

Meeting: Cabinet
Date: 21 March 2025
Classification: Part 1
Key Decision: No
Title of Report: **Southend-on-Sea City Council's response to MHCLG's Greater Essex Devolution Consultation**

Executive Director: Claire Shuter, Executive Director of Strategy and Change
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Executive Councillor: Cllr Daniel Cowan, Leader of the Council

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The English Devolution White Paper was published in December 2024, setting out plans to redistribute power from central government to local communities and new strategic authorities across England.
- 1.2. In January 2025, the Council jointly wrote to Government with Essex County Council and Thurrock Council, expressing our interest in taking forward devolution within the Greater Essex area by requesting a place on the Government's Devolution Priority Programme, a fast-track programme that would see the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) in the quickest possible timescale and the first election for a mayor taking place in May 2026. On 5 February 2025, Government confirmed Greater Essex had been accepted onto the programme.
- 1.3. On 17 February 2025 the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) launched a public consultation in Greater Essex. The consultation seeks views, particularly from interested parties including those who live and work across Greater Essex, on the effect of establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority in the area.
- 1.4. The Council is a respondent to the consultation and has drafted a formal response. The Council agrees that the establishment of a MCCA for Greater Essex is likely to improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of some or all of the people who live or work in Southend; will secure effective and convenient local government in Southend and across Greater Essex; and is based on a geography that reflects the identities and interests of local communities.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- 2.1. **Considers and approves the Council's formal response to the MHCLG's Greater Essex Devolution consultation; and**

2.2. **Delegates authority to the Chief Executive and Executive Director for Strategy and Change to make any final changes to the response prior to submission by 13 April 2025, in consultation with the Leader of the Council.**

3. Background

- 3.1. In the King's Speech 2024 the Government announced its intention to bring forward an English Devolution Bill, to deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to transfer power out of Westminster and into local communities.
- 3.2. The English Devolution White Paper was published in December 2024, setting out plans to redistribute power from central government to local communities and strategic authorities across England. The core aim is to foster economic growth, improve public services, and ensure policies are tailored to local needs. It proposed a shift from "devolution by deal" to a systematic devolution framework with clear pathways for strategic authorities, a new type of local authority, to gain increased powers and funding - especially for those with directly elected mayors.
- 3.3. In January 2025, the Council jointly wrote to Government with Essex County Council and Thurrock Council, expressing interest in taking forward devolution within the Greater Essex area by requesting a place on the Government's Devolution Priority Programme, a fast-track programme that would see the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority in the quickest possible timescale and the first election for a mayor taking place in May 2026.
- 3.4. Government correspondence received on 5 February 2025 confirmed Greater Essex's acceptance onto the Devolution Priority Programme. In this, the Government confirmed that the MHCLG would be leading a public consultation on devolution to Greater Essex in early part of 2025.
- 3.5. Public consultation on the benefits of devolution and the establishment of new authorities is a key part of the Minister of State's assessment and decision-making process, with certain statutory tests needing to be met in order to proceed to achieving a devolution agreement and establishing a MCCA.
- 3.6. This consultation opened on 17 February 2025 and will run until 11:59pm on 13 April 2025. It seeks views, particularly from interested parties including those who live and work across Greater Essex, on the effect of establishing a MCCA in the area. It includes questions on the proposed geography and how the MCCA will make decisions, together with questions on the effects of working across this geography through a MCCA. It does not seek views on the subject of local government reorganisation.
- 3.7. As the consultation is being led and delivered by MHCLG, the Council, along with Essex County Council and Thurrock Council, are respondents to the consultation and have no formal role in its delivery. However, we are able to promote the consultation to residents, businesses and other interested groups and partner organisations.

4. The MHCLG Consultation on Devolution in Greater Essex

- 4.1. Section 46 of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 provides that the Secretary of State may make regulations to establish a (Mayoral) Combined County Authority in an area only if:
- the Secretary of State considers that doing so is likely to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of some or all of the people who live and work in the area;
 - the Secretary of State considers that doing so is appropriate having regard to the need to secure effective and convenient local government; and to reflect the identities and interests of the local communities;
 - the Secretary of State considers that doing so will achieve the specific purposes of the CCA set out in the proposal submitted by the relevant authority or authorities;
 - the constituent councils consent; and
 - any consultation required has been carried out.
- 4.2. As such, the MHCLG is delivering a public consultation on the proposal to form a MCCA for the local government areas of Essex County Council, Thurrock Council and Southend-on-Sea City Council (referred to as Greater Essex in the consultation). MHCLG has adopted an “online first” strategy for the delivery of the consultation, with respondents encouraged to submit their responses directly using the department’s Consult platform. Methods for submitting responses by post and email are also offered.
- 4.3. The consultation opened on 17 February 2025 and will run until 11:59pm on 13 April 2025.
- 4.4. The approach to developing the Council’s response has been to assess the impact and risk of the devolution proposals, in order to present an informed and considered response to the consultation.

5. Southend-on-Sea City Council’s Response to the Consultation

- 5.1. The Council strongly agrees that the establishment of a Mayoral Combined County Authority for Greater Essex:
- 5.1.1. is likely to improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of some or all of the people who live or work in Southend
 - 5.1.2. will secure effective and convenient local government in Southend and across Greater Essex
 - 5.1.3. is based on a geography that reflects the identities and interests of local communities.
- 5.2. Key rationale for the elements of the Council’s response (attached in full at **Appendix 1**) are as follows:
- 5.2.1. **Proposed geography:** Southend-on-Sea City Council has long supported the devolution of powers from Whitehall to local government and agrees that establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the Greater Essex area

- 5.2.2. **Governance arrangements:** The establishment of a mayoral combined county authority for Greater Essex represents a significant step forward in enhancing democratic accountability, strategic oversight, and regional influence, with the governance arrangements proposed offering a sensible approach to ensuring equity and consensus.
- 5.2.3. **Supporting the economy:** The Council considers that the power and flexibility to make strategic, long-term and financially viable decisions about the facilitation, coordination, and delivery of key services and priorities will bring significant benefits to Southend's local economy, providing opportunities to improve productivity, attract inward investment, and improve labour market outcomes for Southend.
- 5.2.4. **Improving social outcomes:** In attaining the devolved powers and funding required to improve the local economy, tackle spatial disparity and inequality, and align strategic decision making across local public services in partnership with health, alliance and voluntary sector organisations, the Council considers that a devolution agreement will tangibly improve economic, social wellbeing and connectivity in Southend.
- 5.2.5. **Local Government services:** The Council considers that a devolution agreement and the establishment of a MCCA will allow Greater Essex to reshape public services in light of local needs and preferences, ensuring efficient, integrated and well-sequenced services for Southend, given the autonomy and local decision-making that is enabled by the powers and funding to be devolved.
- 5.2.6. **The local natural environment:** The Council considers that there are clear benefits to be had from linking environmental interventions at a pan-Essex scale and being able to take a systems-level approach as enabled by the Devolution Framework.
- 5.2.7. **Supporting needs of local communities:** The Council considers that the devolved powers and funding available through a devolution agreement will support the design of tailored solutions that genuinely improve the prosperity, health and wellbeing of Southend's residents and businesses.

6. Reasons for Decisions

- 6.1. To ensure that the Council takes the opportunity to submit an individual response to MHCLG's consultation.

7. Other Options

- 7.1. To not submit a consultation response. However, this would mean that the Council's distinct views would not be considered in the decision-making and assessment process for finalisation of a devolution agreement and the establishment of a MCCA for Greater Essex.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations to this report. However, the Council will maintain a close watch on any

financial implications arising from these decisions that may benefit or disadvantage the Authority.

9. Legal Implications

- 9.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations to this report.
- 9.2. Later in the process, there will be significant legal implications arising from the establishment of a MCCA, given that the functions to be exercised by these new strategic authorities will be enshrined in law via the English Devolution Bill (due to be introduced to Parliament in 2025). These implications will be considered in future reports to Council and Cabinet at the appropriate stage of the devolution process.

10. Policy Context

- 10.1. The English Devolution White Paper includes requirements for mayors to produce two new statutory strategy documents: a Local Growth Plan and a Spatial Development Strategy. It also says that mayors will lead on the production of two existing statutory strategy documents: the Local Skills Improvement Plan (currently the responsibility of employer-led bodies designated by the government) and the Local Transport Plan (an existing responsibility).
- 10.2. These requirements will have a significant impact on the Council's existing policy ecosystem. These implications will be considered in future reports to Council and Cabinet at the appropriate stage of the devolution process.

11. Carbon Impact

- 11.1. There is no direct carbon impact arising from the recommendations to this report.

12. Equalities

- 12.1. There are no direct equalities impacts arising from the recommendations to this report.
- 12.2. Devolution itself will have direct equalities impacts resulting from new, amended and ceased services or functions. These will be considered through a programme of equality analysis specific to the devolution programme as it progresses.

13. Consultation

- 13.1. The consultation response has been developed in collaboration and consultation with Cabinet Members and Council officers.

14. Appendices

- 14.1. **Appendix 1**: Southend-on-Sea City Council's response to MHCLG's Greater Essex Devolution Consultation
- 14.2. **Appendix 2**: MHCLG's Greater Essex Devolution Consultation document

15. Report Authorisation

This report has been approved for publication by:

	Name:	Date:
Executive Director(s)	Claire Shuter	07/03/2025
S151 Officer	Joe Chesterton	07/03/2025
Monitoring Officer	Susan Zeiss	07/03/2025
Relevant Cabinet Member(s)	Cllr Daniel Cowan	11/03/2025