

20 March 2024		ITEM: 11
Council		
Greater Essex Devolution		
Wards and communities affected: All wards	Key Decision: Key decision	
Report of: Cllr Andrew Jefferies, Leader of the Council		
Accountable Assistant Director: n/a		
Accountable Director: Dave Smith, Chief Executive & Managing Director Commissioner, and Thurrock Council lead negotiator for Greater Essex devolution		
This report is public		
Version: Final		

Executive Summary

In September 2023, the Government offered Greater Essex the opportunity to be one of eight areas to work towards a Level 2 devolution deal. Since the Government announcement last autumn, Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council, along with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, have been preparing a draft Level 2 devolution deal.

If approved by Government and agreed by all parties, the deal would involve creating a new Greater Essex Combined Authority.

Initially, Greater Essex devolution was expected to be included in the Government's Autumn Statement on 22 November 2023. Greater Essex was not named in the Autumn Statement and, at present, the progress is at a pause point until after the next General Election.

This report covers the actions taken so far and the next steps should Government approval be given.

Commissioner Comment:

No commissioner comment required.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 Full council notes the progress and current pause of the proposed Greater Essex Devolution deal.

Version Control (delete as appropriate)

Version 1 - First draft ready for DMT, SLT and Commissioner input; **Version 2** - Second Draft ready for Portfolio Holder, Leader and other Member Input; **Version 3** - Third draft for any further comments; **Version Committee** – Draft ready for submission to public committee; **Version Cabinet** – Final version ready for Cabinet/Executive decision

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 In September 2023, the Government offered Greater Essex the opportunity to explore the potential for a Level 2 devolution deal. Working groups from each of the three main local authorities (Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea council and Thurrock Council) began to meet regularly to discuss the proposed Level 2 option.
- 2.2 Devolution is the decentralisation of powers, decision making and funding away from Central Government to local democratically elected & accountable bodies elsewhere in England. It is not about local government reform or reorganisation, taking funding from existing councils, or becoming a contracted delivery agency for the government. It could also provide a new means for existing local councils to explore opportunities for further collaboration and innovation.
- 2.3 A Greater Essex deal would be designed to provide better funding and enable local decision-making in areas such as the economy, skills, transport, support for businesses.
- 2.4 The combined authority would be a new institution in which Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council, working closely with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, to take collective decisions on the powers and budgets that Government devolves to Greater Essex. The Greater Essex deal would also not involve a directly elected mayor or the more expansive powers associated with a Level 3 devolution deal.
- 2.5 It would not be a merger of the 3 councils. Each authority would remain independent, as would the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.
- 2.6 The combined authority would incorporate the former role of the Local Enterprise Partnership, following the Government's decision to disband these and bring them under local democratic oversight.
- 2.7 City, district and borough councils in Essex would also have a voice under the combined authority to ensure that local needs continue to be reflected in all decision-making.
- 2.8 Thurrock Council's devolution activity was initially being delivered by:
- Dave Smith, devolution chief negotiator
 - Alix Macfarlane, devolution strategic lead
 - Asmat Hussain, devolution governance and law
 - Working group of subject matter experts from across the council, with a focus on transport, skills and education, and the economy

When any work starts again on progressing Greater Essex Devolution, this will be taken forward by Alex Powell, Assistant Chief Executive, with support from Dan Fenwick, Monitoring Officer, and the specialist working groups

- 2.9 A draft deal document was prepared by strategic leads for the three main local authorities, with support from subject matter experts in the local council working groups. The draft deal has been approved by the Leaders of the councils for submission to DLUHC. This was submitted to DLUHC in November 2023 and is currently still under review by DLUHC.

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- 2.10 In January 2024, the Minister for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities formally notified the three councils that efforts to pursue a Greater Essex devolution deal will be put on hold until after the general election.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The alternative option is to do nothing and not participate in the discussions for Greater Essex devolution.
- 3.2 A do nothing option was considered based on the resource required to progress devolution options. However, this option was rejected in preference of supporting the devolution process due to the benefits to Thurrock if Greater Essex was approved, and the associated benefits of closer working partnerships with neighbouring councils that can be achieved with or without devolution.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Thurrock council's improvement journey recognises the opportunities of collaborative working with partners across the region.
- 4.2 Devolution has the potential to bring additional government investment, effective regional decision making and improved ways of working to Greater Essex.
- 4.3 The council has more to gain than risk from exploration of the devolution process for the benefit of the borough.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 If the government gives the go ahead for Greater Essex devolution, a comprehensive consultation will take place across the region, including a focus on representation of different audiences. A consultation plan has been prepared that can be implemented swiftly. Timing would be set to effectively take the outcomes from the consultation to the three councils' Full Council meetings for Member consideration.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 Devolution involves delivering some services at a regional level that have previously been decided on at borough level. This will be considered carefully in the main constitution that will be developed to operationally support the deal to ensure devolution decisions are made in the best interests of the borough.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Rosie Hurst**
Interim Finance Manager

20 February 2024

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The draft Devolution deal includes government investment in Greater Essex. The draft deal also covers areas of shared responsibility between the three councils, that are currently administered by each council. This will have financial implications that will need careful consideration and monitoring as part of the ongoing negotiations.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Jayne Middleton-Albooye**
Interim Head of Legal Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer
23 February 2023

There are no specific legal implications for this report as it provides an update on progress for members. The council's Interim Director of Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer) has been closely involved with developing the governance of the draft devolution deal. Ongoing legal involvement during the progression of any devolution activity is important for the council to gain the maximum benefit and assess any risk from a potential deal, and to ensure that the procedural steps set out in legislation are adhered to.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**
Team Manager - Community Development and Equalities
Adults, Housing and Health Directorate
20 February 2024

All information regarding Community Equality Impact Assessments can be found here:
<https://intranet.thurrock.gov.uk/services/diversity-and-equality/ceia/>

There are no diversity and equality implications. All three councils have diversity and equality commitments. The proposed consultation to be undertaken if the devolution deal progresses includes ensuring representation from different demographics across the Greater Essex region.

7.4 Risks

No specific risks arise from this report. However potential risks around the progression of a Greater Essex devolution deal will require continual assessment during the negotiation, delivery, and implementation stages.

7.5 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children

None

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8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. Appendices to the report

None

Report Author:

Alix Macfarlane

Interim Director of Communications and Devolution Strategic Lead

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