| Committee: | Audit and Standards Committee | Date: |
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| Title: | The Government's Electoral Reform Strategy and Local Government Review in Essex | Thursday, 27 November 2025 |

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## Summary

1. This paper seeks to summarise the key changes proposed under the Government's Electoral Reform Strategy and give a brief outline of the Local Government Review plans about electoral arrangements.

## Recommendations

2. To note the implications of the Government's planned electoral reforms and subsequent future legal changes and implications, especially in line with Local Government Review.

## Financial Implications

3. None.

## Background Papers

4. None

## Impact

5.

| Communication/Consultation | Communication with elected members and bodies from Parish Clerks to MP level |
| --- | --- |
| Community Safety | None |
| Equalities | None |
| Health and Safety | None |
| Human Rights/Legal Implications | Elections and Democracy Bill to be introduced which will have implications for existing electoral law |
| Sustainability | None |
| Ward-specific impacts | None |

| Workforce/Workplace | None |
| --- | --- |

**Situation**

6.1　The Government this summer published its publication on "Restoring trust in our democracy, our strategy for modern and secure elections".  Measures include clear Labour Party manifesto commitments such as lowering the voting age to 16 and automated voter registration. Scotland already has voting from aged 16 for the Scottish Parliamentary elections and this has been in place since 2016.  Wales has had voting from aged 16 for their Senedd elections since 2021. Pilots are taking place in Wales for automated voter registration.

6.2　The changes will require legislation and will be in the form of an Elections and Democracy Bill. Secondary legislation will implement the detailed measures.

6.3　Key changes and implications

**6.3.1　Electoral timetable changes**

- **Registration deadline to move from midnight on the 12th day before the poll to 5pm – in line with absent vote deadlines**

   Though on face value this seems a minor change, this is welcomed by the Returning Officer as it will allow administrators more time to process the new electors and produce subsequent correspondence such as confirmation notification letters and resultant poll cards for eligible electors.

- **Postal vote deadline will be moved from 5pm, 11 working days before the poll to 5pm, 14 working days before the poll**

   This is greatly welcomed by administrators as it will allow more time to finalise and issue the postal ballot papers ahead of the poll, though admittedly at the expense of the electors who would have their deadline for application reduce by 3 working days.

- **Nominations deadline will be moved from 4pm to midday on the final day of nominations at all polls**

   This again is welcomed by the Returning Officer as it allows more time to process and check candidate details and publish legal notices.  Such tasks must be done as soon as possible after the deadline, such as sending data to printers to start producing ballot papers and postal voting packs. More processing time for the Returning Officer and his staff is paramount.

**6.3.2 Postal and Proxy Voting Changes**

- **Allow Returning Officers to issue replacement postal votes from after the postal vote application deadline if they are satisfied the original postal vote is lost or not received and will not arrive in time for the postal voter to cast their vote**

  At present legally these cannot be issued until after 6 working days before the polls which is unnecessary and often too late for the elector. This measure is a clear benefit to the electorate.

- **Allow a postal voter to cancel their postal vote and vote in person or appoint an emergency proxy after the postal vote application deadline on the basis the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is satisfied their postal vote has not and will not arrive in time for them to cast their vote**

  This is greatly welcomed and will gives the ERO more flexibility to help the elector who may be disenfranchised through no fault of their own.

### 6.3.3    Communications and registration

- **Encourage Returning Officers to send election information via email, with guidance from the Electoral Commission**

  Further detail is awaited about what information this would involve and what burden if any this will place on the Returning Officer and his staff. The concept of providing further impartial information to the electorate is welcomed though.

### 6.3.4    Improving nominations

- **Simplify and rationalise nominations forms, including making clearer the penalty for lying to the Returning Officer**

Nomination papers need reviewing for greater clarity and introduces penalties for candidates who seek to circumnavigate the legislation is greatly welcomed by the Returning Officer.

- **Further consider rules around sham/misleading nominations**

Any measures to protect current candidates and parties and make it very clear to the voting public is welcomed by the Returning Officer.

### 6.3.5    Polling Day

- **The use of technology by polling staff is to be explored such as managing registers and other processes**

This is welcomed by the Returning Officer and his staff and will support and validation to changes that are already happening across the UK. Such measures now are often price prohibitive and clarity in this area is needed.

### 6.3.6    Supporting election delivery

- **Carry out a review of electoral print and delivery supplier market**

    There is concern on the amount of capacity in the print market, so a review of this area is overdue and welcomed. This would help lower the risk of election delivery.

### 6.4.0    Other Proposals

### 6.4.1  Votes at 16

- The voting age will be lowered to 16 with registration from aged 14.

- Electoral administrators will be included in work to engage young people in democracy
- Steps will be taken to help the education sector support the implementation of votes at 16, with youth and civil society groups

The key issue for the ERO is the mechanism for achieving this as there is currently a disconnect between young people and registering/voting and this will require measure support from the Department for Education in identifying and transitioning your voters to the register of electors.

### 6.4.2  Automated registration

- **The Government will actively test methods of such automated registration, but safeguards will be introduced to reduce risk to anonymous electors**

    The aim of this change is to maximise registration which currently is based on the public and electoral administrators being proactive and is welcomed by the ERO to increase registration levels.

- **The open register will change from current opt out to active opt in**

    This is welcomed. Currently electors must actively opt out of appearing in the open marketing register. This reflects other services where you must actively choose to receive marketing information.

### 6.4.3    Changes to voter ID

- UK issued bank cards to be added to the list of acceptable ID.

- Allow digital forms of ID to be shown – this for example will include the digital driving licence.

Uttlesford is an area with few issues over provision of voter ID, however, all changes to give the electors more options of identification are welcomed by the Returning Officer.

### 6.4.4 Tackling abuse and intimidation

- Further measures to be introduced to prevent and tackle potential abuse and intimidation of candidates, their agents and electoral officials.

Any measures in this area are welcomed to protect public officials in addition to candidates and agents.

### 6.4.5 Candidate identification

- Candidates will be required to provide evidence of identity.

This is currently based on trust and is open to abuse and candidates will show identity in the same way electors do when they go to vote.

### 6.5.0 Local Government Review within Essex

### 6.5.1 Timetable
- September 2025 – deadline for the submission of formal unitary proposals.
- November 2025 to early 2026 – public consultation period.
- Elections – 7 May 2026 – Elected Mayoral for the Greater Essex area, plus other scheduled elections. The Essex County Council election was just postponed and not cancelled from May this year, so plans are for it to take place along with the County Combined Authority Mayoral election next May, unless it is formally cancelled by the Government before the end of March.
- Structural Changes Order (SCO). This is the Statutory Implement negotiated before the summer recess to agree legislative basis for the new unitary councils.
- Parliamentary journey of the Order begins autumn 2026 and completes before the Pre-Election Period begins in March 2027.
- Elections – 6 May 2027 – Shadow unitary councils set up for members to serve an initial 4-year term (first year in shadow and then a 3-year term on the new unitary council).
- Vesting Day – 1 April 2028 – new unitary councils come out of "shadow" and existing council are simultaneously abolished.

### 6.5.2   Elections

**2026**

As referred to in 6.5.1 above, as part of the Devolution Deal, a County Combined Authority Mayor will be elected for the Greater Essex area, this comprising existing district councils within the County Council area of Essex plus the two existing unitary councils of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock.

There will be a lead council to oversee this election. This legally must be a constituent member of the Combined Authority so this can only be either the County Council, Southend or Thurrock. Southend-on-Sea City Council's Chief Executive will be the Combined Authority Returning Officer. This Council's Local Returning Officer will be responsible for running the Voting Area of Uttlesford for the mayoral election in the same way that this occurs for the Essex Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election.

Legislation for this mayoral election is still to be laid in Parliament, and it is due to take place on 7 May, the same day as the previously postponed Essex County Council elections. There is still a possibility that the County Council elections may be postponed again and in effect, cancelled, and if so, County Council members' current term of office would be extended by a further 2 years.  It is the Government's current intention not to cancel such polls; however, they can be cancelled anytime right up to the Pre-Election Period starting at the end of March.


**2027**

We assume that Uttlesford's existing scheduled all out-district council elections will be cancelled and replaced by the Shadow Council elections to the new unitary council – but the Government has neither announced this as their intention nor made effect to it in law. Parish elections would we presume still take place on the same day.


**2028**

The next Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election for Essex is scheduled to take place; however, duties may well be incorporated within the powers of the new Greater Essex Mayor so this election would cease to exist, especially in light of the recent announcement by the Government to abolish these polls.


### 6.5.3 Electoral Boundaries

The basis for the new unitary authorities will most likely be either existing ward boundaries, or on existing county council electoral divisions – with these varying models being part of the different business cases submitted to Government,

awaiting a minded-to decision from Government in March 2026, put into law in the SCO process described above.

Whatever electoral arrangements are used for the Shadow Council membership and subsequent new councils from 1 April 2028, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England is committed to conducting a full review of electoral areas of the county, prior to the next full local elections after vesting Day (May 2031).

### 6.5.4 Term of Office

The term of office for members elected to the Shadow Council elections in 2027 would be for an initial 4-year term, the first year in shadow and then a 3-year term of the new unitary council. And every 4 years thereafter at the same time as all-out parish council elections.

Members of existing Districts/Boroughs/City Councils can continue to serve on their current council in addition to serving on any shadow council.

## Risk Analysis

7.

| Risk | Likelihood | Impact | Mitigating actions |
|------|-----------|--------|--------------------|
| None arising from this report, which is for information only. | N/A | N/A | N/A |

1 = Little or no risk or impact
2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.
3 = Significant risk or impact – action required
4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.