

Appendix 20: Summary note of Scrutiny Committee discussion regarding Local Government Reorganisation – 22 September 2025

The discussion on item 2, regarding local government reorganisation, covered several key points:

The Chair said the meeting had been called to consider the submission of proposals to government for local government reorganisation. He said the committee's role was to hold the administration to account and test the proposals put forward, to assess whether they were robust, deliverable and in the public interest.

The Leader was invited to speak to the report. She explained that local government reorganisation was happening, so the choice was whether to shape it or let it happen with no input. She said that the 5 unitary model provided good value for money and a strong sense of place and belonging for residents and outlined the rationale for proposing a model of 5 unitary authorities for Essex, with Uttlesford, Epping and Harlow forming one authority of around 325,000 people. She noted the government's guidance of 500,000 population, which was clarified as a guiding principle rather than a hard target.

Councillors raised concerns about the reliability and consistency of the financial figures across the different business cases. Cllr A Reeve noted significant disparities in areas including IT and social care.

Officers explained that although each council had the same base data, each bid will have made its own assumptions and the detail behind those assumptions had not been shared amongst the other bids.

The Leader said with regard to the reliability and credibility of the 3 unitary model, this bid was drawn from the work of PWC and Essex County Council officers alone, whereas the 5 unitary bid used Grant Thornton work and had input and challenge from Section 151 officers from Southend, Basildon, Chelmsford and Uttlesford.

Councillor Moran said that the 5 unitary model did not align with the government's guidance on population size for new unitaries. He raised concerns about the proposed number of councillors per ward, stating it was lower than the national average for unitary authorities.

The Leader said there was a letter from the Minister (*page 101 in the Council pack*), stating a 500,000 minimum population was guidance and bids needed to justify if proposed populations were above or below that figure.

Cllr Bagnall questioned whether consideration had been given to a methodology by which all councillors could have had their say and rank the competing bids. The Chief Executive explained that constitutionally Full Council was only allowed to vote matters up or down and there was no facility for a multiple-choice vote.

Appendix 20: Summary note of Scrutiny Committee discussion regarding Local Government Reorganisation – 22 September 2025

The Chair said in terms of commitment to scrutiny and oversight it was hard to criticise the executive.

Councillor Sell said he felt the process was rushed by Government but expressed general support for the financial viability of the proposals, but raised concerns about the transition and payback costs noted in the PWC report. He said the District Councils Network had published information saying the PWC report was out of date. He also pointed out that the Government had not commissioned any independent research to support “mega councils”. Additionally, he felt he was there to do what was best for residents of Uttlesford and there needed to be some safeguards, such as area committees and a physical base in the district.

Cllr Luck agreed that the process was rushed but the council did not have a choice. He said the business cases were not like-for-like comparisons, but that the 5 unitary option was the best for neighbourhoods.

Councillor Criscione asked whether the Cabinet was looking at the issue through an Uttlesford lens or a Greater Essex lens. The Leader responded by saying they had to look at what is best for the whole of Essex, albeit through an Uttlesford lens. She added that she felt the Rochford bid was a little self-serving.

Cllr Criscione questioned the criteria used in the assessment, stating it was focused on the government's requirements rather than the needs of Uttlesford residents. He also raised concerns about the potential impact on the Thurrock debt *situation (page 18 paragraph 11.8 and page 23, paragraph 13.5 and 13.6 of the Council pack)*, council house stock and council tax harmonization.

He said all models seemed financially viable although questioned the believability of the PWC payback figures for the 5 unitary option that were in the 3 unitary bid.

With regard to economic development, he was a firm believer in the London – Cambridge corridor, which the 5 unitary bid preserves.

His final point was that of green belt – if Uttlesford came together with Epping and Harlow he was concerned about where housing would go.

The Leader said Harlow wanted to be a city and suggested that development could take place around the existing town, with the other areas just taking the shortfall.

Cllr Gooding said one reason he was less supportive of the 5 unitary option was that there was, with regard to SEND provision, a serious risk that in other parts of the county people would fare less well. He said SEND was not a function just of population, and that there needed to be capital funding to provide new facilities.

The Leader said the 5 unitary model would represent people more closely, with smaller populations, and Cllr Sell said adult social care spend per head in Thurrock and

Appendix 20: Summary note of Scrutiny Committee discussion regarding Local Government Reorganisation – 22 September 2025

Southend was lower than the larger Essex County Council. He said he saw a deep difference between the business cases, with the centre of decision making being further away, but with the 5 unitary model, the headquarters would be closer. He was concerned that the fewer the number of councillors, the more likely it was that people who had a day job would be pushed out.

Councillor Coote spoke in support of the 325,000 population size, stating it would provide better local representation and accountability. He said social housing was his main driver.

Cllr Driscoll spoke about the importance of local decision-making and service delivery, and expressed concerns about the larger unitary models potentially forgetting more deprived areas.

Cllr A Reeve said the 5 unitaries bid was the only one that linked the three current areas with the greatest housing shortfall.

Councillor Haynes said the officer assessment of the business cases was based on the Government criteria and he would liked to have seen criteria relevant to the residents of Uttlesford and how each proposal would affect them. He said there should be concern about the harmonisation of council tax and questioned how the PWC analysis in the 3 unitary bid could be taken seriously, given it showed all costs in year 1 and all savings achieved by the end of year 2.

The Leader said not one recently established unitary council had saved money yet. With regard to the assessment, it was against the criteria that the Government had asked for, and it was a bid that was going to the Government.

The Chief Executive said a council tax comparison could be done but that it may give a false impression as could only show the relative levels today and only speculate about the future.

Councillor Bagnall raised the financial analysis in the 3 unitary bid (*page 408 of the Council pack*) and questioned why the 53 year payback time for the 5 unitary model was not similarly reflected in either of the 4 unitary models in that bid's analysis. He also asked for clarification on the Thurrock debt issue.

The Chief Executive said he thought it was reflected, and drew members' attention to the analysis by the Chief Executive of Chelmsford City Council (*page 820 of the Council pack*) of the variations between the PWC and Grant Thornton reports, contained within the document pack.

The Chair concluded the meeting by asking the Leader what the shortcomings of the Cabinet proposal were. The Leader said she would prefer even smaller authorities but emphasised she was very pleased with the proposal. It best reflected the principles of

Appendix 20: Summary note of Scrutiny Committee discussion regarding Local Government Reorganisation – 22 September 2025

localism and would serve the interests of Uttlesford residents. She said that the 5 unitary model would allow for more responsive and accountable local services, particularly in areas like adult social care and children's services.

The Chair asked the Leader why the 5 unitary model was better than the 3 unitary model. She said to summarise it was better due to localism, at the beginning of the process it had been decided that the guiding principle was about the feel of the place and local representation. She said the Council had the London to Cambridge corridor and the natural economic growth of this area which the others do not, and that the district naturally aligns with Harlow and Epping.

The Chair said that it had been an informed debate and congratulated the members and Cabinet for their thorough review of the documentation. The Chair also thanked the officers for their huge amount of work and the quality of the analysis.

The Chair asked Members of the Scrutiny Committee to vote either in favour of the Cabinet paper or against. Six Members voted in favour, 1 against and 4 abstained.

The Chair called the meeting to a close at 9.04pm.