

- 2.2 **If 2.1 is agreed, to agree to submit the Plan to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution on or before 21st March 2025, and to note that all local authorities in the Greater Essex area will submit the Plan as set out in the Appendix by the deadline subject to their decision making processes;**
- 2.3 **Delegate to the Assistant Chief Executive authority to submit the Plan on or before 21 March on behalf of the council and to make any amendments following consultation with the Chief Executive / Managing Director Commissioner and the Leader and Deputy Leader to ensure that any changes made by other local authorities can be agreed and reflected appropriately in the final version; and**
- 2.4 **As the delegation in 2.3 includes authority to submit the Plan in circumstances where one or more local authorities in the Greater Essex area do not agree to submit the Plan as set out in the Appendix.**

3. Commissioner's Comments

- 3.1 Commissioners note the latest update on LGR proposals and in particular the points pertaining to the importance that any new unitary configuration involving Thurrock prioritises ongoing financial sustainability. This will be of particular interest to commissioners and we will comment more once a more substantive proposal involving Thurrock is forthcoming.
- 3.2 Commissioners also recognise and support the Council's determination to examine the evidence against the government's criteria before committing to any particular size and model. It is clearly essential that in creating a new council which carries with it the financial burdens of Thurrock Council that the proposal is sound and financially sustainable from the outset. Thurrock council is already under considerable resource constraint so the council will need to ensure that it does not lose focus on its prime objective of recovery as set out by the Secretary of State.

4. Proposals – the rationale and evidence for the recommendations

- 4.1 Local government reorganisation presents many opportunities. Thurrock Council and its residents have benefited from the unitarisation of simpler structures in contrast to tiers systems responsible for different services. However, Thurrock's size does not benefit from the economies of scale afforded by others. Becoming part of a larger unitary authority is likely to increase greater leverage in generating growth and regeneration, in commercial and contractual procurement and negotiations, in removing duplication from commissioning and will enable more resilient workforce management and streamline leadership structures and decision making. The opportunity to generate more efficient ways of working are essential to protecting public services, as council tax and business rate income continue to be outstripped by demand. For our workforce, it will open up new opportunities for career development working with a wider range of partners and communities.

- 4.2 The English Devolution white paper, published on 16 December 2024, sets out government's vision for simpler, more sustainable, local government structures, alongside a transfer of power from Whitehall to local mayors and combined authorities through devolution. For effective devolution, mayoral combined authorities are at their best when made up of strong unitary councils represent the needs and provide the insight into their local communities. As such, local government reorganisation is a critical part of successful devolution. Thurrock Council, alongside upper tier partners are supportive of the benefits devolution will bring to Greater Essex.
- 4.3 Government have also been clear about their ambitions for local government, inviting proposals from all remaining 2-tier areas and unitary councils where there is evidence of failure, or their size or boundaries may be hindering their ability to deliver sustainable and high-quality services to their residents. Submitting the Interim Plan by 21 March provides us with an opportunity to test with Ministers our ambitions. Not doing so may diminish our ability to influence how local government reorganisation is designed and implemented in Greater Essex. The consequence of not advocating for Thurrock's preferred options in the best interests of local residents now may mean government takes a more directive role in the future. On 5 February 2025, MHCLG wrote to the leaders of Greater Essex to formally invite the development of proposals for LGR. Government have asked for an Interim Plan to be submitted by 21 March as the foundation for a formal proposal on reorganisation by 26 September 2025.
- 4.4 Government's guidance for the proposal includes a joint submission for unitary local government across the whole of Essex, that is complementary to devolution, covers a sensible geography with an appropriate tax base to allow for sustainable and high-quality public services and creates an organisation that can achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks.
- 4.5 The Greater Essex Interim Plan describes the work that Greater Essex leaders have achieved to date, and the work planned to meet governments criteria. The submission makes a compelling case for change which will benefit the residents and businesses of Thurrock and Greater Essex.
- 4.6 The Interim Plan does not commit Thurrock Council or any other council which signs up to the plan to any particular course of action. Prior to the publication of the Government's criteria for Local Government Reorganisation, a number of councils expressed a preference for a model which creates five new unitary councils across Essex. That preference is expressed within the Plan, although there is a clear commitment to also consider the evidence at hand and which model for LGR is most appropriate in light of the criteria issued by government. Thurrock Council's position throughout has been to consider the evidence and not to express any preference, either in favour or against any particular model at this stage, until the full evidence is considered. Officers remain mindful of the particular financial constraints of the council and therefore under the direction of Government Commissioners, will also consider how that impacts any future model of local government in Essex.

4.7 Following submission, government officials will provide feedback on the plan and provide help to support the final proposals. Following the 26 September 2025 submission, if the Minister then decides to implement any proposal, and the necessary legislation is agreed by Parliament, government will work with leaders to move to elections to new 'shadow' unitary councils as soon as possible as is the usual arrangement in the process of local government reorganisation.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 The Plan has no formal legal status and does not commit the council to a proposal for new boundaries. Work is ongoing with Greater Essex councils, but this stage is a precursor to that more detailed work.

5.2 However, it is important to meet the government's challenge of submitting an interim plan. Choosing not to submit an interim plan at this stage could delay the exploration work and opportunities identify for the council, residents and businesses of Thurrock and would be contrary to the council's current policy position.

6. Consultation

6.1 Essex leaders and chief executives have worked collaboratively to co-write to the Interim Plan. The Plan does not commit to any new boundaries, this work will take place over the summer and will consider the outcomes of an engagement programme. A government consultation on any final proposals will take place at the appropriate stage.

7. Financial Implications

7.1 The decision of this report is for the approval of the Interim Plan for Local Government Reorganisation. As such, there are no associated financial implications with regards to this decision.

7.2 As further plans develop with regards to Local Government Reorganisation, financial modelling will be developed to ensure all financial implications are considered and reported.

Implications verified by: Sima Khuroya, Assistant Director Financial Management & Procurement Date 6th March 2025

8. Risk Implications

RISK DESCRIPTION & CONSEQUENCE	MITIGATIONS	RESIDUAL RISK STATUS (after mitigations)
Not submitting the Interim Plan risks a missed opportunity to work with government on the ambitious timetable they have set. The consequence is that Thurrock does not benefit from timely opportunities that LGR may bring (such as future financial sustainability and maintaining public services)	We continue to be an active participant and work alongside partners across Greater Essex and the government to develop plans.	Green
Not submitting the Plan, may risk our ability to influence the design of local government	We continue to be an active participant and	Green

reorganisation in the region. The consequence is that government may take a more directive role and our ability to advocate for preferred options in the best interest of Thurrock are diminished.

work alongside partners across Greater Essex and the government to develop plans.



Implications Verified by Kelly McMillan, Corporate Risk Manager
Date 6th March 2025

9. Legal and Governance Implications

9.1 As stated above, the submission has no legal effect on the authority and its boundaries. The Council can use its powers under s.1 of the Localism Act 2011 (the general power of competence) to agree the submission and there is nothing in the limitations on this power in s.2-4 of the Act to restrain its use in this decision. The general power of competence is an executive function to be determined by Cabinet and this is a key decision due to the significance of its impact across the council or alternatively the Cabinet may choose to exercise any executive function it has delegated under the LGA 2000.

9.2 The Cabinet has power under the delegate its powers to an officer and these powers may be subject to the condition of consultation as set out in 2.2 and 2.3. It is intended that all Greater Essex councils will agree and submit the Plan. 2.2 and 2.3 however seek to protect the council's interests by allowing for Thurrock to submit the appended Plan even in the situation where one or more of the Greater Essex authorities does not vote in favour of the submission and / or for other reasons chooses not to submit the appended Plan and / or changes that protects Thurrock's position need to be made.

Implications Verified by Dan Fenwick, Executive Director, Corporate Services and Monitoring Officer Date 5 March 2025

10. Equality and Diversity Implications (including the public sector equality duty)

10.1 There are no EDI implications at this stage.

Implications Verified by Rebecca Lee Date 6th March 2025

11. Other Relevant Implications

11.1 None at this stage

12. Background Documents

English Devolution White Paper