

#### 2) Local identity matters

In all the surveys, the majority of respondents (**86%** in Thurrock, **74%** across Greater Essex, **63%** in the 5U survey) said they identified most strongly with their local village, town or city, rather than their borough or county. In the 5U survey, **64%** said maintaining local identity, cultural, and historic importance was a priority for council services.

In the Thurrock survey, residents were asked where they travelled to most often to work or socialise. **52%** said London, **35%** said Basildon, **33%** said Southend and **29%** said Brentwood. The issue of proximity to London was raised many times throughout the engagement, with residents making it clear they enjoy

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living near London but do not want to become part of it, as they feel their identity is distinct living in Essex.

*See Section 4: Criteria 1 for further detail on the four-unitary model defines functional and coherent geographies and later in this section for further detail on how the four-unitary model maintains local identity.*

### 3) Service quality is top priority for LGR

Residents think that delivering high quality services should be the top priority for new councils created through LGR. **65%** of respondents to the 5U research placed high quality services that work well as their top priority for their new council. In the Greater Essex research, **85%** said they would agree with LGR if it led to better services, and **42%** of respondents rated improved quality of public services as the main opportunity of LGR for the wider community. In the Thurrock research, ambitions for improved services were voiced by many respondents, from hopes for more investment in local community services, through to a desire to see improvements in areas like public transport.

*See Section 4: Criteria 3 for further detail on the four-unitary model supports high quality and sustainable service delivery.*

### Other relevant findings

**Limited willingness to pay more:** Only **44%** of Greater Essex respondents said they would support service improvements through slightly higher council tax. In the Greater Essex and Thurrock qualitative engagement, concerns about increased council tax as a result of LGR were raised regularly by residents.

These findings highlight the importance of efficiencies and economies of scale in LGR plans.

**Concern about loss of local services:** In the Greater Essex research, services not being delivered at a local level was seen as the greatest risk, raised by **38%** of respondents. Similarly, of those not supportive of the 5U proposals, the most frequently expressed concern was about less local representation. Thurrock residents also raised this issue, questioning whether they would still have a say in decisions made by larger councils.

**The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is a key partner for LGR:** Regular meetings with Thurrock CVS, and wider learning from representative groups across Greater Essex, indicate the sector has concerns about the risk of larger councils losing touch with communities. However, they have helpfully set out the conditions in which they feel we can succeed together, and we have used this insight to inform our proposals. They have asked that all LGR proposals:

- Commit to community-level governance structures across all areas
- Ensure these bodies have clear remits, resources, and real influence
- Reflect natural communities and neighbourhoods, including cultural and thematic identities, not just administrative borders
- Actively connect with parish/town councils, community networks, and trusted local individuals, groups and voluntary organisations

While new operating models will be decided by the new councils, the four-unitary model will 'bake in' local decision-making and partnership working as a key to the success of the new councils, and we have been clear that the VCS will have an important role to play going forwards.



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## Four authorities grounded in local identity, culture, and history

**Criteria 4b.** Proposals should consider issues of local identity and cultural and historic importance

Each new council reflects and respects the distinct local identities across the area, ensuring that each unitary authority is rooted in coherent and recognisable communities. It builds on established partnerships and avoids arbitrary boundaries, supporting geographies that make sense both culturally and operationally. This strengthens civic pride and makes governance more meaningful.

### Maintaining local identity across Greater Essex

Greater Essex is a large and diverse region with a rich history, strong civic traditions and distinct local identities. From coastal towns and rural villages to historic market centres and modern urban hubs, the geography and culture of Essex have shaped how communities live, work (see travel to work map below) and relate to their local institutions.

We know from engagement with our residents that they associate their identity with their local town and not their local authority. They do not live their lives according to administrative boundaries. Their daily experience is shaped by functional geographies - commuting patterns, access to hospitals, schools, and community services - that often extend beyond council borders. The lived reality is that every road, bus route, and service network crosses boundaries. New authorities must recognise this and work together to create coherent, strategic plans that reflect how people move and access services. This includes transport, health, and preventative care, which are most effective when delivered through local, community-based interventions. The geography must support both strategic coordination and planning across council boundaries, as well as local responsiveness.

The four-unitary model reflects the diversity of the place. It avoids arbitrary boundaries driven by administrative considerations and instead builds on established relationships between places, services and communities. Each

unitary has been designed to support the integrity of towns and align them to coherent and recognisable geographies, supporting effective governance and strengthening civic pride.

We have avoided clusters which span long and unwieldy distances from one end of the county to the other. Instead, there is a natural separation between the four clusters, shaped by transport corridors, settlement patterns and cultural heritage. These divisions reflect how people identify with their local area and how services are accessed.

### Travel to work patterns across Greater Essex

Figure 4.18 below highlights the number of workers within areas across Greater Essex and the number of commuters moving to and from those areas. This shows clear alignment in travel patterns across the region, aligned most coherently with the four-unitary model. A summary of travel to work alignment with each new unitary council is set out in the table below. Detailed figures are within Appendix 1: Key data sets.

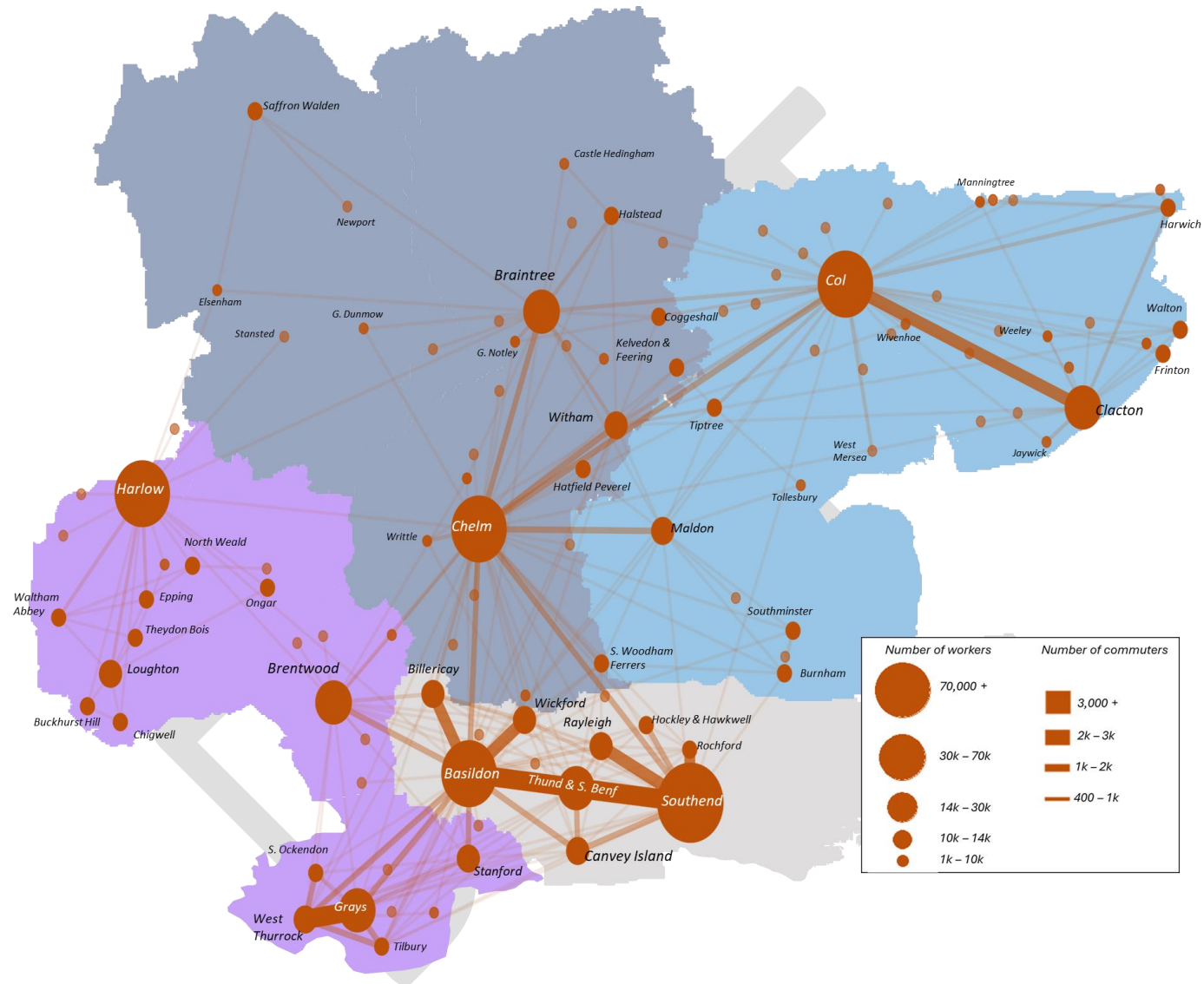
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<b>West Essex</b>	Brentwood Epping Forest Harlow Thurrock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• West Essex borders London and has significant outbound commuting beyond Greater Essex into London.</li> <li>• Thurrock is largely self-contained, with around 25,000 residents living and working locally.</li> <li>• A key commuter route exists between West Thurrock and Grays.</li> <li>• Harlow and Epping Forest have strong mutual commuter links, with each being the other's top destination for work outside their area of residence.</li> </ul>
<b>North Essex</b>	Braintree Chelmsford Uttlesford	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chelmsford is the county's main transport hub, with the busiest train station and strong links across North Essex, including into Braintree.</li> <li>• Chelmsford will be key to improve rural connectivity and better integrate Uttlesford.</li> <li>• Most Braintree residents work locally, but there are notable commuting patterns to Uttlesford and Chelmsford.</li> </ul>
<b>East Essex</b>	Colchester Maldon Tendring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colchester and Tendring share one of Essex's strongest commuting relationships, with approximately 10,000 people travelling between the two.</li> <li>• The Clacton–Colchester route is a recognised key corridor.</li> <li>• Maldon remains largely self-contained in terms of work travel.</li> </ul>
<b>South Essex</b>	Basildon Castle Point Rochford Southend-on-Sea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South Essex is highly interconnected, particularly between Basildon and Southend-on-Sea and Castle Point and Southend-on-Sea.</li> <li>• Basildon is the most common work destination (outside of residence) for Brentwood, Castle Point, Chelmsford and Thurrock, and is the highest across Greater Essex which is expected given its strong economic performance and job prospects.</li> <li>• Rochford sees more residents working in Southend-on-Sea than locally, with additional commuting to Basildon, Castle Point and Chelmsford.</li> </ul>

#### What our residents have told us is important

In the Thurrock survey, residents were asked where they travelled to most often to work or socialise. **52%** said London, **35%** said Basildon, **33%** said Southend and **29%** said Brentwood. The issue of proximity to London was raised many times throughout the engagement, with residents making it clear they enjoy living near London but do not want to become part of it, as they feel their identity is distinct living in Essex.

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Figure 4.18 – Travel to work patterns across Greater Essex<sup>32</sup><sup>32</sup> Census 2021

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#### Four new unitaries built on distinct and meaningful local identity

<b>West Essex</b>	Brentwood Epping Forest Harlow Thurrock	<p>Connected by its proximity to London with a shared outlook to the leisure, work and economic opportunities that it brings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurrock's port economy and industrial heritage anchor the area.</li> <li>• Connected historically via the A128.</li> <li>• Brentwood's cultural assets include Ingatestone Hall and Brentwood Cathedral.</li> <li>• Harlow has a strong civic identity as a post-war new town with a defined urban centre.</li> <li>• Natural boundaries and recreation in Epping Forest and Lee Valley.</li> </ul>
<b>North Essex</b>	Braintree Chelmsford Uttlesford	<p>Connected by their outer proximity to London but also by their outlook to Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire, with picturesque villages around economic and leisure hubs of the City of Chelmsford</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chelmsford, Braintree and Uttlesford combine rural character with historic depth.</li> <li>• Chelmsford is the county town and a public service hub.</li> <li>• Braintree's heritage includes Cressing Temple Barns and Hedingham Castle.</li> <li>• Uttlesford's market towns and countryside support local distinctiveness.</li> </ul>
<b>East Essex</b>	Colchester Maldon Tendring	<p>Connected by a shared coastline and nature reserves, with coastal towns and international assets of importance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colchester, Tendring and Maldon form a coastal and cultural region.</li> <li>• Colchester is Britain's first recorded city with Roman heritage and home to the infamous Boudicca.</li> <li>• Tendring includes seaside towns like Clacton and Harwich with strong identities and regeneration needs.</li> <li>• Maldon's maritime heritage and global brand reinforce its distinctiveness.</li> </ul>
<b>South Essex</b>	Basildon Castle Point Rochford Southend-on-Sea	<p>Hugged by the Rivers Crouch and Thames with strong internal work travel patterns, its residents frequently travel to Southend-on-Sea City's seaside and theatres</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Densely populated and economically varied area.</li> <li>• Southend-on-Sea is a city with strong civic and coastal identity.</li> <li>• Basildon's post-war urban culture is supported by venues like Towngate Theatre.</li> <li>• Castle Point includes Canvey Island and Hadleigh, with active community programmes.</li> <li>• Rochford contributes market towns and green spaces.</li> </ul>

#### What our residents have told us is important

In all the surveys, the majority of respondents (**86%** in Thurrock, **74%** across Greater Essex, **63%** in the 5U survey) said they identified most strongly with their local village, town or city, rather than their borough or county. In the 5U survey, **64%** said maintaining local identity, cultural, and historic importance was a priority for council services.

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## Criteria 5: Supporting devolution arrangements

This section includes:

**Unlocking the devolution vision in Greater Essex**

**Criteria 5a**

**Equal representation from all four corners of Greater Essex**

**Criteria 5c**

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## Unlocking the devolution vision in Greater Essex

**Criteria 5a.** Proposals will need to consider and set out for areas where there is already a Combined Authority (CA) or a Combined County Authority (CCA) established or a decision has been taken by government to work with the area to establish one, how that institution and its governance arrangements will need to change to continue to function effectively; and set out clearly (where applicable) whether this proposal is supported by the CA/CCA /Mayor

The model aligns with the new Greater Essex Combined County Authority (GECCA). Each council will be an equal partner, helping to deliver shared priorities. This supports joined-up working, from infrastructure and inclusive economic growth to public service reform and community wellbeing, and unlocks the benefits of devolution.

### The functions of GECCA

Greater Essex has been selected as part of the Government's Devolution Priority Programme and is progressing towards the establishment of a Combined County Authority (CCA), with a target to hold mayoral elections in May 2026. GECCA will operate across the four proposed unitary authorities, taking on functions and powers devolved from Government that require a strategic, regional approach. Functions of GECCA will include:

- Providing strategic leadership and representing Greater Essex nationally
- Convening partners to drive public service reform and regional collaboration
- Managing funding for skills, transport, infrastructure and growth
- Developing shared strategies and using data to guide investment
- Ensuring accountability for delivery and outcomes

While GECCA will lead on strategy, funding and regional coordination, the four-unitary authorities will be equal partners on its board. They will focus on local delivery, ensuring that programmes reflect community priorities and are implemented effectively on the ground.

### Progress towards devolution

Since joining the Government's Devolution Priority Programme in February 2025, Greater Essex has established a cross-authority programme team and developed a delivery plan with a critical path and PMO oversight. The guiding principles of the programme include:

- Set GECCA up for success.
- Ensure it is safe, legal and ready to deliver statutory functions.
- Prepare for growth without constraining the future mayor.
- Focus on strategy and commissioning, not direct delivery.
- Align plans with available budget.

Four workstreams are underway including:

- 1 **Finance** – managing pre-setup costs, establishing year 1 budget, and ensuring financial governance.
- 2 **Legal and Governance** – preparing for mayoral elections, drafting the constitution, and setting up assurance and scrutiny frameworks.
- 3 **Establishing the Authority** – designing the operating model, digital and staffing requirements, and preparing a day 1 plan.
- 4 **Policy and Functions** – defining GECCA's functions, building capability, preparing strategies and an evidence base, and developing a project pipeline.

The existing constituent authorities are committed to launching a strategic, capable organisation from day 1, ready to deliver and grow under mayoral leadership.

### How the four-unitary model supports devolution

Devolution is a transformative opportunity to unlock potential, drive growth and create a place where people want to live, work and to visit. Our area is dynamic, thriving, entrepreneurial and creative and our ambition is to create a



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growing economy that improves local living standards and to enable public service reform to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and viability of public services. Devolution is the mechanism to unlock this potential by giving local leaders the powers, resources and policy levers to drive change at pace and scale.

The four-unitary model aligns to, and supports the delivery of, the government's Industrial Strategy. The new unitaries will have a good balance of the highest-potential sectors identified in the strategy, including advanced manufacturing, creative industrials, life sciences and digital technologies; as well as each having a significant gateway to trade through either and air or sea port.

Devolution, coupled with strong unitary local government, will unlock the strong growth potential at Thames Enterprise Park, Freeport East and Harlow Innovation Park, as well as across all areas of opportunity as outlined in further detail in Criteria 1 and Appendix 3.

Working with the mayor and GECCA, the four authorities will be better equipped to tackle the barriers to growth (such as planning and skills) and be a strong partner to government departments and the Office for Investment to make it easier for businesses to get the certainty they require to invest in Greater Essex.

The four-unitary model is designed to complement and strengthen devolution arrangements through:

1. **Alignment with GECCA:** Each of the four unitary authorities will act as a relatively equal constituent member of GECCA, supporting strategic coordination across seven competencies outlined in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill.
2. **Enabling delivery of devolved functions:** The model supports the delivery of devolved powers across:
  - a. Skills and employment (including control of the Adult Skills Fund)
  - b. Transport and local infrastructure (including establishing a combined authority level Local Transport Authority, bus franchising, key route networks and rail partnerships)

- c. Housing and strategic planning (including brownfield development, affordable housing)
- d. Economic development and regeneration (including inward investment and business support)
- e. Health and wellbeing and public service reform
- f. Public Safety (including integration of PFCC functions)
- g. Environment and net zero

3. **Supporting integrated governance and public service reform:** The model complements the coterminous footprint of Essex Police and Fire services and supports integration with ICSs. It enables joined-up planning across health, housing, education and transport, and supports a public health approach to community safety and wellbeing.
4. **A platform for long-term investment and accountability:** The four-unitary model provides the foundation for a strategic authority capable of managing a long-term investment fund, coordinating infrastructure delivery and driving inclusive growth. It supports transparent, accountable governance and meets the Government's four tests for devolution: effective leadership, appropriate geography, flexibility and accountability.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model creates large authorities with wide geographies, making it harder to advocate for place-based projects and risking uneven delivery, for example, a council responsible for a project based around Stansted will also be responsible for delivery in Harwich which is c.70 miles away.

The 5U model fragments scale and resilience, with smaller authorities potentially unable to take on delivery risk or attract investment given their weaker financial position.

In contrast, the 4U model creates four balanced, capable partners with sufficient scale to deliver projects, financial stability to manage risk, and geographic focus to support local priorities. Four authorities will make it easier to agree voting arrangements and ensures effective delivery of devolved functions across Greater Essex.



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## Equal representation from all four corners of Greater Essex

*This section describes how the four-unitary model for Greater Essex meets Government Criteria:*

**Criteria 5c.** Proposals should ensure there are sensible population size ratios between local authorities and any strategic authority, with timelines that work for both priorities

Four equal councils mean fair representation across the region. An even number of local authorities means the mayor could have a tie-break vote if necessary, helping to avoid deadlock and strengthen their position as a strong democratically elected leader for the whole of Greater Essex. Four balanced councils can build on existing district strengths to deliver locally while supported by the strategic scale of the combined authority to deliver major programmes across the region. This creates a balanced and effective governance structure.

### Strengthened local delivery through balanced representation

The four-unitary model provides a balanced and effective governance structure that supports both local delivery and strategic leadership. The model ensures a sensible and balanced population distribution across Greater Essex, with each authority serving between approximately 418,000 and 550,000 residents.

Each of the four new unitary authorities will have equal representation on GECCA, with one vote per council and a fifth vote held by the mayor. This structure supports majority voting, where at least two authorities and the mayor must be in agreement for decisions to proceed. This helps avoid deadlock and strengthens the position of the directly elected mayor while still requiring collaboration and consensus across the geography.

This model is aligned with the legislative direction set out in the English Devolution White Paper, which confirms that mayors must be in the majority for decisions to be valid.

The model also supports the mayor's ability to drive strategic functions such as housing, transport, skills and growth, while enabling each unitary to focus on local delivery. It creates a firm foundation for regional collaboration and ensures that each corner of Greater Essex has a voice in shaping the future.

This is particularly important for cross-boundary issues such as infrastructure planning, relationships with neighbouring mayors, and engagement with London. The four-unitary model provides the clarity, balance and functionality needed to unlock devolution and deliver for residents across the region.

### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model risks over-concentration of population and voting power in a single authority. It consolidates the existing capability of the current constituent authorities, but this centralisation may undermine balanced representation and equity across Greater Essex.

The 5U model introduces complexity and imbalance by diluting the capacity of existing authorities and makes majority voting more difficult to achieve, potentially hindering effective decision-making and the drive for growth.

The 4U model provides a stable and balanced platform for strategic decision-making. It avoids the risks of over-concentration and dilution by creating new councils supported by an existing authority and distributing the county's capability across the remaining two. This configuration ensures equal weight is given to each part of Greater Essex and is the only model that delivers this balance effectively.

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## Criteria 6: Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment

This section includes:

<b>Strong community engagement across Greater Essex</b>	<b>Criteria 6a</b>
<b>Building on best practice community engagement</b>	<b>Criteria 6b</b>

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## Strong community engagement across Greater Essex

**Criteria 6a.** Proposals will need to explain plans to make sure that communities are engaged

Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs) give residents a direct voice in local decisions. They put people and place at the heart of the new system by giving residents a direct voice in local decisions. The four-unitary model is a balanced, practical, and scalable foundation for community engagement, and avoids the risks of larger, more distant councils in overuse of NACs to bridge the democratic deficit.

### Effectively empowering our neighbourhoods

We are aware of the Government's outline plans to legislate to establish a duty on councils to create effective neighbourhood governance. The former Minister had stated a preference for Neighbourhood Area Committees (NACs), which:

- are made up of 'front-line' ward councillors.
- are often empowered to establish local priorities and plans.
- have delegated powers to allocate funding for neighbourhood budgets.
- can bring together the council and partners to engage directly with communities in their local area.

The above aligns with the emerging neighbourhood model trialled by Thurrock Council, offering clear and transparent governance whilst allowing room for local solutions to local issues. *See response to Criteria 6b in the next section for more detail on this case study.*

This approach directly responds to the wider challenge of declining public trust in institutions, as set out in the 'Creating places that deliver the promise and potential of local government reform' report<sup>33</sup> and community engagement (see Section 6: Criteria 4a). The report highlights that local government reorganisation must be used to rebuild legitimacy and confidence in the local state. NACs provide a visible and accountable mechanism for residents to shape decisions and hold services to account. This would help avoid the risk of patchy or tokenistic engagement and ensure that all communities benefit from a clear and accountable system of local area working.

### How the four-unitary model will enable strong community engagement

The four-unitary model provides a practical and scalable foundation for meaningful community engagement across Greater Essex. While the model allows for both strategic and localised decision making without the need to compromise on either, neighbourhood governance such as NACs are a valuable part of maintaining the local connections to communities.

The four-unitary model is not dependent on the boundaries or presence of parishes. It is a flexible, minimum viable approach that can be tailored to local context and scaled over time. It avoids creating new layers of governance and instead focuses on strengthening what already works, particularly where there are existing parish and town councils to connect with. By embedding NACs, alongside existing arrangements, into the unitary operating model from the outset, the four-unitary model meets the government's expectations while reflecting local context and learning from experience.

<sup>33</sup> [ICC / DCN - Creating places that deliver the promise and potential of local government reform](#)

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### Comparison to other proposed models

The 3U model risks creating councils that are too expansive to effectively connect with communities, potentially becoming overly reliant on Neighbourhood Area Committees to address this democratic shortfall. Overuse of NACs to bridge the democratic deficit could inadvertently re-establish complex district-level structures, demanding substantial officer and member resources to function effectively.

The 5U model brings the risk of excessive fragmentation, which could complicate the coordination of engagement across broader public sector systems.

### Design principles for Neighbourhood Area Committees

The below principles, built on past experience and planning conversations to date, reflect current thinking on how NACs can be effectively implemented in Greater Essex. Ultimately, decisions about how the model will be implemented will be taken locally and informed by the councillors who represent and understand the local area.

1. **Ward councillor-led:** NACs are led by ward councillors, providing a formal role for 'frontline' members and ensuring democratic accountability at the neighbourhood level.
2. **Embedded in the unitary operating Model:** NACs are structurally integrated into an authority's governance and service delivery arrangements.
3. **Geographically flexible and locally defined:** NAC boundaries reflect local identity, functional geographies and existing community footprints based on wards. They would not follow a uniform template across the county and would be encouraged to explore a range of engagement mechanisms to allow diverse communities to take part.

4. **No new governance layers:** NACs do not create additional tiers of government. Where parish or town councils exist, NACs complement rather than duplicate their role. No new parishes will be created.
5. **Minimum viable structure:** NACs are designed to deliver meaningful engagement without unnecessary bureaucracy. They will have clear terms of reference, defined roles and proportionate officer support.
6. **Resourced and supported:** How NACs are integrated into the operating model of councils can ensure they have access to dedicated officer capacity (e.g. area coordinators) so they are effective, sustainable and able to influence local delivery.
7. **Business and economic engagement:** NACs provide a platform for engaging local businesses and supporting town centre partnerships, particularly in market towns and high streets.
8. **Outcome-focused and influential:** NACs have a defined role in shaping local priorities, influencing service delivery and monitoring outcomes. They are not symbolic or tokenistic.
9. **Aligned with existing structures:** NACs will actively connect with, not replicate, existing forums, partnerships, community networks and voluntary organisations. They build on what already works and avoid duplication.

### What our residents have told us is important

In the Thurrock survey, residents were asked where they travelled to most often to work or socialise. **52%** said London, **35%** said Basildon, **33%** said Southend and **29%** said Brentwood. The issue of proximity to London was raised many times throughout the engagement, with residents making it clear they enjoy living near London but do not want to become part of it, as they feel their identity is distinct living in Essex.

## Building on best practice community engagement

**Criteria 6b.** Where there are already arrangements in place it should be explained how these will enable strong community engagement

The four-unitary model builds on existing community engagement structures which can be scaled to support strong local involvement in all four councils. This ensures residents remain at the heart of decision making and services reflect local needs.

Resident engagement tells us that our communities value and want services based on need and where councils listen to local voices (see Criteria 4a). Many councils are already on a journey towards better community involvement in local decisions and neighbourhood-level service delivery. The desire to channel community power into place-shaping and sharing responsibility for designing and delivering the right services in the right way is strong in Greater Essex and there are many good examples of councils listening properly to local people and being more effective and efficient as a result.

The neighbourhood model, once further collaboratively developed, will give Greater Essex a strong blueprint for local involvement, empowerment and co-production. LGR must strengthen rather than dilute the influence and involvement of local people – something residents raise as really important to them.

### Case Study: Communities in Action – Chadwell St Mary

The Communities in Action pilot tested a new approach to place-based engagement, co-producing a Community Plan with residents through targeted outreach, events and surveys. Over 120 residents contributed, alongside local councillors, businesses and community groups.

The pilot made use of existing community infrastructure, including the library, family hub, community church and local voluntary organisations. These assets played a central role in engagement and delivery, showing how NACs in Greater Essex could be rooted in local neighbourhoods.

Key outcomes included:

- Six clear local priorities identified: green spaces and environment, public transport and road safety, health and wellbeing, community safety, activities for young people and community events, and better engagement and communication.
- A published Community Plan sets out actions already underway, including new play equipment, community clean-ups and expanded health and wellbeing initiatives.
- A new community led steering group is being established to oversee delivery and maintain momentum – ‘Chadwell in Action’.

The pilot highlighted challenges that NACs would need to address, including low baseline trust in councils, consultation fatigue and a lack of clear local information. However, it showed that with the right support and coordination, residents are willing to engage and lead change, and that engagement can build stronger connections across different communities, building cohesion.

**This pilot evidences that in some areas the foundations for NAC-style neighbourhood working are in place. It shows how a structured, ward-level approach, supported by local councillors and community partners, can deliver meaningful engagement and local accountability across Greater Essex.**

### **Case Study: Essex Caring Communities Commission – Community Engagement for Prevention**

The Essex Caring Communities Commission was established in 2024 to explore how community capacity can be harnessed to reduce demand on health and care services. Its work provides a clear example of how community engagement can underpin a shift to prevention.

The Commission found that many of the drivers of poor health and wellbeing - such as isolation, poor housing, and lack of access to services - can be addressed more effectively through local, community-led action. It highlighted the importance of civil society, carers and community infrastructure in supporting early intervention and reducing reliance on acute services.

Key findings included:

- Essex has some of the highest levels of community need in England, with six of the ten highest-need wards nationally.
- Community-led initiatives such as community supermarkets, triaging hubs and local safety funds are already delivering preventative outcomes.
- The voluntary sector in Essex is underfunded by an estimated £2 billion compared to national averages, limiting its potential impact.

The Commission proposed a series of actions to strengthen community engagement and prevention, including:

- Establishing a Greater Essex Office of Prevention to coordinate system-wide preventative work.
- Creating a residents assembly to embed community voice in decision-making.
- Launching a Volunteering Olympics and a civil society leadership programme to build capacity.
- Developing a network of multi-agency triaging hubs to bring services closer to residents.

**This case study shows how Greater Essex is already building the foundations for neighbourhood-level engagement that supports prevention. It provides a model for how new unitary authorities can embed community voice and capacity into their operating models from day one.**

### **The four-unitary model is best placed to deliver effective community engagement**

All models can work towards creating the right infrastructure to support NACs, with opportunities to make use of existing community resources. The use of existing infrastructure will provide a more 'local' feeling, as this was flagged by residents across Essex as being important to them when engaging with their councils.

The existing neighbourhood and community engagement systems will support strong community engagement, as they have the pre-existing relationships with the citizens of the area and will be able to share lessons learned. The learnings that will be provided by the existing systems will support the development of future initiatives across Greater Essex.

However, the four-unitary model is most suited to deliver best practice community engagement due to its cohesive geographical structure and balanced population. This will reduce the strain on any one unitary authority to run significantly more NACs. The four-unitary model having a relatively smaller population size in each boundary line compared to larger proposed models, will allow for operation at scale while being close enough to deliver locally.

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## Section 5: Financial case for change

This section includes:

**Financial context**

**The financial position of new councils**

**Approach to LGR financial modelling**

**Financial modelling summary results**

**Reorganisation savings**

**Disaggregation costs**

**Implementation costs**

**Phasing and payback period**



## Financial context

Councils across Essex are under pressure from rising costs and demand, and Thurrock's debt adds further strain. Reorganisation is a chance to reset and build a more sustainable system for all.

### National Financial context

The local government sector faces a major financial challenge with an estimated £4 billion funding gap over the next two years. Demand for critical services, is increasing because of population growth and ageing populations. Local authorities are also facing rising costs, with adult social care costs estimated to have increased by 9% and children's social care costs by 18% in real terms over the past five years.

### The Greater Essex financial context

Combined net revenue expenditure across the 15 councils of Greater Essex is £1,552 million<sup>34</sup> with 65% in Essex County Council, 11% within Thurrock and 10% in Southend-on-Sea, the authorities delivering complex statutory people services.

Across Greater Essex, councils are facing sustained financial pressures. Rising demand in adult social care, children's services and SEND, alongside inflationary cost pressures and legacy debt, are placing significant strain on budgets. The current two-tier system contributes to inefficiencies through duplication in democratic arrangements and overlaps in service delivery.

Total external debt across Greater Essex stands at £4.1 billion<sup>35</sup>, with Thurrock accounting for £1.1 billion of this. While Thurrock's financial challenges are well documented, it is important to note that its debt represents only 27% of the total across the region.

Across the Greater Essex area, non-earmarked reserves total approximately £158 million<sup>36</sup>. These reserves are unevenly distributed across the 15 councils, reflecting differences in financial strategy, risk appetite and historic budget

management. While some authorities maintain relatively strong reserve positions, others have limited flexibility to respond to emerging pressures. In the context of rising demand and constrained funding, the ability to draw on reserves to manage volatility is becoming increasingly important. However, reserves are a finite resource and cannot be relied upon to address structural financial challenges.

Medium Term Financial Plans (MTFPs) across Greater Essex reflect the scale of the challenge. Budget gaps are forecast to widen over the coming years, with limited flexibility to absorb shocks or invest in transformation. MTFPs incorporate assumptions around inflation, demand growth and council tax, but vary significantly between authorities. These plans will need to be revisited as reorganisation progresses to reflect transitional costs and opportunities for efficiency and transformation.

Financial modelling has been based on a simplified set of assumptions and do not reflect the potential impact of the Fair Funding Review, which is expected to significantly affect council finances. While considered, the complexity and uncertainty of the review mean it has not been modelled in detail. It does not alter the overall narrative or strategic case for reorganisation and will continue to be kept under review.

Similarly, the model does not include detailed consideration of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) pressures. Predicted spending on education is expected to rise, and the DSG funding picture is evolving. This may have implications for future financial planning but is too fluid and complex to reflect meaningfully in the current modelling. A balance will need to be struck between growing demand and available resources.

<sup>34</sup> [Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England: 2023 to 2024 individual local authority data - outturn - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>35</sup> CIPFA Essex LGR – Debt and Non-Current Assets July 2025

<sup>36</sup> Individual council budget reports

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Further detail on debt analysis and scenario modelling for Thurrock is included in the main body of the proposal within Section 4: Criteria 2, with reference to CIPFA modelling.

Figure 5.1 – Net revenue budget across Greater Essex

Council	Non-Earmarked Reserves (£m) (2023-24) <sup>37</sup>	Net Revenue Budget (£m) <sup>38</sup>
Basildon	3.0	38.0
Braintree	10.0	19.5
Brentwood	9.3	8.2
Castle Point	5.5	4.2
Chelmsford	11.9	28.9
Colchester	6.9	15.3
Epping Forest	6.6	18.7
Harlow	4.3	13.9
Maldon	2.6	10.7
Rochford	1.9	11.4
Tendring	4.0	21.7
Uttlesford	2.1	11.6
Southend-on-Sea	11.0	156.7
Thurrock	10.9	177.2
Essex County	68.0	1,016.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>158.0</b>	<b>1,552.3</b>

<sup>37</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority Non-earmarked Reserves webpages

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2023-to-2024-individual-local-authority-data-outturn>

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## The financial position of new councils

The four-unitary model creates a fair balance between the new councils. Each has the scale and resources to be financially sustainable. This avoids creating weak or overburdened authorities.

### Modelling key data sets for the new councils

The table below shows financial and demand data sets consolidated for each unitary authority under each of the models being proposed. It shows the strong balance achieved across the four unitary authorities – each with a healthy tax base and no significant outliers in terms of reserves. The financial health of the new councils will also be largely determined by demand pressures.

Figure 5.2 – Key data comparison of the unitary model options regarding financials and demand

Metric		Four-unitary authority				Three-unitary authority			Five-unitary authority				
See Appendix for further data sets split by unitary for each option		West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Financial	Net revenue expenditure (£m )(2023/24) <sup>39</sup>	423.2	350.4	324.6	454.3	631.5	453.4	467.6	341.3	259.6	267.3	394.1	290.2
	Council tax base (number of band D equivalent properties) (2024) <sup>40</sup>	173,324	169,545	126,477	186,896	241,010	197,250	217,980	115,722	125,250	112,552	177,428	125,288
	Non-Earmarked Reserves (£m) (2023/24) <sup>41</sup>	44.9	43.4	32.0	37.7	48.6	59.7	49.7	22.4	27.4	38.5	43.5	26.3
Demand	Total SEN support <sup>41</sup>	9,019	7,161	7,503	10,387	14,212	9,003	10,855	7,403	5,364	5,140	9,354	6,809
	Total EHCP <sup>41</sup>	3,452	2,398	2,145	3,696	5,554	2,943	3,194	2,924	1,392	1,861	2,884	2,630
	Number of children with a CP Plan on 31st March <sup>41</sup>	406	459	462	390	511	537	669	309	321	290	595	202
	Number of clients accessing long term support at the end of the year: 18-64 <sup>42</sup>	1,625	1,582	2,105	2,133	2,867	1,731	2,847	1,415	913	1,075	2,590	1,452
	Number of clients accessing long term support at the end of the year: 65+ <sup>41</sup>	3,109	2,565	2,881	3,759	5,107	3,150	4,057	2,334	1,828	1,792	3,587	2,773

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2023-to-2024-individual-local-authority-data-outturn>

<sup>40</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority council tax webpages

<sup>41</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority non-earmarked reserves webpages

<sup>42</sup> Received from Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council, and Thurrock Council

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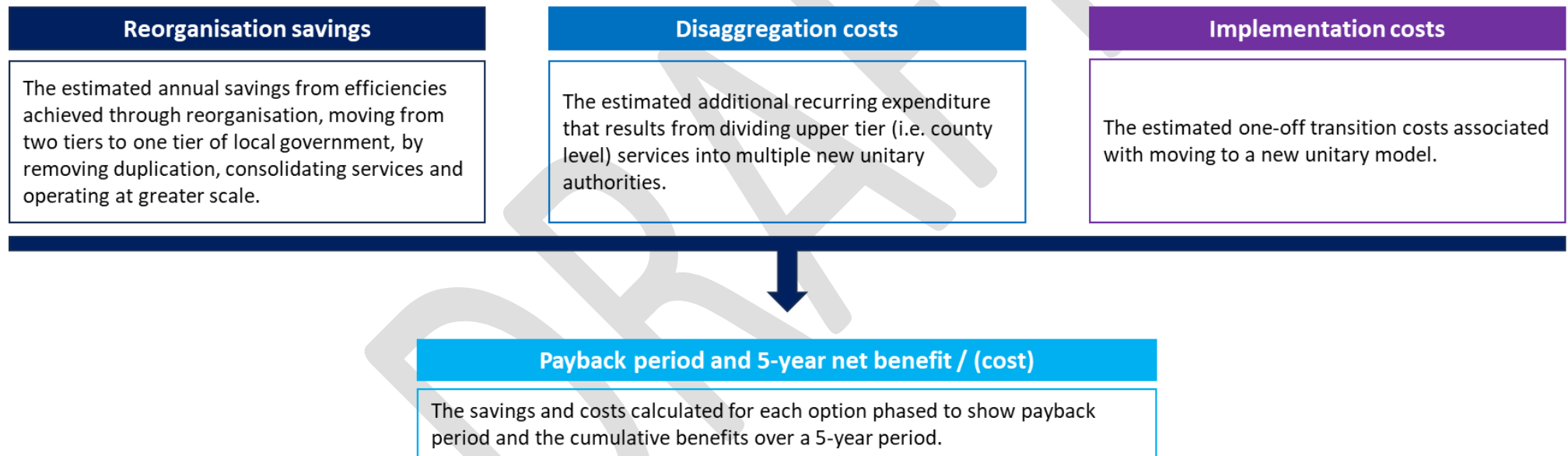
## Approach to LGR financial modelling

The financial costs and benefits associated with LGR have been estimated for the four-unitary model, as well as three and five-unitary models for comparative purposes. Calculations are based on latest available revenue budget figures, benchmarked costs and benefits from previous LGR proposals, with assumptions adjusted to reflect key characteristics of the proposed models including the number of unitary authorities. The four-unitary model performs strongly, with realistic assumptions and clear financial advantages. It offers the best return on investment longer-term.

### Key elements of the financial calculations

The calculation of costs and benefits is made up of three key calculations which combine to provide a view of the payback period and net benefit for each of the shortlisted options.

Figure 5.3 – elements of the financial calculations



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### Benchmarking, data sources and assumptions

- Data has been gathered from a combination of publicly available data and data shared across the Greater Essex Councils.
- The model applies benchmarking from past LGR cases and relies on experience of local government reorganisation implementation in the refinement of assumptions.
- Our financial calculations are underpinned by benchmarking of previous LGR proposals and the estimated costs and benefits modelled in those reports. The figures are estimated costs and benefits, not the actual amounts delivered; however, we have factored in evidence from reports on post-LGR implementation. For example, the financial impacts of unitary re-structuring in 2008-09 were modelled in a 2016 report which stated that each council had delivered the same levels of savings or greater than the projected savings figures estimated in their proposals<sup>43</sup>. The report also references an estimated level of savings per abolition of each unitary council to total c.£4.5m, which is consistent with the modelling undertaken in this proposal and level of savings estimated<sup>44</sup>.
- Assumptions within the model take account of the local situation in Greater Essex, and do not take account of decisions made by future administrations.
- The model does not attempt to reflect the potential impact of the Fair Funding Review, which is expected to significantly affect council finances. While this has been considered, it is too complex and uncertain to model accurately at this stage.
- The model also does not include detailed consideration of Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) pressures. The DSG funding picture is evolving and may have implications for future financial planning, but it is also too fluid and complex to reflect meaningfully in the current modelling.
- Each element of the model applied is explained separately within this section of the report.

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<sup>43</sup> [Unitary local government](#), House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 2025

<sup>44</sup> [As Tiers Go By](#), NLGN, 2014

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## Financial modelling summary results

The three-unitary and four-unitary models both reduce costs, but the three-unitary model is harder and more complex to deliver. Its large, disconnected geographies create complexity and risk. The four-unitary model is simpler, more practical and offers more greater long-term sustainability.

Our financial modelling shows:

- The **four-unitary model** will have net annual savings of **£28.3m**, after one-off costs of implementation of **£80.8m**, meaning an estimated payback period of **less than 4 years**.
- A **three-unitary model**, whilst avoiding long-running disaggregation costs, introduces additional complexity and therefore implementation cost by combining two current unitary authorities (Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea).
- A **five-unitary model** will result in a very similar cost of local government delivery to the current position and therefore may never deliver a return on the significant upfront investment in implementation costs.

Figure 5.4 – Summary of financial modelling

LGR option	Reorganisation savings (gross) (£m)	Disaggregation costs (£m)	Recurring revenue savings (£m)*	Implementation costs (one-off) (£m)	Net annual impact after five years (£m)	Estimated payback period
Three-unitary model	43.4	-	43.4	(93.7)	73.5	Within 4 years
Four-unitary model	55.0	(26.7)	28.3	(80.8)	49.5	Within 4 years
Five-unitary model	52.1	(44.4)	7.7	(86.7)	(51.5)	Over 10 years

\*Recurring revenue savings = gross reorganisation savings less disaggregation costs

The calculation of each element of the financial model is explained within this report section.

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## Reorganisation savings

All models deliver savings by removing a tier of government. But larger, harder-to-manage councils risk recreating bureaucracy. The four-unitary model avoids this and delivers savings more reliably through a simpler model of reorganisation.

**Reorganisation savings (gross) definition:** The estimated annual savings from efficiencies achieved through reorganisation, moving from two tiers to one tier of local government, by removing duplication, consolidating services and operating at greater scale.

### Method of calculation:

- Reviewed past LGR cases to estimate and benchmark an indexed average level of savings per capita achievable through LGR.
- Multiplied the benchmarked savings per capita figure by the total population of Greater Essex to arrive at an estimated total saving for per unitary model (broken down by cost categories in figure 5.6).
- Applied a dilution of savings for the number of unitary authorities being created, due to reduced ability to operate at scale. This equated to a reduction of 5% for the four-unitary model and 10% for the three-unitary model.
- Applied specific adjustments based on the characteristics of Greater Essex and assumptions around the models being proposed. This included a reduction in the total savings achievable by the three-unitary model and a delay in the realisation of those benefits as set out in figure 5.5.

### Reorganisation savings for each model

Figure 5.5 – Reorganisation savings summary

	Gross reorganisation savings (£m)	Commentary
Three-unitary model	43.4	Delivery across larger, less coherent geographies is unlikely to deliver efficiencies as effectively due to increased complexity in management and need to establish additional structures. Timing of benefits realisation within the three-unitary model would be further delayed due to the complexity of delivery.
Four-unitary model	55.0	Significant savings achievable from removing a tier of local government (note – gross savings exclude disaggregation costs).
Five-unitary model	52.1	Significant savings achievable from removing a tier of local government (note – gross savings exclude disaggregation costs).



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### Categories of saving

As part of benchmarking LGR revenue savings, categories of savings have been identified to provide an indication of the expected breakdown of savings. The exact proportion of savings will vary by option.

Figure 5.6 – Savings categories

Cost Category	Estimated % of Total Savings
Optimising Leadership	20%
Right Sizing the Organisation	24%
Consolidating Corporate Services	10%
Service Contract Consolidation	10%
Procurement & 3rd Party Spend	10%
Digital & IT Systems	9%
Asset & Property Optimisation	9%
Democratic Services	4%
Other	4%

## Disaggregation costs

Disaggregation costs only apply where more than three unitaries are created. The four-unitary model keeps these costs manageable, whereas they are higher in the five-unitary model due to the additional unitary authority being created.

**Disaggregation costs definition:** The estimated additional recurring expenditure that results from dividing upper tier (i.e. county level) services into multiple new unitary authorities. Note: Disaggregation costs are only considered for the four and five-unitary options as there is no increase in the number of 'upper tier' authorities post reorganisation in a three-unitary model.

### Method of calculation:

- Identified core service categories where disaggregation will drive cost increases were as: Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Housing, Place Services, and Corporate and Support Services.
- Allocated Essex County Council net revenue spend against cost categories defined.
- Applied percentages of additional spend to each cost category to uplift total costs in line with benchmarking from previous LGR cases, to estimate the future level of spend of each cost category.
- Applied an additional uplift to the level of disaggregation costs for each additional unitary being proposed.

### Disaggregation costs for each model

Figure 5.7 – Disaggregation summary

	Disaggregation costs (£m)	Commentary
Three-unitary model	-	No recurring disaggregation costs because there are the same number of 'upper tier' authorities as currently

Four-unitary model	(26.7)	Some recurring disaggregation costs exist due to four-unitary authorities rather than three
Five-unitary model	(44.4)	Significant recurring disaggregation costs exist due to the formation of five authorities

### Categories of disaggregation costs

As part of calculating disaggregation costs, costs increase by category of spend have been calculated, as summarised below.

Figure 5.8 – Cost categories

Cost Category	Standard disaggregation cost uplift %
Adult Social Care	2 – 3%
Children's Services	1 – 2%
Place Services	1 – 2%
Corporate & Support Services	3 – 4%

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## Implementation costs

Implementation costs generally rise with the number of councils. The three-unitary model is especially complex due to merging two existing unitaries alongside the disaggregation of County services. The four-unitary model avoids this complexity and keeps costs lower.

**Implementation costs definition:** The estimated one-off transition costs associated with moving to a new unitary model.

### Method of calculation:

- Reviewed past LGR cases to estimate and benchmark an indexed average level of implementation costs per capita.
- Multiplied the benchmarked costs per capita figure by the total population of Greater Essex to arrive at an estimated total implementation cost per unitary model (broken down by cost categories in figure 5.8).
- Applied an uplift of costs per additional unitary authority being created, due to additional costs through establishing governance structures, IT systems, administrative frameworks, etc.
- Applied specific adjustments based on the characteristics of Greater Essex and assumptions around the models being proposed. This included an increase in the total implementations for the three-unitary model as set out in figure 5.9.

### Implementation costs for each model

Figure 5.9 – Implementation cost summary

	Implementation costs (£m)	Commentary
<b>Three-unitary model</b>	(93.7)	Implementation complexity and costs are highest due to need to integrate two unitaries and some County functions into a single unitary, as well as disaggregate the remainder of the County into two (see Criteria 2 for relevant case studies)
<b>Four-unitary model</b>	(80.8)	Implementation complexity and costs are relatively high due to need to integrate and disaggregate to form four authorities, but lower than other models
<b>Five-unitary model</b>	(86.7)	Implementation complexity and costs are high due to the number of new authorities being created

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### Categories of implementation cost

As part of implementation cost benchmarking, categories of implementation costs have been identified to provide an indication of the expected breakdown of costs, for any of the LGR options.

*Figure 5.10 – Implementation cost categories*

Implementation cost category	Estimated % of Total Implementation Costs
Workforce exit (including redundancy)	46%
Transition Team	13%
Processes harmonisation	8%
Estates and Facilities	8%
Systems consolidation	7%
Workforce development	5%
Culture and communications	4%
Contingency	10%

## Phasing and payback period

The four-unitary model is expected to pay back its implementation costs within three years. This is faster than the five-unitary model and comparable to the three-unitary model. It delivers early value and long-term savings. This does not factor in the potential transformation and other decisions taken within each authority beyond Day 1.

**Payback period definition:** the period taken to reach a net positive financial impact of LGR, once all one-off and recurring savings have been taken into account.

**5-year net benefit / (costs) definition:** the combined benefit or cost of LGR considering all one-off costs and recurring benefits.

### Method of calculation:

- Percentages of costs and benefits are allocated out by each year, using experience of past LGR cases (see table below) to estimate the appropriate phasing of delivery.
- Assumptions have been applied to adjust for features of specific models where appropriate. This includes a delay to the timing of

benefits realisation within the three-unitary model due to the complexity of delivery.

- Calculate net benefit (cost) for each year of the model and show a cumulative total impact.
- Identify the year in which there is a cumulative net benefit (i.e. payback has been achieved).

### Phasing and calculation of payback period

The payback calculation is made up of reorganisation savings, disaggregation costs, and implementation costs. Phasing of costs and savings in the model has been set out below. Percentages relate to the proportion of total savings realised or total costs incurred within the specified time period.

Figure 5.11 – Payback period summary

	Three-unitary model				Four-unitary model			Five-unitary model		
	Shadow Year	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3 onwards	Shadow Year	Year 1	Year 2 onwards	Shadow Year	Year 1	Year 2 onwards
<b>Reorganisation savings</b>	-	25%	50%	100%	10%	50%	100%	10%	50%	100%
<b>Disaggregation costs</b>	-	-	-	-	10%	50%	100%	10%	50%	100%
<b>Implementation costs</b>	50%	50%	-	-	50%	50%	-	50%	50%	-

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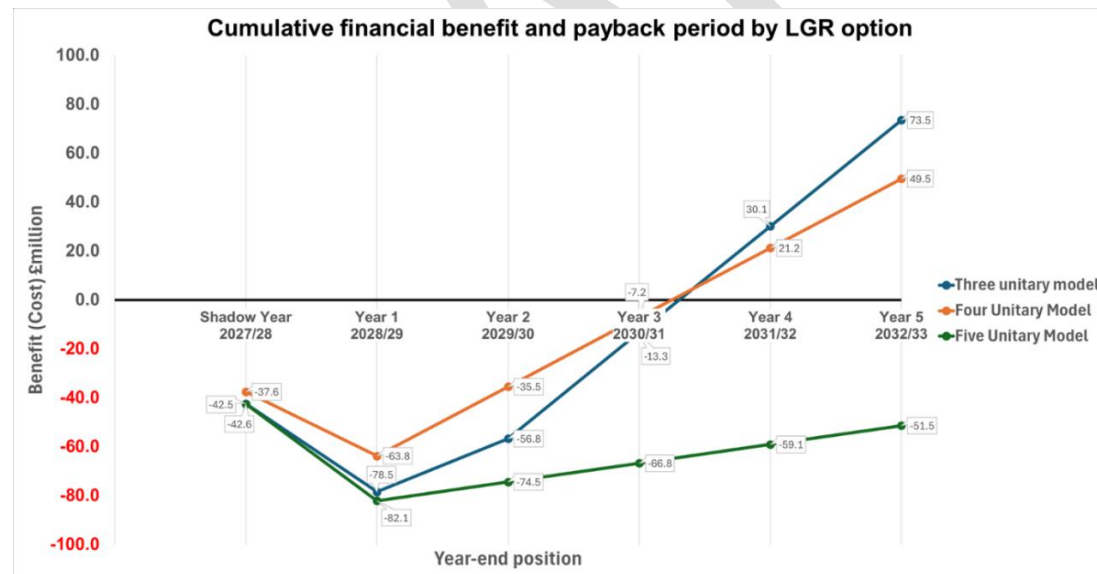
### Cumulative financial benefit and payback period by LGR options

Set out below is the year-by-year breakdown of the financial impact of LGR, considering both one-off costs and recurring benefits / costs.

Figure 5.12 – Cumulative financial benefit and payback period by LGR option

Modelling year	Financial year	Three-unitary model		Four-unitary model		Five-unitary model	
		Net benefits (cost) by year (£m)	Cumulative benefit (cost) (£m)	Net benefits (cost) by year (£m)	Cumulative benefit (cost) (£m)	Net benefits (cost) by year (£m)	Cumulative benefit (cost) (£m)
Shadow Year	2027 / 28	-42.5	-42.5	-37.6	-37.6	-42.6	-42.6
Year 1	2028 / 29	-36.0	-78.5	-26.2	-63.8	-39.5	-82.1
Year 2	2029 / 30	21.7	-56.8	28.3	-35.5	7.7	-74.5
Year 3	2030 / 31	43.4	-13.3	28.3	-7.2	7.7	-66.8
Year 4	2031 / 32	43.4	30.1*	28.3	21.2*	7.7	-59.1
Year 5	2032 / 33	43.4	73.5	28.3	49.5	7.7	-51.5

\*Payback year



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## Section 6: Implementation plan

This section includes:

**Learnings from previous LGR programmes**

**Key implementation phases and activities**

**Implementation governance and workstreams**



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## Learnings from previous LGR programmes

Successful delivery of LGR programmes depends on strong planning, governance and engagement. Lessons from other areas have shaped this approach and the critical success factors defined. The approach is designed to be deliverable and resilient, with stakeholder engagement vital to its success, ensuring transparency, trust and alignment throughout the transition.

Greater Essex has already benefited from learning drawn from recent LGR programmes. This approach has informed both our analysis and early implementation planning. Continued engagement with peers across the country will be essential as we move into the next phases of delivery.

### Principles for successful LGR delivery

Evidence from past reorganisations and the 2024 Grant Thornton study highlights ten critical success factors for effective transition and delivery:

1. **Start early and plan proactively:** Early mobilisation supports better risk management, clearer timelines and smoother service continuity.
2. **Maintain continuity of public services:** Services must remain uninterrupted, with clear operational handovers and contingency plans in place.
3. **Design around residents and communicate clearly:** Structures and services should reflect resident needs, supported by timely, accessible communication.
4. **Establish transparent and accountable governance:** Decision-making should be open, with visible leadership, clear responsibilities and strong programme controls.
5. **Set a coherent vision and align transformation:** A single, shared vision should guide all change activity to avoid duplication and fragmentation.
6. **Support staff and build an inclusive culture:** Staff should be engaged early, supported through change and empowered to shape the future organisation.
7. **Balance technical delivery with cultural change:** Address both systems and governance ('hard' elements) and behaviours, values and leadership ('soft' elements).

8. **Understand and resource future workforce needs:** Map current and future capacity and ensure the right people are in place to deliver.
9. **Ensure financial sustainability and value for money:** Deliver efficiencies without compromising quality, underpinned by robust financial planning.
10. **Apply rigorous controls and assurance:** Confidence should be built through strong programme management, risk tracking and clear escalation routes.

### Stakeholder engagement

Strong stakeholder engagement is critical to a successful transition to unitary governance. Councils that have undergone reorganisation consistently emphasise the value of involving stakeholders early and consistently. This helps build understanding of what is changing, when and why, reduces resistance, and builds trust.

Once the proposal is confirmed, a comprehensive engagement plan will be developed. This will ensure clear, timely communication and place stakeholder perspectives at the centre of delivery. Key stakeholders include:

- Citizens of Essex
- UK Government
- Elected officials
- Local government employees
- Local businesses
- Community groups and non-profit organisations (e.g. parishes, neighbourhood groups)
- External service providers

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## Key implementation activities

Implementation will follow five clear phases, from discovery to go-live. The focus is on safe transition and long-term transformation. Successful implementation will require collaboration across existing councils, strong programme management and early mobilisation. This ensures services continue smoothly while change is delivered.

Delivering local government reorganisation (LGR) in Greater Essex is a complex undertaking. The proposed four-unitary model presents its own complexities; however, it leverages existing upper-tier capacity in Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea, avoiding the risks associated with merging existing unitary authorities. This provides a more stable foundation for transition and reduces implementation risk. Our approach goes beyond achieving safe and legal status on Day 1. It is designed to enable long-term transformation, with a clear focus on service improvement, financial sustainability and better outcomes for residents.

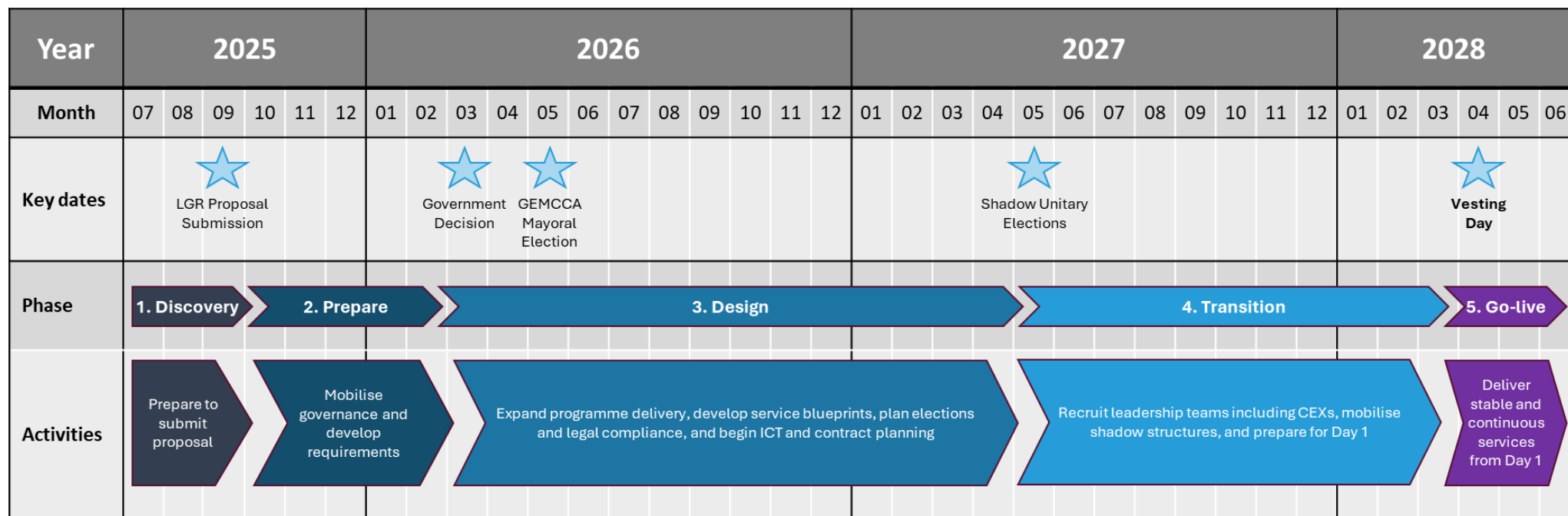
### High-level implementation plan

The implementation programme will be structured across five main phases, with the Transition & Launch phase split into two sub-phases. The timeline is working to an overall vesting day of 1 April 2028. There are several key dates and milestones throughout:

Milestone	Date	Description
<b>LGR Proposal Submission</b>	September 2025	Formal submission of the proposed model for local government reorganisation in Greater Essex to the UK Government.
<b>Government Decision</b>	March 2026 (expected)	Anticipated date for the Government to confirm whether the proposal will proceed.
<b>GECCA Mayoral Election</b>	May 2026	Election of the Mayor for the Greater Essex Combined County Authority (GECCA), subject to Government approval.
<b>Shadow Unitary Elections</b>	May 2027	Elections to establish shadow unitary councils that will prepare for full transition.
<b>Vesting Day</b>	1 April 2028	Official launch of the new unitary authorities, with full powers and responsibilities transferred.

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Figure 6.1 – Plan on a page diagram of implementation



### Phases of implementation and priority activities

The table below sets out the priority implementation activities in further detail.

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Phase	Timing	Priority activities
<b>1. Discovery</b>	To Oct 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish programme structure, identify resources, and clarify roles and responsibilities for programme teams</li> <li>- Recruit strategic partner to support programme design and delivery</li> <li>- Strategic working protocols to take informed decisions and control the impact of LGR</li> <li>- Set up a central data hub to gather and maintain consistent programme data</li> <li>- Identify datasets and understand data quality, completing remediation before transfer to new systems</li> <li>- Identify and engage stakeholders, gathering their thoughts on unitarisation and the best method for a smooth transition</li> </ul>
<b>2. Prepare</b>	Oct 2025 – Mar 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish programme governance, workstreams and financial controls, setting clear ownership of responsibilities and reporting lines</li> <li>- Develop high-level implementation plan, timeline and critical path with a project manager to ensure key milestones are met allowing achievement of the critical path</li> <li>- Confirm future service requirements and detailed service planning for the new unitary authorities</li> <li>- Define and agree the scope of LGR-related decisions with sovereign councils</li> <li>- Complete baseline of data currently held across the councils and identify any key differences, supporting the creation of a plan for merging all the repositories</li> <li>- Agree upon communications and engagement strategy with key stakeholders and public</li> <li>- Government decision and programme expansion (aligned with partners)</li> </ul>
<b>3. Design</b>	Mar 2026 – May 2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Begin expansion of programme, risk management and quality assurance</li> <li>- Begin work on ICT infrastructure, systems, people and contract treatment review and planning</li> <li>- Create organisation and service blueprints to align services and identify early transformation opportunities and risks</li> <li>- Conduct options appraisals for key service areas, sourcing solutions that drive the best outcome for the communities</li> <li>- Prepare for key legal and governance decisions</li> <li>- Plan and deliver elections for shadow authorities</li> <li>- Ensure compliance with Structural Change Order and legal assurance processes</li> </ul>
<b>4. Transition</b>	May 2027 – Mar 2028	<p>Shadow Authorities (May 2027 – May 2028):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appoint Chief Executives and statutory officers for each new authority</li> <li>- Deliver member induction and service briefings</li> <li>- Establish a timetable for key decisions and policy development</li> <li>- Begin development of council plans and strategic priorities</li> <li>- Shadow running of operational governance to test and refine</li> <li>- Test and operationalise the systems to ensure smooth transition for go-live</li> </ul> <p>Officer leadership (Oct 2027 – Mar 2028)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appoint tier 2 and tier 3 leadership teams</li> <li>- Finalise service planning and operating models</li> <li>- Develop Medium-Term Financial Plans and draft budgets</li> </ul>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Prepare key policies and strategies including constitutions, risk registers and corporate plans</li><li>- Allocate staff and confirm organisational structures, keeping them up to date with ongoing engagement / change management</li><li>- Finalise Day 1 readiness plans</li></ul>
<b>5. Go-Live</b>	Apr 2028 – Onwards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ensure stability and continuity of services from Day 1</li><li>- Monitor and manage early operational performance</li><li>- Begin delivery of post-LGR transformation priorities</li><li>- Embed new governance, culture and leadership arrangements</li></ul>

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## Day 1 Ambitions

The priority for Day 1 is to ensure safe and legal service delivery, with no disruption to residents. Shortly after, targeted transformation activities will begin to improve services, strengthen financial sustainability and enhance outcomes.

Absolute requirements for a safe and legal Day 1	Targeted transformation activities pre-Day 1	Stretch target and post-Day 1
<i>Minimum targets to allow the new councils to deliver services safely to their communities</i>	<i>Activities that begin integration of the new councils and begin set up for a successful integrated council</i>	<i>Activities showing full integration for the new councils</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clear vision and strategy:</b> Each new council must have a defined direction to guide initial operations.</li> <li>• <b>Service integration – data:</b> Existing data structures must be reviewed and aligned to a single, agreed format to support unified service delivery.</li> <li>• <b>Service integration – people:</b> Staff must be kept informed through regular updates and training to prepare for new ways of working.</li> <li>• <b>Skills and capacity mapping:</b> The new councils must identify and fill any gaps in skills and capacity to support transition.</li> <li>• <b>Contract mapping:</b> Reviewing existing contracts will help identify integration opportunities and ensure continuity of service.</li> <li>• <b>Financial and commercial arrangements:</b> Plans must be in place to transfer financial responsibilities from existing councils to the new authorities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Creation of Unitary Delivery Groups:</b> Teams of specialists from each of the new councils who will support the delivery of unitarisation and share best practices across councils.</li> <li>• <b>Bringing service leads together:</b> To compare policies and processes, enabling identification of alignment opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Development of a plan for further transformation:</b> Unitarisation is the starting point - councils should agree a roadmap for ongoing transformation and improvement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Fully integrated service delivery model:</b> Support the new unitary area with seamless services for all citizens.</li> <li>• <b>Enhanced and consistent ways of working:</b> Ensure all staff use aligned processes through integration and training.</li> <li>• <b>Consistent functional processes:</b> Improve structure, reliability and effectiveness by reducing errors.</li> <li>• <b>Single, secure system for each unitary:</b> Enable cross-service delivery while protecting sensitive data.</li> <li>• <b>Cross-system integrated governance:</b> Provide strong oversight and accountability through unified reporting.</li> <li>• <b>Single data system:</b> Ensure data integrity and continuity across services with one secure source of truth.</li> </ul>

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## Implementation governance and workstreams

The four-unitary model will be delivered through a clear governance structure, including a central Programme Board, Unitary Delivery Groups and Shadow Authority Boards. Dedicated workstreams will manage key areas like finance, digital, workforce and legal readiness. This ensures strong oversight and coordinated delivery.

A structured governance framework will be established across Greater Essex to oversee the unitarisation process. This will be formally defined through the preparation phase but will include:

- **LGR Programme Board:** Reports to the Leaders Group and GECCA joint committees. Led by the Chief Executives of the new unitary authorities and a Programme Director, it will manage strategic issues and risks.
- **Unitary Delivery Groups:** Sub-groups under the Programme Board focused on area-specific issues such as elections, planning and policy. These will become increasingly important as Shadow Authorities are formed and interim Heads of Paid Service are appointed.
- **Shadow Authority Boards:** Created for each new unitary, led by the appointed Chief Executive. Responsible for reviewing and executing strategies ahead of full implementation.

- **District Area Representatives:** Representatives from the new clustered councils will provide local insight and ensure area-specific impacts are considered.
- **Day 1 Board:** Oversees preparations for go-live, including delivery of the programme plan, milestone tracking and completion of Day 1 activities.

### Key workstreams for implementation

To deliver a successful transition to unitary governance, Greater Essex will establish a set of focused workstreams. These will address the core operational and strategic areas required for safe and legal Day 1 delivery, while laying the foundation for long-term transformation. Each workstream will be supported by dedicated leads, clear objectives and robust governance.

Key workstreams	Delivery focus
<b>Culture and Change Management</b>	Deliver a cultural change programme alongside staff transfer processes, supported by staff engagement, communications and coproduction of branding and values.
<b>Service Organisational Design</b>	Design new service structures informed by comparative analysis of legacy models, policies and skill levels.
<b>HR and Workforce</b>	Plan and deliver TUPE processes, consult with staff and develop a workforce strategy to support recruitment and retention.
<b>Digital Systems and Data</b>	Map systems, cleanse data and develop secure, unified platforms to support integrated service delivery.
<b>Partnerships and Stakeholders</b>	Maintain strong external relationships through joint working protocols and stakeholder engagement in organisational design.
<b>Contracts, Commercial, Assets and Estates</b>	Align procurement pipelines, map contracts and establish governance to ensure continuity and value for money.
<b>Finance and Budgeting</b>	Manage budget disaggregation, transition funding and long-term financial planning.



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<b>Legal and Governance</b>	Establish compliant governance structures, support elections and ensure legal readiness.
<b>Communications and Engagement</b>	Coordinate internal and external messaging to support staff, stakeholders and public understanding.
<b>Programme Management</b>	Deliver efficient programme management, resource planning and milestone tracking to manage risks, maintain continuity and enable transformation.

### Risks and mitigations

There are significant risks inherent to any LGR implementation. The size and population of Essex means that the level of risk will be greater than some other programmes. We have therefore sought to minimise risk in the selection of our preferred model, and have also progressed our thinking on how key risks can be mitigated through effective planning and governance.

Alongside the risks, there is also potential additional upside to the approach set out in this proposal. A prudent approach has been taken, for example with regards to the assumptions underpinning the financial model. The four-unitary also limits some of the wider risks of LGR, for example in aggregating and disaggregating upper tier services simultaneously. With successful mitigation of implementation and delivery risks it is also possible that LGR and implementation of the four-unitary model can bring benefits additional to those set out in this proposal.

Risk		Impact	Likelihood	Mitigation
<b>Disaggregation complexity</b>	All LGR options involve splitting county councils and existing unitaries. This is a complex process that must avoid disruption to service delivery during transition.	High	High	Start detailed planning early to identify service transition risks. Use the two existing unitaries to support new ones, sharing best practice and experience with more complex service areas.
<b>ICT and systems integration</b>	Multiple systems are in use across Greater Essex. A decision is needed on which systems to retain and how to integrate data without affecting services.	High	Medium	Set up a dedicated ICT workstream to map current systems and licences. Identify preferred systems early and plan integration to avoid service disruption.
<b>Capacity constraints</b>	Staff will need to maintain current services while preparing for transition. This dual workload may stretch capacity and impact delivery.	High	Medium	Review roles and map skills to enable flexible resourcing. Share capacity where possible and bring in external support or SMEs to fill gaps.
<b>Programme slippage</b>	The timeline for implementation is tight. Given the scale and complexity, there is a high risk of delays.	High	Medium	Establish clear governance and track milestones regularly. Use early escalation routes to address emerging delays.

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<b>Cultural misalignment</b>	Newly formed councils will bring together different organisational cultures and ways of working, which may lead to friction and misalignment.	Medium	Medium	Engage staff early and visibly. Set clear organisational design principles and appoint leadership early to build confidence and clarity.
<b>Council tax harmonisation</b>	Council tax rates will change under the new structure. This will affect residents and may be met with resistance.	High	High	Communicate changes clearly and early. Use government frameworks to support implementation and provide clear justification to residents.
<b>Aggregation of services</b>	Services will need to be merged across new areas. This poses risks to continuity and consistency in delivery.	High	High	Plan early to align similar services. Test rigorously to ensure data integrity and continuity during system merges.
<b>Financial uncertainty</b>	Financial pressures across the system, including unresolved DSG deficits, MTFS gaps and FFR challenges, may limit capacity to invest in transformation and affect implementation timelines.	High	High	Establish a dedicated financial oversight group within the LGR programme to monitor and manage financial risks across all authorities. This group should align transformation plans with existing financial recovery strategies, ensure early visibility of pressures in areas like DSG and MTFS, and coordinate the use of capital receipts and invest-to-save funding.

**What our residents have told us is important**

In Thurrock, **51%** of respondents were unaware of what LGR would mean for them. This highlights the need for ongoing communication and transparency. Councils will continue to engage with communities throughout implementation. *See Section 4: Criteria 4.*

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## Section 7: Options appraisal

This section includes:

**Identifying and shortlisting options for evaluation**

**The three options analysed in this report**

**Summary scoring and commentary against government criteria**

## Identifying and shortlisting options for evaluation

A longlist of options was tested against a set of red-line criteria. Only three models met the threshold for detailed evaluation. The four-unitary model emerged as the most balanced and viable option for Greater Essex.

### Identifying options

To support selection of a preferred option, a long list of all potential options was assessed against an initial set of ‘red lines’, allowing a significant number of potential options to be disregarded.

- 1 Geographic continuity and travel: Options should not include areas which would require travel outside of the local authority area to deliver key services
- 2 Options with an obviously more feasible alternative: Ensuring options are attractive to all Greater Essex and do not bias a particular region
- 3 Proposed unitary authorities should be close to the population threshold of 500,000: These options meet criteria set out by the government to gain the benefit of economies of scale. To allow more options to be considered we set tolerances of 5-20%.
- 4 Proposed unitary authorities should be financially sustainable: GVA and usable reserves should be sustainable in comparison to other unitary authorities. Financing costs as a percentage of NRE should be below 20%
- 5 Separation of pre-existing unitary authorities: Bringing together the two existing authorities brings a new set of implementation complexity and integration issues

### Evaluation of options

An initial assurance exercise confirmed that shortlisted options met the government’s baseline criteria, enabling more detailed analysis to identify a preferred model for Greater Essex.

Options were assessed against six core government criteria using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. Fourteen evaluation metrics were developed directly from the requirements set out in the government’s letter dated 6 February 2025. These metrics were selected where they enabled meaningful comparison between options. Requirements that were considered non-differentiating were excluded from scoring.

Each option was scored using a Red-Amber-Green (RAG) framework to indicate how well it aligned with the definition of “what good looks like”: **High (Green)**: Fully meets the criteria; **Medium (Amber)**: Partially meets the criteria; **Low (Red)**: Does not meet the criteria.

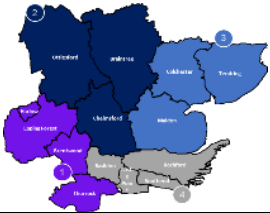
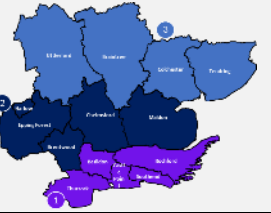
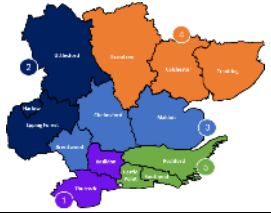
This scoring was supported by a summary of evidence and rationale, drawing on both data and qualitative insights. The process ensured a consistent and transparent comparison of options against government expectations. The summary of this evaluation is provided below.

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## The three options analysed in this report

For presentational purposes, the evaluation process completed is shown with a focus on the three models put forward by authorities across Greater Essex (i.e. a three-unitary, four-unitary and five-unitary model with the boundaries shown below).

Figure 7.1 – Unitary options under review and population figures

	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
												
	<b>West:</b> Brentwood, Epping Forest Harlow, Thurrock	<b>North:</b> Braintree, Chelmsford, Uttlesford	<b>East:</b> Colchester, Maldon, Tendring,	<b>South:</b> Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on- Sea	<b>South:</b> Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on- Sea, Thurrock	<b>Central:</b> Brentwood, Chelmsford, Epping Forest, Harlow, Maldon	<b>North:</b> Braintree, Colchester, Tendring, Uttlesford	<b>Southwest:</b> Basildon, Thurrock	<b>Northwest:</b> Harlow, Epping Forest, Uttlesford	<b>Central:</b> Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon	<b>Northeast:</b> Braintree, Colchester, Tendring	<b>Southeast:</b> Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on- Sea
<b>Population</b> <sup>45</sup>	488,368 (26%)	438,829 (23%)	418,532 (22%)	550,861 (29%)	729,062 (38%)	603,756 (32%)	563,772 (30%)	368,745 (19%)	325,609 (17%)	331,757 (17%)	510,162 (27%)	360,317 (19%)
<b>Geographic area</b> <sup>46</sup>	707	1,596	1,141	505	689	1,294	1,966	295	1,011	924	1,325	395
<b>Population density</b>	691	275	367	1,091	1,058	436	307	1,250	322	359	385	913
<b>GVA</b> <sup>47</sup>	15,556	13,108	8,714	13,440	19,056	17,567	14,195	12,918	9,404	10,866	11,492	6,138
<b>GVA per capita</b> <sup>44</sup>	31,853	29,870	20,820	24,398	26,138	31,160	23,511	35,032	28,881	32,753	22,526	17,035
<b>Deprivation</b> <sup>48</sup>	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.13	0.09	0.08	0.12	0.11
<b>Homelessness</b> <sup>49</sup>	1.20	0.99	1.26	1.46	1.66	0.80	1.14	1.95	0.64	1.02	1.17	1.36
<b>Wider determinants of health</b> <sup>50</sup>	7.90	4.87	8.53	8.30	8.84	6.08	7.60	11.30	7.00	4.33	8.93	7.20

<sup>45</sup> [Estimates of the population for England and Wales - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Standard Area Measurements for Administrative Areas \(December 2023\) in the UK](#)

<sup>47</sup> [Regional gross domestic product: local authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/mappingincomedepriivationatlocalauthoritylevel>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/datasets/lifeexpectancyforlocalareasofgreatbritain?utm>

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## Summary scoring and commentary against government criteria

The evaluation focused on three models, and each were scored High, Medium or Low against the six government criteria. This enabled consistent comparison and supported identification of the four-unitary model as the best option for Greater Essex. Summary rationale for scoring is set out against each of the six government criteria, comparing the performance of the three-unitary, four-unitary, and five-unitary models.

Figure 7.2 – Summary scoring and commentary against government criteria

1. Establishing a single tier of local government	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balances key economic indicators including GVA, council tax base, and business rates</li> <li>Ensures each new unitary aligns to a functional and recognised geography</li> <li>Strong economic growth prospects for each unitary, with an economic centre and international port in each authority</li> <li>Aligns boundaries with functional travel patterns and supporting place-based infrastructure investment and transport planning</li> <li>Housing delivery and homelessness pressures are distributed evenly, enabling each authority to tailor its approach to local conditions while benefiting from strategic coherence and shared capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Total GVA and GVA per capita is relatively balanced; however, the model creates this balance through joining areas which do not align to functional economic areas and recognised geographies</li> <li>Creates large, disconnected geographies that undermine transport coherence</li> <li>Large size of South Essex may create challenges for local representation and service responsiveness</li> <li>Central Essex rail infrastructure is predominantly radial, resulting in weak internal public transport, high car dependency, and limited internal connectivity</li> <li>North Essex requires long journeys between extremities and poor direct links, reducing internal cohesion and limiting access to services</li> <li>Housing pressures concentrated in South Essex with high homelessness and low housing delivery rates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly uneven population and economic indicators with greatest variance between councils, e.g. Southwest Essex has a GVA per capita nearly double that of Southeast</li> <li>Increased fragmentation risks inconsistent decision-making and weaker alignment with regional priorities</li> <li>Housing and service pressures are dispersed across smaller units, making it harder to coordinate responses and pool resources effectively</li> <li>Travel to work links are strong, grouping districts with both high internal commuting and strong bilateral flows</li> <li>Smaller authorities lack the scale to deliver complex services or attract senior leadership, diluting strategic capacity</li> <li>Increases the number of Cabinets and governance structures required, reintroducing duplication and reducing efficiency gains expected from reorganisation</li> </ul>

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2. Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most balanced configuration, with evenly distributed populations that align with government guidelines and allows for future growth</li> <li>Each authority has sufficient scale to deliver services efficiently and absorb financial shocks</li> <li>West Essex unitary including Thurrock, has sufficient scale and growth potential to deliver long-term resilience</li> <li>Avoids the extremes of over-centralisation or fragmentation, enabling tailored service delivery while maintaining strategic coherence</li> <li>Scale of each unitary supports investment in transformation, recruitment of specialist expertise and delivery of demand-led services such as adult social care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greatest population imbalance, creating a “mega council” in the South, with population exceeding 700,000, and approaching 800,000 by 2047</li> <li>Based on high-level financial modelling has the lowest long-term running cost due to lowest number of authorities</li> <li>Carries greater risk of future cost escalation, with evidence showing that larger councils do not consistently deliver greater efficiency or cost savings</li> <li>Introduces greater complexity in transition, particularly in South Essex where Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea are aggregated alongside disaggregating Essex County Council services, creating a major risk to realisation of financial and efficiency benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes four councils with populations below 400,000, which risk being too small for sustainable operation even after accounting for future growth</li> <li>Fragmentation in the five-unitary model would dilute strategic capacity and increase duplication, undermining the efficiency gains expected from reorganisation</li> <li>Would require significant financial support, estimated between £400 million and £600 million, to be viable</li> <li>Smaller units may struggle to attract and retain specialist expertise, invest in transformation or manage demand-led services</li> </ul>
3. High quality and sustainable public services	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Distributes areas of deprivation and service demand evenly across the new authorities, preventing excessive pressure on any single unitary</li> <li>Wider determinants of health scores are balanced across all four councils, the only outlier being North Essex which is an outlier in the positive direction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The South region has a wider determinants of health score of 8.84 due to the grouping of Thurrock, Basildon, Castle Point, and Southend-on-Sea, which are only counteracted by the inclusion of Rochford who score strongly</li> <li>Evidence from past LGR programmes, such as BCP Council in Dorset, shows that additional complexity of aggregating unitaries alongside disaggregating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Southwest region has a wider determinants of health score of 11.30 due to the pairing of Thurrock and Basildon which each have significant deprivation and inequality issues</li> <li>Fragments the region into smaller authorities, which may struggle to sustain complex services, absorb demand shocks or invest in transformation</li> </ul>



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- Service delivery built on footprints that are manageable and recognised by communities
- Aligns strongly with policing boundaries and provides balanced partnership to future Greater Essex ICB
- Enables tailored service design around community needs while retaining sufficient scale to achieve short-term efficiencies
- Makes best use of existing upper-tier service capabilities in Thurrock, Southend-on-Sea and Essex County Council, reducing transition risk
- Limits the risks associated with combining critical services like adult social care and children's services, avoiding the disruption seen in other reorganisations
- Maintains a scale that supports strategic partnerships and investment in digital

- counties can lead to significant service delivery failures, unclear workforce deployment, and financial instability.
- Greater geographic size may hinder the ability to tailor services effectively at a local level
- Concentrates high-pressure districts such as Thurrock, Southend-on-Sea and Basildon into one authority, which could reduce responsiveness and increase long-term costs
- Scale could complicate partnership working and may reduce democratic accountability by creating authorities that speak for disproportionately large and diverse populations

- Sacrifices economies of scale and exposes each authority to greater financial instability, risking higher ongoing costs and the need for significant government support to remain viable
- Risks greater inconsistency in performance, limited strategic capacity, and reduced ability to engage with regional initiatives
- Lacks the scale to fully support digital modernisation, increasing the risk of technological stagnation and digital exclusion
- Risks diluting influence and generating deadlock, as smaller councils struggle to assert their needs effectively at the regional level

**4. Working together to understand and meet local needs**
**Four-unitary model**
**HIGH**

- Establishes unitary authorities that are internally cohesive, easily navigable, and align with sense of place
- The four-unitary model provides the best balance for responding to the issues which residents tell us matter to them the most (financial stability, service quality and local decision making)

**Three-unitary model**
**MEDIUM**

- The geographic size of the councils makes it more challenging to recognise and represent varying local identities, connecting areas without obvious links over large geographic areas
- The scale of councils in this model does not provide the optimal environment for local decision making which reflects community needs, as identified as a priority by residents

**Five-unitary model**
**MEDIUM**

- Smaller councils risk inadvertently creating artificial boundaries that are neither practical nor align with resident expectations
- Financial sustainability is a priority for local residents, and scale of councils in this model risks their ability to achieve this outcome

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5. Supporting devolution arrangements	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishes four-unitary authorities of equal standing, ensuring balanced representation across Greater Essex, avoiding over-concentration of power and ensures equal weight is given to each part of the region</li> <li>Supports effective GEMCA governance by enabling the mayor to hold a tie-breaking vote, which helps avoid deadlock and ensures decisions can progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consolidates existing capabilities but may undermine balanced representation and strategic equity</li> <li>Risks over-concentration of population and voting power in a single authority</li> <li>Larger size of one unitary could dominate decision-making, reducing the influence of the others and creating governance imbalance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduces complexity and imbalance, diluting the capacity of existing authorities and making majority voting more difficult to achieve</li> <li>Smaller scale of some councils may reduce their ability to influence regional decisions, increasing the risk of fragmentation and inconsistent coordination</li> </ul>
6. Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
	MEDIUM	LOW	MEDIUM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having a relatively smaller population size in each boundary line compared to larger proposed models, will allow for operation at scale while being close enough to deliver locally and avoiding the risk of diluting community voices too far</li> <li>The balanced population size in each of the new authorities avoids strain on any one authority to administer significantly more NACs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risks creating councils that are too expansive across incoherent geographies to effectively connect with communities, potentially becoming overly reliant on Neighbourhood Area Committees</li> <li>Such committees are unlikely to be adequate and could inadvertently re-establish a two-tier structure, demanding substantial officer and member resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely to be able to engage effectively with residents on a local level given the smaller size and scale</li> <li>May lack broader perspectives and representation on how larger scale infrastructure could benefit a wider population outside of their immediate area, and require partnership with neighbouring authorities to deliver effectively</li> </ul>

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## Options appraisal conclusion

The four-unitary model scored highest overall in evaluation, with strong performance across all areas. It is the most balanced and deliverable option, and it is the only model that meets all criteria consistently and avoids the need for external support. It provides the best platform for reform and delivering better outcomes for residents.

	Four-unitary model	Three-unitary model	Five-unitary model
1. Establishing a single tier of local government	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
2. Efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	LOW
3. High quality and sustainable public services	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
4. Working together to understand and meet local needs	HIGH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
5. Supporting devolution arrangements	HIGH	LOW	MEDIUM
6. Stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment	MEDIUM	LOW	MEDIUM

Following a structured options appraisal, it is clear there is no one perfect model. However, the four-unitary model demonstrates the strongest alignment with the government's criteria. It scores 'High' in four key areas:

- **Establishing a single tier of local government**
- **High quality and sustainable public services**
- **Working together to understand and meet local needs**
- **Supporting devolution arrangements**

These are critical success factors for long-term resilience and transformation in local government and provides the optimal opportunity for success.

While the four-unitary model's performance is assessed as medium in **efficiency, capacity and withstanding shocks** and **stronger community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment**, when combined they

provide a middle ground avoiding the extremes of both three-unitary and five-unitary models. The four-unitary model avoids the larger geographies which may struggle to reflect local economic dynamics, weakening the link between growth and reinvestment.

The five-unitary model, while more localised, may lack the scale to capture the full economic potential of key growth areas or to deliver the infrastructure required to support them. The four-unitary model provides the most balance across all criteria, it generates sufficient economies of scale to be viable whilst depriving the benefits of community engagement and neighbourhood empowerment from smaller unitaries. Most important it is the four-unitary model which provides the best environment for success, avoid the extremes of both the five-unitary and three-unitary models.

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## Appendix 1: Key data sets

Figure 8.1 – Key data set for government criteria analysis: Demographics

METRIC	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Population (2023) <sup>51</sup>	488,368	438,829	418,532	550,861	729,062	563,772	603,756	368,745	325,609	331,757	510,162	360,317
Geographic area (sq km) (2023) <sup>52</sup>	707	1,596	1,141	505	689	1,294	1,966	295	1,011	924	1,325	395
Population density (people per sqkm) (2023)	691	275	367	1,091	1,058	436	307	1,250	322	359	385	913
65+ Population (2023) <sup>53</sup>	81,319	88,964	98,187	111,341	135,656	110,515	133,640	56,854	60,868	69,393	113,894	78,802
Population 2032 estimate <sup>54</sup>	506,096	469,091	456,578	564,551	751,987	589,574	654,755	382,754	343,960	350,481	549,888	369,233
Population 2047 estimate <sup>50</sup>	535,615	509,451	498,636	589,668	789,031	628,670	715,669	403,323	370,284	376,402	597,653	385,708

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/estimatesofthepopulationforenglandandwales>

<sup>52</sup> <https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/da8590c5f55f4664b32ad4339f43419c/about>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/estimatesofthepopulationforenglandandwales>

<sup>54</sup> [Subnational population projections for England - Office for National Statistics](#)

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Figure 8.2 – Key data set for government criteria analysis: Financials

METRIC	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Total GVA (£m) (2022) <sup>55</sup>	15,556	13,108	8,714	13,440	19,056	17,567	14,195	12,918	9,404	10,866	11,492	6,138
GVA per capita (£) (2022) <sup>56</sup>	31,853	29,870	20,820	24,398	26,138	31,160	23,511	35,032	28,881	32,753	22,526	17,035
Council tax base (number of band D equivalent properties) (2024) <sup>57</sup>	173,324	169,545	126,477	186,896	241,010	197,250	217,980	115,722	125,250	112,552	177,428	125,288
Council Tax band D average (exc. Fire, Police and Parishes) (£) (2023) <sup>53</sup>	2,086	2,051	2,060	2,109	2,095	2,091	2,046	2,094	2,090	2,071	2,051	2,096
Retained Business Rates (£m) (2024-25) <sup>58</sup>	115.0	76.5	43.8	67.8	138.4	85.1	79.6	104.8	56.8	50.6	57.3	33.6
Non-Earmarked Reserves (£m) (2023-24) <sup>59</sup>	44.9	43.4	32.0	37.7	48.6	59.7	49.7	22.4	27.4	38.5	43.5	26.3
Net revenue expenditure (£m)* (2023/24) <sup>60</sup>	423.2	350.4	324.6	454.3	631.5	453.4	467.6	341.3	259.6	267.3	394.1	290.2
Financing costs (£m)* (2023/24) <sup>56</sup>	80.1	15.3	7.2	34.2	98.2	19.9	18.5	82.8	24.9	5.0	8.7	15.4
Financing Costs as % Net revenue expenditure (inc. County allocations) (23-24)	19%	4%	2%	8%	16%	4%	4%	24%	10%	2%	2%	5%
External Debt (£m) <sup>61</sup>	1,830	548	484	1,261	2,130	1,092	900	1,653	1,051	405	536	478
Financing costs (£m) <sup>57</sup>	144	50	39	73	166	70	70	133	61	32	47	33

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/datasets/regionalgrossdomesticproductlocalauthorities><sup>56</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/datasets/regionalgrossdomesticproductlocalauthorities><sup>57</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority council tax webpages<sup>58</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-non-domestic-rates-collected-by-councils-in-england-forecast-2024-to-2025><sup>59</sup> Respective district council and unitary authority non-earmarked reserves webpages<sup>60</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing-england-2023-to-2024-individual-local-authority-data-outturn><sup>61</sup> CIPFA Essex LGR – Debt and Non-Current Assets July 2025

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Figure 8.3 – Key data set for government criteria analysis: Housing and Homelessness

METRIC	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Deprivation score (2019) <sup>62</sup>	0.10	0.07	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.13	0.09	0.08	0.12	0.11
Homelessness Rate (per 1,000 Households) (Apr-Jun 2024) <sup>63</sup>	1.20	0.99	1.26	1.46	1.66	0.80	1.14	1.95	0.64	1.02	1.17	1.36
Unemployment rates (%) (Oct 23-Sept 24) <sup>64</sup>	4.03	2.86	3.53	3.36	3.47	3.51	3.46	3.91	3.96	2.88	3.62	3.17
Total Crime Rate per 1,000 Pop. (2024) <sup>65</sup>	83.65	69.05	77.07	82.42	83.98	77.21	72.97	91.68	76.57	71.59	76.25	76.10
Housing Delivery Test 2023 Measurement % <sup>66</sup>	0.73	1.07	1.31	0.50	0.46	1.20	1.15	0.35	0.79	1.25	1.37	0.59
Rough Sleeper Count (Autumn 2023) <sup>67</sup>	18	25	11	43	49	30	18	10	11	19	18	39
Number of Households in TA per 1,000 pop. Apr-Jun 2024 <sup>68</sup>	17	7	6	18	25	16	7	16	10	7	7	9
Total number of households in B&B Hotels Apr-Jun 2024 <sup>69</sup>	39	64	153	166	173	77	172	58	41	49	159	115
Total number of households in TA in another local authority district Apr-Jun 2024 <sup>70</sup>	72	140	20	157	225	133	31	148	10	133	21	77

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/datasets/mappingincomedeprivationatlocalauthoritylevel>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/li01regionallabourmarketlocalindicatorsforcountieslocalandunitaryauthorities?utm>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-delivery-test-2023-measurement>

<sup>67</sup> [Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2023 - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>68</sup> [Tables on homelessness - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>69</sup> [Regional gross domestic product: local authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>70</sup> [Regional gross domestic product: local authorities - Office for National Statistics](#)

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Figure 8.4 – Children's Services and Education

METRIC*	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Number of school pupils <sup>71</sup>	75,335	57,644	53,707	83,338	115,050	76,742	78,232	59,491	42,263	45,892	66,819	55,559
Total SEN support <sup>67</sup>	9,019	7,161	7,503	10,387	14,212	9,003	10,855	7,403	5,364	5,140	9,354	6,809
% of students receiving SEN support	12.0%	12.4%	14.0%	12.5%	12.4%	11.7%	13.9%	12.4%	12.7%	11.2%	14.0%	12.3%
Total EHCP <sup>67</sup>	3,452	2,398	2,145	3,696	5,554	2,943	3,194	2,924	1,392	1,861	2,884	2,630
% of students on EHCP	4.6%	4.2%	4.0%	4.4%	4.8%	3.8%	4.1%	4.9%	3.3%	4.1%	4.3%	4.7%
Number of children in care on 31st March <sup>67</sup>	426	187	347	532	808	261	423	419	159	127	398	389
Number of children with a CP Plan on 31st March <sup>67</sup>	406	459	462	390	511	537	669	309	321	290	595	202
Number of children with a CiN Plan on 31st March <sup>67</sup>	523	178	211	352	762	222	280	494	107	129	266	268

\* most recent figures provided have been taken for all metrics

<sup>71</sup> Received from Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council, and Thurrock Council

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Figure 8.5 – Adult Services

METRIC*	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Number of clients accessing long term support at the end of the year: 18-64 <sup>72</sup>	1,625	1,582	2,105	2,133	2,867	1,731	2,847	1,415	913	1,075	2,590	1,452
Number of clients accessing long term support at the end of the year: 65+ <sup>68</sup>	3,109	2,565	2,881	3,759	5,107	3,150	4,057	2,334	1,828	1,792	3,587	2,773

\* most recent figures provided have been taken for all metrics

Figure 8.6 – Public Health England<sup>73</sup>

METRIC	Four-unitary model				Three-unitary model			Five-unitary model				
	West Essex	North Essex	East Essex	South Essex	South Essex	Central Essex	North Essex	Southwest Essex	Northwest Essex	Central Essex	Northeast Essex	Southeast Essex
Wider determinants of health	7.90	4.87	8.53	8.30	8.84	6.08	7.60	11.30	7.00	4.33	8.93	7.20
Life expectancy and causes of death	7.66	5.92	8.42	7.81	8.28	6.15	8.19	9.31	6.67	4.46	10.04	7.58
Injuries and ill health	6.70	8.67	8.47	6.70	6.60	7.88	8.15	6.90	7.33	8.60	8.07	6.40
Behavioural risk factors	6.10	6.67	8.20	9.00	9.00	5.68	7.90	9.40	6.33	5.20	8.47	8.73
Child health	7.63	5.00	9.08	7.00	8.10	5.95	7.63	10.63	4.83	5.92	9.33	6.42
Inequalities	7.50	3.89	8.11	9.33	9.60	5.73	6.67	12.17	4.11	5.78	8.56	7.89
Health protection	10.75	6.50	5.33	6.63	7.80	8.30	6.13	9.75	8.33	7.17	6.50	6.50

<sup>72</sup> Received from Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council, and Thurrock Council<sup>73</sup> [Life expectancy for local areas of Great Britain - Office for National Statistics](#)



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Figure 8.7: Number of people living in [row] and working in [column]. Does not include people who mainly work from home.<sup>74</sup>

		Place of work													
		Basildon	Braintree	Brentwood	Castle Point	Chelmsford	Colchester	Epping Forest	Harlow	Maldon	Rochford	Southend-on-Sea	Tendring	Thurrock	Uttlesford
Place of residence	Basildon	23,353	234	2,219	1,080	2,415	120	321	183	200	856	1,427	20	3,749	147
	Braintree	486	19,302	322	84	5,405	2,736	296	434	998	80	106	543	174	3,584
	Brentwood	1,288	92	5,328	84	919	62	515	168	62	82	159	6	699	98
	Castle Point	3,451	96	276	6,711	904	52	69	22	106	1,178	3,111	6	1,449	71
	Chelmsford	2,755	1,701	1,373	401	24,622	622	526	343	1,179	544	859	86	645	852
	Colchester	280	3,031	113	51	1,983	32,912	92	74	1,001	59	96	3,329	118	503
	Epping Forest	274	68	455	16	384	25	8,786	1,882	27	19	50	11	221	395
	Harlow	204	82	172	6	228	20	2,540	14,225	8	10	21	5	157	1,042
	Maldon	818	1,097	232	177	3,085	736	69	51	6,514	260	482	47	291	124
	Rochford	2,062	114	251	1,249	1,156	66	65	18	240	4,972	5,372	3	542	63
	Southend-on-Sea	2,921	136	303	1,963	1,105	98	89	43	296	3,589	25,652	19	1,116	93
	Tendring	102	774	73	9	580	6,731	74	30	187	30	37	20,691	102	232
	Thurrock	3,905	94	1,000	367	534	50	269	159	59	188	516	18	25,199	99
	Uttlesford	84	1,051	83	12	812	245	606	1,037	50	16	17	96	75	9,064

<sup>74</sup> Census 2021

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## Appendix 2: Approach to developing this proposal

This proposal has been developed through joint working across Greater Essex councils, supported by shared governance, coordinated data analysis, and structured engagement with partners and residents. A detailed options appraisal identified the four-unitary model as the most balanced and sustainable configuration.

### Approach



#### Development of the interim plan

The interim plan was developed between January and March 2025 and submitted to government in April 2024. This was prepared through wide-scale collaboration led by local authority leaders in Essex. Four thematic working groups were established to coordinate evidence gathering and analysis, alongside several key officer and member forums including:

- **Leaders and Chief Executives:** Regular meetings through the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives Forum (ELCE) to test and agree the approach to options appraisal, governance and engagement. This ensured a consistent and transparent process across all councils.
- **Section 151 Officers:** A dedicated finance working group co-ordinated on data collection, validation of assumptions and modelling of options.
- **Monitoring Officers and Democratic Services:** Officers worked together to consider future governance arrangements, including electoral implications and transitional structures.

This collaborative approach enabled the development of a shared evidence base, consistent assumptions and a common understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the region which has supported subsequent proposals.

#### Collaborative working since the interim plan

Following submission, it became clear that all councils in Greater Essex could not align on a single preferred option. However, collaboration has continued through regular meetings of the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives Forum (ELCE), supported by shared programme coordination and data exchange. Councils have worked together to refine the evidence base, test assumptions and maintain alignment on core principles for public service reform.

#### Engagement with our partners

Engagement with partners has taken place throughout the process, including:

- Dedicated sessions with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and Thurrock Commissioners through ELCE
- Dialogue with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) to understand implications for health and care integration
- Engagement with anchor institutions including the University of Essex and Anglia Ruskin University
- Engagement with the Essex Association of Local Councils to reflect neighbourhood-level perspectives

This engagement has informed the development of the proposal and helped shape the configuration of the preferred four-unitary model.

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## Engagement with our residents

The four-unitary model is grounded in meaningful local engagement and a clear understanding of community perspectives. Councils across the area have taken steps to involve residents, partners and stakeholders in shaping the proposal.

- **Essex County Council** commissioned Greater Essex-wide resident research on behalf of all the boroughs, and led targeted focus groups to explore resident views on local identity, service priorities and governance. An Essex-wide partner engagement survey was also carried out and shared by all councils with local stakeholders.
- **Thurrock Council** has carried out a resident engagement exercise including a resident survey, webinar, public meeting, and drop ins at local events and libraries. Its resident perception survey also asked questions about local identity and links.
- **Southend-on-Sea City Council** ran a public consultation to inform its position on local government reform.

This insight has been used to shape the proposal, including the configuration of the four-unitary authorities, the emphasis on local identity and the focus on service integration and prevention. *More detail is set out on this in Section 4: Criteria 4.*

## Options appraisal and focus on the four-unitary model

A detailed options appraisal was undertaken between April and June 2025. This assessed multiple configurations against government criteria, including population size, financial sustainability, service delivery and local identity. As part of this process, councils reviewed quantitative and qualitative data, tested assumptions and evaluated implementation complexity.

The four-unitary model emerged as the preferred option due to its balance of scale and localism, financial viability, and alignment with strategic infrastructure and service geographies. Further analysis was then undertaken to test the four-unitary model in detail and inform this final proposal.

## Developing the vision and principles for LGR

A vision and set of principles for local government reorganisation have been developed following engagement with other councils, partners and residents. These are included in Section 5 and provide a strategic framework for public service reform, guiding the design of new authorities and informing future service transformation.

## Financial modelling

The financial modelling process followed a consistent, structured methodology, grounded in learning from other LGR processes and aligned with government guidance.

The appropriate basis for estimation of costs and benefits were agreed through discussion with finance contacts and review of analysis undertaken - both nationally and within Greater Essex.

Three calculators, consistent with those being used to support other cases for Local Government Reorganisation, were then used to calculate the three core elements of the financial model: disaggregation costs, implementation costs, and gross revenue savings.

## Implementation planning

A high-level implementation plan has been developed and is set out in Section 6. It includes four phases:

1. **Discovery:** Programme setup, stakeholder mapping, data hub creation
2. **Preparation:** Governance, service planning, communications strategy
3. **Design:** Organisational blueprints, elections, legal compliance
4. **Transition and Launch:** Shadow authorities, officer leadership, go-live

The plan draws on lessons from other LGR programmes and includes risk mitigation, governance structures and Day 1 readiness planning.

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## Appendix 3: Strengths and challenges in Greater Essex

Greater Essex is a £50 billion economy with strong transport links, international ports and airports, and sectoral strengths in logistics, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing. Growth is being driven by Freeport investment, innovation hubs, housing and regeneration programmes, and targeted skills initiatives supporting inclusive and green economic development.

### Economic strengths and opportunities

Below is a summary of the key economic growth opportunities in Greater Essex. *These are discussed in relation to the proposed four-unitary model in Section 4: Criteria 1.*

Greater Essex economic growth opportunities	
<b>Trade and logistics</b>	<p>The geography and infrastructure of Essex make it a strategic location for trade, logistics and growth. Basildon's A127 Enterprise Corridor supports advanced manufacturing and distribution, while Braintree and Witham host major logistics parks such as Horizon 120 and Freebournes Industrial Estate. The region's strategic location, with access to the M25, A12, A13 and A120, underpins its role in national and international supply chains.</p> <p>Major projects position Essex as a future economic powerhouse supporting regional and national economic growth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stansted Airport is undergoing a £1.1 billion expansion, expected to create 5,000 jobs.</li> <li>• Thames Freeport, which includes London Gateway Port and Port of Tilbury, is driving over £4.5 billion in planned investment and 21,000 new jobs.</li> <li>• Freeport East features tax sites and innovation centres across north Essex and Suffolk, and plans to create 13,500 new jobs.</li> </ul>
<b>Innovation and enterprise</b>	<p>Innovation is supported by a distributed network of assets across Essex, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Southend-on-Sea is establishing a hub for micro and small enterprises, with strengths in creative industries, medical technologies and aviation. The LaunchPad innovation hub and Airport Business Park are key assets.</li> <li>• The Knowledge Gateway in Colchester, the Ford Dunton Campus in Basildon, and the Lakes Innovation Centre in Braintree, supporting growth in digital, clean tech and advanced engineering.</li> <li>• Harlow and Stansted provide key assets in the UK Innovation Corridor linking London with Cambridge, with the recent decision to locate the UK Health Security Agency in Harlow, providing a catalyst for further growth and innovation in the health sector.</li> </ul>
<b>Skills and workforce</b>	<p>Programmes such as Multiply, the Essex Apprenticeship Hub and the Greater Essex Careers Hub have already supported thousands of residents into training and employment. The Greater Essex Skills Council and Local Skills Improvement Plan are already aligning provision with employer needs across all districts, with place-based delivery through institutions such as Colchester Institute, Basildon's Centre for Digital Technologies, South Essex College (with campuses in Southend and Grays), and the University of Essex, which has a significant local student population and strong links to regional employers.</p>

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<b>Housing and regeneration</b>	Strategic planning powers sought through devolution would enable delivery of sustainable, well-connected communities, and support the delivery of the 200,000 new homes needed by 2040. Growth is planned across the county, including the Tendring-Colchester Garden Community, Harlow and Gilston Garden Town, Dunton Hills in Brentwood, and regeneration in Basildon and Harlow town centres. These complement brownfield opportunities in Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock, including relocation of industrial uses and waterfront regeneration.
<b>Green growth</b>	Greater Essex aims to create 19,000 green jobs by 2030, supported by retrofit programmes, clean energy infrastructure and local energy systems. Investment in solar, hydrogen and offshore wind is being pursued through partnerships with Freeports and private sector investors. Local initiatives include Maldon's Causeway employment zone, Basildon's EV infrastructure programme, and Thurrock's green business grants.
<b>Inclusive growth</b>	The Levelling Up Essex programme has targeted deprivation including areas across Canvey Island, Basildon, Clacton and Jaywick, delivering community hubs, digital inclusion and skills support. Over 140,000 residents have been supported to date.  These efforts are complemented by regeneration initiatives supported through the Towns Fund and other programmes in places such as Tilbury, Colchester, Harlow, Purfleet-on-Thames and Southend-on-Sea. GECCA's ambition is to reduce differences in economic, social, and infrastructure outcomes between different geographic areas across the region.

### Local Government challenges

Below is a summary of the key local government challenges in Greater Essex. *These are discussed in relation to the proposed four-unitary model throughout Section 4: Case for Change.*

Local Government challenges in Greater Essex		Key Criteria
<b>Financial sustainability</b>	Thurrock's financial position is a key driver for change. The council has been under a Best Value intervention since September 2022 and issued a Section 114 notice in December 2022 linked to its failed investment strategy and following the departure of the Section 151 Officer in March 2021. While progress has been made, Thurrock continues to face significant debt and structural financial pressures and can currently only set balanced budgets with exceptional financial support from government via capitalisation directions.	2
<b>Rising service demand and costs</b>	Demand for services continues to rise and create additional financial pressures on authorities. In 2023/24, total expenditure on adult social care rose to £32.0 billion, an annual increase of 12.8% in cash terms and 6.3% in real terms. Gross current expenditure excluding NHS income increased to £27.2 billion, up 8.1% in real terms. <sup>75</sup> Council costs to provide care and support for working age adults is estimated to grow to reach £17bn by the end of 2030. If the current growth in working-age adult social care support continues, this will lead to a total increased cost to local authorities of at least 50% – or £6bn more per year. <sup>76</sup>	3

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/long-reads/social-care-360-expenditure>

<sup>76</sup> The Forgotten story of social care, A County Councils Network and Newton Research Programme

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<b>Ageing population</b>	Greater Essex has an ageing population, with all areas experiencing growth in the number of residents aged 65 and over <sup>77</sup> , with Rochford, Chelmsford, Colchester and Brentwood particularly impacted. This is amplified by the relatively flat growth in the 20-64 age range. This demographic shift is increasing demand for adult social care, housing adaptations, health services and community support. Rising complexity of care needs, workforce shortages, and fragmented service delivery are contributing to financial strain and operational challenges.	3
<b>Deprivation</b>	Several areas across Greater Essex, particularly coastal and urban districts such as Thurrock, Tendring, Basildon and Southend-on-Sea, experience persistent deprivation and figures in the lowest 10% nationally. These areas face lower life expectancy, higher rates of long-term illness, and increased demand for support services. There is a contrast with some neighbouring areas which are in the top 10% nationally. This presents broad challenges and requires differentiated service delivery approaches.	3
<b>Health inequalities</b>	There are clear disparities in health outcomes across the region. Public health metrics show that areas such as Thurrock, Tendring, Basildon and Harlow have higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and respiratory conditions <sup>78</sup> . These inequalities drive demand for adult social care and increase long-term costs.	3
<b>Productivity</b>	Districts with high deprivation often also have limited access to high-value employment and a lower GVA per capita. Despite proximity to strategic assets like Freeports, ports and airports, places such as Tendring and Thurrock have struggled to attract sustained investment and diversify their economies. This limits growth and constrains councils' ability to generate revenue through business rates and employment. The majority of businesses in Greater Essex are also Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), employing fewer than 10 people. This creates challenges in job creation including through apprenticeships and other entry level schemes.	1
<b>Skilled employment</b>	Greater Essex has a shortage of high skilled jobs. Around 100,000 additional workers qualified at level 4+ would be needed to match national averages. Districts such as Braintree, Castle Point and Epping Forest have limited access to higher education and advanced employment opportunities.	1
<b>Infrastructure</b>	Transport infrastructure is under pressure, particularly in east-west connectivity and rural areas such as Maldon and Rochford. Rural areas including Uttlesford and parts of Braintree also face challenges with public transport access. The current system is heavily reliant on car travel, with limited public transport options in some districts. This affects access to services and limits economic mobility.	1
<b>Neighbourhood governance</b>	The current landscape of town and parish councils across Greater Essex is uneven. Some areas have no formal local structures, while others have multiple. This variation presents a risk of inconsistency, duplication or democratic gaps.	6
<b>Climate change</b>	Flooding, coastal erosion and overheating are affecting communities across Essex. These environmental risks are particularly acute in coastal districts such as Maldon, Southend-on-Sea, and Tendring and require coordinated planning and investment in resilience.	1 and 5
<b>Housing and homelessness</b>	Greater Essex has uneven housing delivery and rising homelessness. While areas like Colchester and Chelmsford consistently meet housing targets, others such as Basildon and Southend-on-Sea fall short. Maldon and Tendring face viability and infrastructure constraints, while Braintree and Uttlesford have land availability but limited delivery capacity. Homelessness rates	1

<sup>77</sup> [Estimates of the population for England and Wales - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>78</sup> [Life expectancy for local areas of Great Britain - Office for National Statistics](#)

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	vary significantly, with some districts exceeding 1.4 per 1,000 households <sup>79</sup> . For Temporary Accommodation, there are some councils who will exceed 5.3 households in temporary accommodation per 1,000 household <sup>75</sup> .	
<b>Green growth delivery</b>	Essex has set ambitious targets for green growth, including 19,000 new green jobs by 2030. However, delivery is fragmented across districts. Maldon's Causeway zone, Basildon's EV infrastructure programme and Thurrock's green business grants are promising but lack strategic coordination. Councils need joined-up planning across transport, energy and land use to realise environmental goals and unlock investment in clean energy infrastructure.	1 and 5
<b>Inclusive growth disparities</b>	Despite targeted programmes like Levelling Up Essex, disparities in economic and social outcomes persist. Areas such as Jaywick, Canvey Island and Clacton continue to experience entrenched deprivation. Regeneration efforts are underway but require sustained coordination across councils to ensure inclusive growth reaches all communities.	1 and 5
<b>Innovation and enterprise fragmentation</b>	Innovation assets are distributed across Essex, Southend's LaunchPad, Colchester's Knowledge Gateway, Basildon's Ford Dunton Campus, but are not strategically aligned. Councils lack mechanisms to coordinate investment and link innovation to local delivery priorities. This limits the ability to scale enterprise zones and attract high-value sectors.	1
<b>Governance complexity</b>	The current two-tier system with 15 councils creates duplication and inconsistency in service delivery. This fragmentation limits strategic coordination, slows decision-making, and reduces responsiveness to demand. It also creates confusion for residents and partners navigating overlapping responsibilities.	1 and 6

<sup>79</sup> [Tables on homelessness - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tables-on-homelessness)



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# Appendix 4: Draft CIPFA Template

## Four-unitary model Base Template

### Base Template

This sheet can be copied (between the two 'Sum>>' sheets) to enable you to build up a scenario from a number of working sheets.

### Comparison model

Source

Units

Year

Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast
1 April 26 to 31 March 27	1 April 27 to 31 March 28	1 April 28 to 31 March 29	1 April 29 to 31 March 30	1 April 30 to 31 March 31	1 April 31 to 31 March 32	1 April 32 to 31 March 33	1 April 33 to 31 March 34	1 April 34 to 31 March 35	1 April 35 to 31 March 36	1 April 36 to 31 March 37
Total Year 0 to Year 10										

### Option/Component/Scenario

#### Header inputs

County

Council names and type of councils

Component

Scenario

Author

Version

Date

Short description/comment

Greater Essex
Proposal:
West Essex: Brentwood, Epping Forest, Harlow, Thurrock
North Essex: Braintree, Chelmsford, Uttlesford
East Essex: Colchester, Maldon, Tendring
South Essex: Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford, Southend-on-Sea
Four Unitary Model

Further Description if required.

### Financial information

#### Set up Transitional Costs (without inflation)

£000s

Details of source files or reference to meeting or document can be recorded here for each cost line

Employee costs  
Premises  
Transport  
Supplies and Services  
ICT  
Third Party Payments  
Income  
Contingency  
Other (please specify in commentary)


Enter the incremental transitional and ongoing costs and benefits in the relevant section below - column M to W										
Sign convention - additional costs or loss of income are +ve. Record figures in £ 000's.										
-	25,665	25,665	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	51,330
-	3,233	3,233	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,467
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	1,617	1,617	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3,233
-	2,829	2,829	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5,658
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	4,042	4,042	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8,083
-	3,031	3,031	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,063
Total	-	40,417	40,417	-	-	-	-	-	-	80,834

#### Key Assumptions/Notes

This includes costs related to workforce exist, development and a transition team
This includes the cost of reconfiguration of buildings, costs of disposal, and termination fees on leases.

#### Annual On-going Incremental costs (without inflation)

£000s

Employee costs  
Premises  
Transport  
Supplies and Services  
ICT  
Third Party Payments  
Income  
Contingency  
Other (please specify in commentary)


Sign convention - additional costs or loss of income are +ve.										
-	1,893	8,485	16,931	16,931	16,931	16,931	16,931	16,931	16,931	145,605
-	213	1,067	2,133	2,133	2,133	2,133	2,133	2,133	2,133	18,344
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	107	533	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	1,067	9,172
-	187	933	1,866	1,866	1,866	1,866	1,866	1,866	1,866	16,051
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	267	1,333	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	2,666	22,930
-	200	1,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	17,197
Total	-	2,666	13,331	26,663	26,663	26,663	26,663	26,663	26,663	229,299

#### Key Assumptions/Notes

This includes costs related to workforce exist and development.
Ongoing estates management and maintenance costs

#### Annual On-going Incremental benefits/savings (without inflation)

£000s

Employee costs  
Premises  
Transport  
Supplies and Services  
ICT  
Third Party Payments  
Income  
Contingency  
Other (please specify in commentary)


Sign convention - Savings - lower costs or gains of income are -ve in brackets.										
-	(2,420)	(12,100)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(24,201)	(208,127)
-	(495)	(2,475)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(42,571)
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	(550)	(2,750)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(5,500)	(47,302)
-	(495)	(2,475)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(4,950)	(42,571)
-	(1,100)	(5,500)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(11,000)	(94,603)
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	(220)	(1,100)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(18,921)
-	(220)	(1,100)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(2,200)	(18,921)
Total	-	(5,500)	(27,501)	(55,002)	(55,002)	(55,002)	(55,002)	(55,002)	(55,002)	(473,016)
Grand Total	-	37,583	26,247	(28,339)	(28,339)	(28,339)	(28,339)	(28,339)	(28,339)	(162,882)

#### Key Assumptions/Notes

This includes savings related to optimised leadership and a right-sized organisation in a business as
This includes asset and property optimisation
This includes the impact of consolidating corporate services
Digitisation and IT systems
This includes both service contract consolidation, procurement and third-party spend
Estimated savings related to Democratic Services

-ve is a net savings +ve is a net cost.



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## Three-unitary model Base Template

**Base Template** This sheet can be copied (between the two "Summary" sheets) to enable you to build up a scenario from a number of working sheets.

Comparison model	Source	Units	Year	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	
				Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	
				1 April 26 to 31 March 27	1 April 27 to 31 March 28	1 April 28 to 31 March 29	1 April 29 to 31 March 30	1 April 30 to 31 March 31	1 April 31 to 31 March 32	1 April 32 to 31 March 33	1 April 33 to 31 March 34	1 April 34 to 31 March 35	1 April 35 to 31 March 36	1 April 36 to 31 March 37	Total Year 0 to Year 10

**Option/Component/Scenario**

**Header Inputs**

County	Greener Essex	Further Description if required.
Council names and type of councils		
Component		
Scenario	Three Unitary Model	
Author		
Version		
Date		
Short description/comment		

**Financial information**

**Set up Transitional Costs (without inflation)** £000s

Enter the incremental transitional and ongoing costs and benefits in the relevant section below - column M to W  
Sign convention - additional costs or loss of income are +ve. Record figures in £ 000's.

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Total
Employee costs	-	29,750	29,750	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59,500
Premises	-	3,748	3,748	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7,496
Transport	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies and Services	-	1,874	1,874	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3,748
ICT	-	3,280	3,280	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,559
Third Party Payments	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contingency	-	4,685	4,685	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9,370
Other (please specify in commentary)	-	3,514	3,514	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7,028
<b>Total</b>	-	46,850	46,850	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	93,700

Details of source files or reference to meeting or document can be recorded here for each cost line

**Annual On-going Incremental costs (without inflation)** £000s

Sign convention - additional costs or loss of income are +ve.

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Total
Employee costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Premises	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Transport	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies and Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ICT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Third Party Payments	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Income	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contingency	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other (please specify in commentary)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

**Annual On-going Incremental benefits/savings (without inflation)** £000s

Sign convention - Savings - lower costs or gains of income are -ve in brackets.

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Total
Employee costs	-	-	(4,774)	(10,548)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(10,096)	(147,994)
Premises	-	-	(9771)	(1,953)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(30,272)
Transport	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies and Services	-	-	(1,085)	(2,170)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(4,340)	(33,835)
ICT	-	-	(9771)	(1,953)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(3,906)	(30,272)
Third Party Payments	-	-	(2,170)	(4,340)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(8,680)	(87,270)
Income	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contingency	-	-	(434)	(868)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(13,454)
Other (please specify in commentary)	-	-	(434)	(868)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(1,736)	(13,454)
<b>Total</b>	-	-	(10,850)	(21,700)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(336,350)

-ve is a net savings +ve is a net cost.

**Grand Total**

	Year 0	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Total
Transitional Costs	-	46,850	46,850	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	93,700
Annual On-going Incremental costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Annual On-going Incremental benefits/savings	-	-	(10,850)	(21,700)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(336,350)
<b>Grand Total</b>	-	46,850	36,000	(21,700)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(43,400)	(242,850)

**Key Assumptions/Notes**

This includes costs related to workforce exit, development and a transition team

This includes the cost of reconfiguration of buildings, costs of disposal, and termination fees on leases.

This includes costs related to workforce exit and development.

Ongoing estates management and maintenance costs

Work required to harmonise processes, and facilitate effective service transition. This includes specific

This includes savings related to optimised leadership and a right-sized organisation in a business as

This includes asset and property optimisation

This includes the impact of consolidating corporate services

Digitisation and IT systems

This includes both service contract consolidation, procurement and third-party spend

Estimated savings related to Democratic Services

