

8th September 2020

Re: Local Government Reform for Essex

Dear David

The majority of Essex Leaders have now participated in two summits led by Essex County Council on Local Government Reform (LGR) and devolution.

We welcome the approach to gather high-level district data to try to put some sort of logic into how unitaries may be formed. It is essential that we assess, objectively, what is best for the residents of Essex.

It became clear at the last meeting that a few Leaders want to back a proposal of a single, Greater Essex Mayoral Combined Authority and a yet to be determined number of unitaries.

At the beginning of the last meeting on Friday 21st August, you said you felt it unlikely that there would be 'disputes' around the proposal you have loosely outlined i.e. a single MCA, and you said that risks around the progression of a proposal were 'remote'.

We think it is important to acknowledge formally that there is indeed a difference of opinion between what a small number of Leaders would like to see go forward to MHCLG and what a larger number of Leaders (co-signatories to this letter) would like to see submitted i.e. a dual Combined Authority model for Essex. It is important we acknowledge and attempt to resolve these differences before it does indeed become a dispute and jeopardise our credibility with MHCLG.

As Leaders who value democracy, we should apply those principles in our collaborations as we consider LGR and devolution for Essex, and not simply to allow a minority to put forward a proposal that the majority have not bought into. It was anticipated that these summits would be collaborative to help

formulate the right model for Essex. However, it would seem the consultant has already been appointed and the agenda of the minority is being pushed on.

Equally as Leaders we are pragmatic and we recognise that the Minister may well ultimately decide what is the preferred model for Essex, but it must also be acknowledged that the Minister's letter, that you have shared with us all, is in reality a reflection of the conversation you had held with him previously. It is not specifically a 'ministerial requirement' as you had suggested.

Whilst we have not yet seen the white paper, it should also be noted that an upper limit of 900k as a unitary size is not a figure we had heard before. This figure bears no resemblance to local decision making or a sense of place and makes absolutely no allowance for population growth.

The basis for our objection to a single Greater Essex MCA is outlined below:

- There is concern about how much power would be held by a single mayoral figure.
- There is concern at the possible size of unitary councils based on your proposals, and moreover, an Greater Essex Mayor would be perceived as too remote from the people they represent, overseeing the fortunes of in excess of 2 million people, a huge number for a shire-based MCA.
- There is a concern that there is no allowance for the obvious distinction between north Essex and the riparian south. The estuary area of Essex would sense a tension between the objectives for the growth ambitions of that area, and the objectives of a Mayor who interests would also lie as far north as Harwich and Saffron Walden
- That the principles of devolution (to bring decision making closer to the people they represent) are not being upheld.
- That any such proposal for a single MCA is a top down led approach that suits the requirements of central government more than it does the people of Essex.

Given these objections, we must also consider how much this could distract from the present importance of the post Covid recovery agenda.

As Leaders we wish to collaborate and work together on the right outcome. We ask that there is an acknowledgement that there is indeed a significant disagreement and that regard is given to the opinions of the majority of Essex Leaders, rather than be simply overlooked by a minority of 'the willing'.

Hopefully we can meet an amicable solution between ourselves, if that is not the case, it may well be that two proposals are put forward to MHCLG and the Minister must decide based on the merits of each.

We look forward to the next summit and the open acknowledgement of concerns and the need for an amicable resolution.

Yours Sincerely

Cllr Chris Hossack Leader of Brentwood Borough Council

Cllr Mark Cory Leader of Colchester Borough Council

Cllr S Robinson Leader of Chelmsford City Council

Cllr G Callaghan Leader of Basildon

Cllr Rob Gledhill Leader of Thurrock

Cllr Mark Ingall Leader of Harlow

Cllr John Lodge Leader of Uttlesford

Cllr Norman Smith Leader of Castle Point