

Southend-on-Sea City Council's response to the Greater Essex Devolution Consultation

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Author:

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The consultation questions and our response

Question 1 - Proposed Geography

To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to the area?

Response: Strongly Agree

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 (MCCA) over the proposed geography will deliver benefits to Southend and the Greater Essex area.

Greater Essex is an established functional economic geography with substantial untapped economic potential, settled travel to work areas and significant assets and connectivity that a devolution deal will help to capitalise on. We have a demonstrable successful history of working in partnership to achieve pan-Essex goals. A MCCA based on this geography will be recognisable to residents and businesses, preserve affective and effective identities, reflect the historic boundaries of the county and the two unitary authorities, and provide the ways and means in which to achieve deeper transformation than would be possible than working via joint committees.

The proposed geography experiences entrenched issues with low productivity, low skills, spatial disparities and social mobility and health inequality. As mayoral strategic authorities will be considered as the default delivery institution for new programmes or activity¹, under this model Greater Essex will not be affected by turbulence in the policy programme defined by central Government and will have more stable funding and capacity to deliver place-based policy and programmes of intervention that address local issues and solve local problems. In the same vein, a consolidated budget for the proposed geography could be used equitably across housing, regeneration, local growth, local transport, skills, retrofit, public health and employment support to provide long-term, stable support to achieve the priorities in the Corporate Plan and give Southend, as part of Greater Essex, the flexibilities and freedoms it needs to strategically direct funding to where it will have the most impact.

We understand that there may be concerns about introducing additional bureaucracy to the local government system as a result of establishing a mayoral strategic authority. We consider that this risk will be mitigated by delivering a programme of local government reorganisation across Greater Essex in parallel with the devolution programme.

Question 2 - Proposed Governance

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined County Authority?

Response: Strongly Agree

The proposal for establishing a MCCA with a democratically elected mayor and board constituted by representatives initially nominated by Southend-on-Sea City Council,

¹ MHCLG, Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth, 16 Dec 2024, p88

Essex County Council and Thurrock Council and eventually elected by the residents of these same areas, will ensure democratic accountability and amplify Southend's and Greater Essex's voices regionally and nationally, allowing for greater influence on strategic policy at all levels, with the proposed governance arrangements involving a weighted voting system.

The Council strongly supports the proposal for the weighted voting arrangement – which would see Essex County Council appointing three representatives to be constituent members of the MCCA, and Southend on Sea City Council and Thurrock Council each appointing two representatives, resulting in seven constituent council members in total – and considers that it presents an equitable and democratic approach. As decisions are proposed to be approved via a simple majority in favour, including the Mayor, the Council considers that this provides the simplest arrangement for equitable voting given the current population and disparities between the three constituent authorities.

A democratically elected, magnified, equitable voice for Greater Essex will have more influence on regional and national policy, with the mayor holding certain legal and significant soft powers to further Greater Essex's strategic outcomes. We also recognise the valuable contributions of the Police, Fire, and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) model, particularly in its reach into operational services, and are content that the proposed governance arrangements will retain these strengths while integrating them into the broader governance framework of the mayor's office, ensuring continuity and high-quality service delivery.

We consider that concerns about concentration of power in a mayoral strategic authority model are effectively mitigated by the proposed governance arrangements, as these ultimately require a level of consensus for most decisions, explicit consent for some decisions, and present a balanced and democratic approach to governance that will allow us to deepen already strong partnership working across various sectors, fostering even more collaboration and locally-led decision-making that will drive better outcomes for Southend.

The strategic oversight and accountability processes required as a condition of receiving a devolution deal will further ensure democratic accountability for achieving the outcomes desired from devolution.

Question 3 - Supporting The Economy

To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the economy of the area?

Response: Strongly Agree

Strategic authorities, underpinned by a robust and resilient local government sector, will be able to drive economic growth and deliver high quality public services via strategies that are aligned closely to local need and identities.

The statutory policy and strategy framework for mayoral strategic authorities – Local Growth Plans, Spatial Development Strategies, Local Skills Improvement Plans and Local Transport Plans – will align area-wide action to pull on the levers of change and tackle the wider determinants of low growth, poor labour market outcomes, low social mobility and health inequalities. This strategic policy framework will enable Southend to set out a long-term vision for growth in the city and Greater Essex over the next

decade, offering an unprecedented opportunity to drive central government policy, steered by shared strategic priorities. With local policies aligned across skills, housing, innovation and infrastructure, we will be able to build on existing economic growth strategies to deliver our desired outcomes.

A strong Greater Essex region would greatly enhance the UK economy, acting as a catalyst for economic growth. We have a strategic position within a pan-European and wider context, with two major airports that link to Europe and further, and two major shipping ports in Thames Haven and Tilbury, to bring in and export goods around the world.

A MCCA with devolved powers will use the powers, funding and functions conferred onto it to develop and implement strategic economic policy and programmes within the Greater Essex area, with responsibility for the vast majority of public service delivery to remain with the constituent councils.

Transport Infrastructure: High quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity. The government will empower Strategic Authorities to take greater oversight of their local transport networks.

Skills and Employment Support: Devolution means skills and employment provision that is more relevant to local jobs.

Housing and Planning: Devolution will deliver more houses that are closer to infrastructure, as well as more social and affordable housing. All areas will be required to develop Spatial Development Strategies over a strategic geography and within a defined timeframe. We expect the MCCA will facilitate closer working to meet the government's housing aspirations in the combined area.

Strategic Authorities: The government will create in law the concept of a Strategic Authority. All Strategic Authorities will belong to one of the following levels: Strategic Authorities will have a defined list of areas of competence, set out in law. These are designed to bolster, not detract from, the functions and role of other public bodies, such as NHS England, Jobcentre Plus the Environment Agency or Local Authorities.

Business Support and Investment: The government aims to strengthen Strategic Authorities' role in the business ecosystem. It will work with Mayoral Strategic Authorities to develop a future regional innovation funding programme, and U K Research and Innovation will extend its regional partnerships to other Mayoral Strategic Authorities. The Office for Investment will work with Mayors to develop and market strategic investment propositions.

Question 4 - Improving Social Outcomes

To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve social outcomes in the area?

Response: Strongly Agree

The Council considers that devolution to a Greater Essex geography will improve social outcomes through the interconnected strategies described above that will create more focused and responsive policies, enable better integration of public services, and foster greater community involvement. By being able to tailor a Greater Essex policy and strategy ecosystem to local need, we will be able to directly address the unique

requirements, barriers and circumstances of local communities and the Greater Essex economy.

As a core tenet of devolution is the empowerment of local leaders, the strategic direction on this will come from those who best understand the needs of the communities they support. The devolution framework offers significant opportunities to drive genuine action on the social determinants of poor health through, in the shorter term, the powers relating to transport, housing and planning, and in the longer term the aim to align all public sector boundaries across the geography. There is the power to effectively coordinate strategies in these areas with policy and strategy in sectors such as skills, innovation, and infrastructure, to support communities to use the new tools available to shape their local areas (such as the strengthened “Right to Buy” for community assets), and to take meaningful action to address wicked problems such as child poverty, disparities in life expectancy relating to deprivation, negative perceptions of safety and the volume and impact of anti-social behaviour on the communities that experience it.

Question 5 - Local Government Services

To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve local government services in the area?

Response: Strongly Agree

We are confident that devolution, in parallel with local government reorganisation, can create more efficient, responsive, and accountable local government structures, with clearer leadership, that can better deliver high quality local government services.

By providing opportunities to integrate local government services through holistic, place-based approaches, we can overcome the complexity and fragmentation created by our current structures and deliver public services that are value for money and preserve and reflect the identity of our communities. These services will be high quality and value for money because they will be tailored to the specific needs of local communities; resources will be allocated according to outcomes; and action will be coordinated across various services and sectors, leading to improved outcomes and results.

Question 6 - Improving The Local Natural Environment

To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through a Mayoral Combined County Authority will improve the local natural environment and overall national environment?

Response: Strongly Agree

As with improving social outcomes, the powers, opportunities and funding available via devolution agreement and the establishment of a MCCA for Greater Essex will be possible via key and interconnected strategies relating to local transport, regeneration and infrastructure, clean energy transition, environmental leadership, decarbonisation and integrating environmental considerations into broader planning and infrastructure decisions.

A Greater Essex MCCA will be able to play a crucial role in achieving the government's clean power mission by transitioning to a low-cost, clean energy system, and by implementing the Warm Homes Plan to reduce carbon emissions. A MCCA will be able to effectively promote Southend's economic, social and environmental aims relating to its green and blue infrastructure on a wider platform than the Council could alone.

The Council already has a strong track record of delivering innovative and impactful environmental projects, such as REMeDY, Catchment to Coast (which saw the delivery of our award-winning retrofit home at Juniper Road), Cool Towns, Nature Smart Cities, Sustainable and Resilient Coastal Cities, PlastiCity and 2Imprezs. Being expected and empowered to integrate environmental considerations into broader planning and infrastructure development will mean that we can more easily achieve our Net Zero commitments and stimulate our green and blue skills pipeline and jobs market.

The opportunity to collaborate with Great British Energy will allow us to better support renewable energy projects at the local level, and being able to make locally informed, tailored decisions on how to use the funding available for warmer homes and greener buildings will allow us to promote energy efficiency and reduce our environmental impact in our key areas (over 80% of Southend's carbon footprint is related to emissions from homes, transportation, and businesses). For instance, being empowered by the Devolution Framework to achieve the outcomes of our existing Essex Air Quality Strategy, a collaborative partnership between Southend, Thurrock and Essex councils, by taking into account the entirety of our transport and freight corridors across the geography, will undoubtedly pay dividends. We see that having a key role in coordinating local energy planning to support the development of regional network energy infrastructure will lead to improved outcomes at both local and national level.

MCCAs will take on enhanced roles as responsible authorities² for Local Nature Recovery Strategies, with a mandate to convene partnerships, coordinate action, and monitor environmental delivery across their areas. This means we will be able to work more impactfully across the Greater Essex area with our existing LNRS as our foundation to create and restore nature across all parts of Greater Essex, both urban and rural, supporting the health and wellbeing of our people and wildlife.

As the funding is reserved for established MSAs, Greater Essex would not receive it until 2028 at the earliest. This could provide opportunities to start to develop plans and pipelines to stimulate a retrofit sector early, planning skills, career pathways and inward investment from the private sector as per our emerging Greater Essex Economic Growth Strategy.

Question 7 - Supporting Needs of Local Communities

To what extent do you agree or disagree that working across the proposed geography through the Mayoral Combined County Authority will support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities?

Response: Strongly Agree

² There are 48 designated LNRS areas across England. Greater Essex (including Thurrock and Southend) is designated as one of these regions, with Essex County Council as the current Responsible Authority appointed to deliver the LNRS for our area.

A MCCA based on the proposed geography will be recognisable to residents and businesses, preserve and strengthen affective and effective identities, and reflect the historic assets, identity, geography and boundaries of the county on which the affective identity of Southend's communities is based. There are significant cultural and community-related agglomeration opportunities to grow our culture and tourism offer, improve our high streets, and attract inward cultural investment and increase the concentration of cultural activities in Southend and Greater Essex, which will at the same time offer unparalleled opportunities to significantly boost civic pride and resident satisfaction in local areas.

In empowered alignment with our neighbouring local authorities, and with strategic coordination, powers, influence and funding via a MCCA, we can develop a form of place leadership that aligns policy beyond individual authority boundaries to reflect the way that residents, business owners and visitors work, rest and play in Southend and across Greater Essex.

Working across Greater Essex in this way will empower local decision-making, protect community assets and ensure local engagement in strategic planning, meaning that decisions about the interventions needed to meet communities' needs around the quality of the private rental market, supporting healthier lifestyles, improving socioeconomic lifestyle and increasing high street vitality will be taken by councillors and residents working together to tackle and address these priorities.