Comprehensive Consultation Response: Business Case A – Five Unitary Authorities

The business case for five new unitary authorities for Essex, including a West Essex authority comprising Uttlesford, Epping Forest, and Harlow, developed and supported by Southend-on-Sea City Council, Chelmsford City Council, Basildon Borough Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Castle Point Borough Council, Colchester City Council, Harlow Council, Maldon District Council, Tendring District Council, Uttlesford District Council.

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

Strongly Agree.

The five-unitary layout explicitly aligns West Essex to the London–Cambridge corridor, recognising travel-to-work patterns and functional economic zones.

By grouping Uttlesford with Epping Forest and Harlow, the proposal avoids contrived boundaries and supports coherent strategic planning for growth, rail and road connectivity (e.g., M11, West Anglia Main Line).

This alignment reduces cross-boundary friction in planning and economic development, and enables Local Plans to sit in general conformity with a future Essex-wide Strategic Development Strategy (SDS).

The five-unitary model is the only one which is built around one urban core in each unitary – Harlow, Basildon, Chelmsford, Colchester and Southend, with sensible travel-to-work areas and surrounding communities. All other models are built around asymmetric pairings of urban cores, with more disjointed agglomerations of rural areas with little in common.

Q2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

Agree.

More detailed operating models (for all options) will be developed later, but the foundations of the five-unitary model are credible, with balanced scale (around 380k population), clear strategic focus, and prudent financial assumptions.

The council considers the five-unitary model realistic on transition costs and savings, creating the conditions for improved outcomes in social care, housing and economic growth. The proposal draws on substantial evidence that efficiencies and economies of scale can – and elsewhere in the country – already are being achieved by councils of this scale, including some greater economies than achieved in larger councils.

The structure avoids internal competition between major urban centres within the same authority, enabling balanced service planning.

Q3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

Agree.

The five unitary authorities proposed in this model would have an average of around 380k residents and as such would sit among the largest quartile of current unitary councils, achieving economies of scale without becoming remote, but still having the scope to expand as our communities grow in the coming years.

Indicative budgets around £500m per authority provide financial capacity while keeping governance close to communities.

This size reduces risks of monopolistic supply-chain dependence that can affect mega-authorities while still allowing shared service expertise.

Q4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in Best Value Intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support?

Agree.

Consolidating 15 councils into 5 reduces fragmentation, strengthens governance, and spreads risk more evenly across Essex.

Officer advice highlights prudence in the proposal's financial modelling and notes preparatory steps such as Uttlesford's £2.75m LGR reserve for transition.

External validation (e.g., CIPFA debt/asset mapping) indicates sustainability of combined positions across the proposed configurations.

Q5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

Agree.

The model supports integrated delivery for adults' and children's services, housing, transport and environment, with capacity to invest in early intervention.

Separating cities/urban cores across different authorities reduces internal competition and enables balanced investment decisions.

Future service operating models can leverage locality hubs and digital platforms to maintain accessibility.

Securing the future of council housing is important. This model would bring Uttlesford together with Harlow and Epping Forest, all of which are stock-holding council housing landlords and would therefore likely provide a safe future for council housing in this part of Essex. In contrast, the other three proposals pair Uttlesford (a stock holder) with councils who long since transferred out all their council housing and do not operate a Housing Revenue Account – and would therefore put substantially at risk the long-term viability and future of council housing in this area.

Q6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

Partially Agree.

County-wide engagement plus a supplementary survey (around 7,000 responses) informs the design of this proposal, but deeper co-creation is needed for future development and detailed service design. This was substantially greater public engagement than the other models undertook, which was at best cursory.

Implementation phases should embed structured stakeholder forums and resident panels to shape local priorities.

Tailored rural policies will help ensure market towns and villages remain central to decisions.

Q7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements, for example, the establishment of a strategic authority?

Strongly Agree.

Boundaries are coterminous with the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and functionally supports devolution.

The five-constituent model provides balanced representation and practical collaboration on transport, housing, net zero, skills and public safety (PFCC functions when transferred).

Interplay with Mayor's Strategic Development Strategy (SDS) and Local Plans is practical with clear conformity protocols.

Q8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Strongly Agree.

This model – unlike the other models – is built around a ratio of 1 elected member to circa 2,800 residents (compared to 1 elected member to c4,800 in the three unitary model and 1

to c5,000 in the four unitary models). As a result, the five-unitary model would be substantially more accessible supporting engagement and demonstrably stands a much greater chance in its early years of enjoying the confidence of its population because of the consequential increased visibility and availability of elected members.

Rural-majority composition in West Essex increases the likelihood that rural needs, parish/town councils and neighbourhood forums have voice and influence.

Locality-based governance and devolved budgets can further empower communities.

Q9. If you would like to, please use the **free text box** to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on this proposal.

Uttlesford District Council endorses the five-unitary model as the optimal option.

The five-unitary model balances scale and proximity, aligns with natural economic geographies, and supports the planned Mayoral Combined County Authority. This proposed model keeps the local in local government, and enjoys our enthusiastic support, as it does of a total of ten out of fifteen of the current Essex local authorities.

Comprehensive Consultation Response: Business Case B – Three Unitary Authorities

The business case for three new unitary authorities for Essex, placing Uttlesford with Braintree, Colchester, and Tendring, developed by Essex County Council and supported by Braintree District Council and Epping Forest District Council

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

Disagree.

Grouping Uttlesford with coastal/urban areas of Colchester and Tendring cuts across the London–Cambridge corridor and established travel-to-work areas. For example, there is little travel-to-work activity for Uttlesford towards most of the rest of the proposed new council area.

Misalignment risks incoherent infrastructure and housing strategies and weakens the ability to support corridor-based growth.

Strategic planning would have to reconcile divergent needs (coastal deprivation vs rural growth nodes and the London/Cambridge innovation corridor), increasing policy friction.

Q2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

Partially Agree.

Although scale can enable investment and shared expertise, governance becomes remote and unduly complex.

Officer analysis and member determination flags risks of slower decision-making and reduced accountability in authorities of this size.

Outcome delivery may suffer where local responsiveness and place-based priorities are diluted.

Q3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

Partially agree, albeit with material reservations.

Large size can achieve economies in some business areas, but mega-authorities like these are prone to inefficiency and distance from residents. The business case for three-unitary councils lacks credibility generally as it seems to be built on the over-simplistic and unreliable principle that economic efficiency increases on a straight-line basis.

It is our view that the projected savings are unrealistic. The financial modelling for the three-unitary proposal relies on aggressive savings forecasts, optimistic pay harmonisation savings and higher IT transition costs that may be overstated and are of highly questionable validity.

Overall, this model is deliverable but decidedly sub-optimal relative to alternatives.

Q4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in Best Value Intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support?

Partially Agree.

Consolidation may strengthen resilience, yet modelling assumptions (PwC) lack credibility.

The proposal uses high assumed IT costs and aggressive savings trajectories which substantially increase implementation risk.

A more realistic approach would temper optimism bias and plan for phased, realistic benefits.

Q5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

Partially Agree.

Economies of scale are possible, but rural service accessibility and local priorities may well be overshadowed.

Mega-scale procurement risks over-reliance on national supply chains and weaker local provider ecosystems.

Mitigations would need strong locality operating models and delegated budgets – and be more likely to increase bureaucratic and governance overheads to make up for the remoteness of the model design overall.

Securing the future of council housing is important. This model would bring Uttlesford together with Braintree, Colchester and Tendring, which would therefore likely put at risk the long-term viability and future of council housing in this area.

Q6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

Disagree.

Engagement is highly limited and does not convincingly indicate substantial public support for or confidence in very large authorities for diverse areas like Uttlesford.

Co-creation at this scale is much more challenging; mechanisms would be required to ensure rural voices are heard.

Without robust locality governance, local identity risks dilution.

Q7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements, for example, the establishment of a strategic authority?

Agree.

Boundaries are coterminous with the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and functionally supports devolution.

However, the proposed very large constituent authorities may complicate representation and voting balance, risking disproportionate influence.

Clear constitutional safeguards would be needed within the combined authority.

Q8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Disagree.

Councillor-to-resident ratios (around 1:4,800) are materially higher than the other options such as the five-unitary model, very substantially reducing accessibility.

Remoteness hampers neighbourhood empowerment unless significant devolved powers and participatory tools are embedded.

The model would need strong ward-level structures and digital participation to compensate, and it is not clear whether this could be achieved in practice.

Q9. If you would like to, please use the **free text box** to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on this proposal.

The council considers the three-unitary model as technically deliverable but very substantially sub-optimal in quality and outcome terms.

This model creates mega large councils (around 630k residents), prioritising scale but guaranteeing risks of remoteness and misalignment with natural economic geographies. This proposed model takes the local out of local government and would create distant authorities carved out of a map to follow political considerations rather than the lived experience of local people.

Among sections of our communities there is disillusionment with government at all levels. The council believes that this disillusionment becomes greater the more distant the level of government is from residents, affecting their experience of service delivery and easy

access to local councillors and staff. Mega large councils will maximise this feeling of a lack of empowerment for some in our communities

Comprehensive Consultation Response: Business Case C – Four Unitary Authorities

The business case for four new unitary authorities for Essex, including Uttlesford joining a North Essex authority with Braintree and Chelmsford, developed by Thurrock Council.

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

Agree.

The Business Case for four unitary councils, developed by Thurrock Council, offers better alignment than the three-unitary model, but disrupts Uttlesford's link to West Essex, which is critical for preserving economic ties to the London–Cambridge corridor.

Q2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

Agree.

The model is clearly, unashamedly and perhaps-understandably built around the perceived interests of bailing out Thurrock's widely-reported financial crisis through pairing it with selected neighbouring councils with the strongest Council Tax bases, and then simply putting the rest of Essex together on whatever alignment is still possible, rather than a whole-county, holistic and evidence-based approach.

Officer analysis highlights that the four-unitary model can nonetheless deliver improved service integration and financial resilience, but the diversity within each authority may still pose challenges for tailoring services to local needs. Compared to the three-unitary proposal, this option offers better prospects for maintaining accountability and responsiveness.

The proposal assumes but does not provide credible evidence that larger authorities will have the capacity to invest in transformation and digital services, which could improve outcomes.

Risks include slower decision-making and potential dilution of rural priorities if governance structures do not adequately reflect local diversity, as would generally be harder to achieve under this model compared to the five unitary model, albeit more easily than the three-unitary proposal.

Q3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

Agree.

Authorities under the four-unitary model would have populations averaging around 470,000, providing resilience while avoiding the extremes of the three-unitary proposal.

The proposal's claim that this size is within the optimal range for achieving economies of scale without creating overly remote governance structures is not supported with any credible evidence to illustrate that the proposed population numbers represent an optimal size.

Q4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in Best Value Intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support?

Agree.

Financial modelling suggests the proposed four-unitary model is sustainable, though assumptions require validation.

The Council notes that while the four-unitary modelling offers a credible path to financial stability, transition costs and harmonisation risks remain significant factors to manage.

Compared to the three-unitary proposal, this model reduces the risk of creating overly large and remote authorities, while still delivering savings through consolidation. It is as a model however sub-optimal in this regard compared to the five-unitary proposal.

Q5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

Agree.

The model allows for integrated service delivery, but risks remain around maintaining rural service accessibility.

The Council's view is that while larger authorities can improve strategic planning, they must ensure rural communities like Uttlesford are not disadvantaged in resource allocation. Whilst acknowledging this tension, the proposal does not credibly rise to that challenge.

Maintaining local service hubs and devolved decision-making will be essential to avoid centralisation that could undermine accessibility, potentially increasing costs of this model (not apparently factored into its costings).

Securing the future of council housing is important. This model would bring Uttlesford together with Braintree and Chelmsford, neither of which are stock-holding council housing landlords and would therefore likely put substantially at risk the long-term viability and future of council housing in this area.

Q6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

Disagree.

Engagement is highly limited and does not convincingly indicate substantial public support for or confidence in very large authorities for diverse areas like Uttlesford.

Co-creation at this scale is more challenging than in the five-unitary model; mechanisms would be required to ensure rural voices are heard.

Without robust locality governance, local identity risks dilution.

Q7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements, for example, the establishment of a strategic authority?

Strongly Agree.

Boundaries are coterminous with the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and functionally supports devolution.

The Council considers that this four-unitary model provides balanced representation and offers a practical structure for strategic collaboration on housing, transport, and economic development.

Q8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Agree.

Four authorities offer better proximity than the three-unitary proposal, though less than the five-unitary model.

This four-unitary model would result in councillor-to-resident ratios of around 1:5,000, very substantially reducing accessibility.

Remoteness hampers neighbourhood empowerment unless significant devolved powers and participatory tools are embedded.

The model would need strong ward-level structures and digital participation to compensate.

Q9. If you would like to, please use the **free text box** to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on this proposal.

This four-unitary model is considered a technically credible and deliverable option, offering a compromise between scale and local identity. It is decidedly less optimal than the five-unitary model but preferable to the three-unitary proposal in terms of governance and community engagement.

This model substantially disrupts Uttlesford's link to West Essex and the London to Cambridge corridor, whilst also creating larger authorities (on average overall) than our preferred five-unitary model or than the alternative four-unitary model proposed by Rochford District Council.

Comprehensive Consultation Response: Business Case D – Four Unitary Authorities

The business case for four new unitary authorities for Essex, placing Uttlesford with Epping Forest and Harlow, developed by Rochford District Council.

Q1: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal suggests councils that are based on sensible geographies and economic areas?

Partially Agree.

Uttlesford's placement with Epping Forest and Harlow aligns with the West Essex corridor, but the wider county alignments proposed by Rochford District Council in this proposal are substantially less coherent, especially in South Essex.

Imbalances in unitary population sizes (ranging from 325k to 640k) could complicate county-wide strategic planning and resource distribution.

Compared to the five-unitary model, internal tensions (e.g., combining Basildon with Southend) are more acute.

Q2: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will be able to deliver the outcomes they describe in the proposal?

Agree.

Four authorities superficially offer a reasonable balance of scale and proximity, but this model with uneven size and mixed urban/rural profiles raises governance complexity.

Outcome delivery will depend on robust locality arrangements to prevent urban cores dominating rural priorities.

Compared to the three-unitary model and the other four model, responsiveness is better; compared to the five-unitary proposal, somewhat weaker.

Q3: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils are the right size to be efficient, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks?

Agree.

This four-unitary proposal will create average populations of around 475,000, which can secure economies and resilience; however, the large variance between the proposed council sizes may distort management bandwidth and investment choices.

The proposal's savings assumptions require validation, with caution around pay harmonisation and information, communication and technology integration costs.

Overall credible, but less balanced than the five-unitary model.

Q4: To what extent do you agree or disagree that this proposal will put local government in the area as a whole on a firmer footing, particularly given that some councils in the area are in Best Value Intervention and in receipt of Exceptional Financial Support?

Agree.

This four-unitary proposal is sustainable in principle, but disparities in size and South Essex design choices could undermine balanced county-wide outcomes.

Transition risks would need to be mitigated through phased implementation and clear asset/debt disaggregation.

Stronger cross-boundary protocols would be needed to manage uneven pressures.

Q5: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposed councils will deliver high quality, sustainable public services?

Agree.

Integration is achievable, but attention must be paid to rural accessibility and avoiding city/urban dominance in resource allocation.

Local service hubs, devolved budgets and performance frameworks should be embedded to protect neighbourhood access.

Procurement strategies should balance scale with local provider engagement.

Securing the future of council housing is important. This model would bring Uttlesford together with Harlow and Epping Forest, all of which are stock-holding council housing landlords and would therefore likely provide a safe future for council housing in this part of Essex.

Q6: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal has been informed by local views and will meet local needs?

Partially Agree.

Engagement is present but limited; supplementary local listening has been carried out.

Given size disparities, tailored engagement and co-design would be essential to reflect diverse priorities.

Rural representation mechanisms should be specified in future governance design.

Q7: To what extent do you agree or disagree that establishing the councils in this proposal will support devolution arrangements, for example, the establishment of a strategic authority?

Strongly Agree.

Boundaries are coterminous with the proposed Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) and functionally supports devolution.

This four-unitary model is workable for strategic collaboration on housing, transport, net zero and PFCC integration.

Interplay with Mayor's Strategic Development Strategy (SDS) and Local Plans is practical with clear conformity protocols.

Q8: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the proposal enables stronger community engagement and gives the opportunity for neighbourhood empowerment?

Agree.

Four authorities offer better proximity than the three-unitary proposal, though less than the five-unitary model.

This four-unitary model would result in councillor-to-resident ratios of around 1:5,000, very substantially reducing accessibility. Remoteness hampers neighbourhood empowerment unless significant devolved powers and participatory tools are embedded.

Neighbourhood empowerment can be strengthened through parish/town council roles, participatory budgeting and digital engagement.

A rural-majority West Essex authority offers a good base for local empowerment if governance embeds locality principles.

Q9. If you would like to, please use the **free text box** to explain the answers you have provided to questions 1-8 referring to the question numbers as part of your answer. You may also use the box to provide any other comments you have on this proposal.

The Council consider this four-unitary model credible but sub-optimal overall, with concerns about coherence in South Essex.

There are notable disparities in the sizes of the proposed councils (from ~325k to ~640k). This single-authority supported model – advanced by Rochford District Council – borrows evidence from other cases and seems to be built around the principle of 'keeping the band together' in their current two-councils-one-staff successful shared services arrangement with Brentwood Borough Council, and then dividing up what is left in the rest of Essex, but without any obvious underlying rationale.

Selfishly, this model suits Uttlesford, but looking (as required) at the whole of Essex, this model is overall substantially disadvantageous compared to the five-unitary model.