

Great Waltham Parish Council

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Response to the Greater Essex devolution consultation, Establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority across Essex, Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea

This document is the response of Great Waltham Parish Council ("Council") to the above-named consultation. Because the online submission functionality provides insufficient space for it to articulate its comments in full, the Council has chosen to submit its response by email.

Consultation questions

About You

Question 1: What best describes your response?

I am responding on behalf of, or as a representative of, a business or organisation

Routing for business/organisation

Question 8: What best describes your organisation?

Parish Council

Question 9: What is the first part of the postcode where your business or organisation is based? For example, if your postcode is AB1 2CD, you would write AB1.

CM3

Question 10: 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?

- **Don't know**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 11: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed governance arrangements for the Mayoral Combined County Authority?

- **Neither agree nor disagree**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 12: 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?

- **Neither agree nor disagree**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 13: 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?

- **Neither agree nor disagree**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 14: 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?

- **Don't know.**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 15: 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?

- **Neither agree nor disagree**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 16: 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?

- **Don't know**

Please explain your answer.

See supplementary narrative after Question 17.

Question 17: Please tell us how you found out about this consultation?

- **GOV.UK website**

Supplementary narrative

1. The Council is pleased to expand upon its responses.
2. The Council understands the desire for change in this area and recognises the possibilities for improvements articulated in the consultation document. However, the Council is concerned that the proposed changes will do nothing to stem the diminution or removal of services which its parishioners have experienced over a number of years, principally due to a consistent absence of adequate funding to ensure that previously enjoyed amenities are maintained or improved. The Council is especially apprehensive that the proposals, rather than improving the current state of affairs, will provide an opportunity for funding to be, in effect, reduced even further – the consultation document offers no firm assurances that this will not be the case.
3. In view of this, to gain confidence in the proposals, the Council will need to see far more information and detail in relation to how the current services and activities of the existing higher authorities will be safeguarded against further cuts, together with more substantive evidence in terms of how the changes will generate meaningful improvements. Without such visibility the Council currently finds it difficult to visualise a situation where the proposed changes will translate into tangibly better outcomes for all its parishioners.
4. While the Council understands that town and parish councils are not specifically included in the proposed restructuring, it was disappointed to see that in a consultation paper which discusses ‘enabling more decisions to be taken at a more local level’, those bodies which are actually closest to Essex communities – the county’s town and parish councils – are not mentioned. The Council would argue that for most citizens these lower-level councils are in a better position to articulate what their communities want if they are to be given ‘a greater say in decisions that affect them’.
5. The Council therefore feels that town and parish councils should be able to participate more actively in the restructuring process, especially to ensure that any higher-level reorganisation does not have the (presumably unintended) consequence of current city, district or county council services being ‘rationalised’ or withdrawn. Communities and their town and parish councils are already having to consider picking up the slack in relation to higher authorities’ services which have been cut or denuded under the current arrangements.
6. In the context of establishing a new mayor and describing what ‘local’ actually means, the nomenclature used in the consultation is unhelpful. In particular, the descriptions ‘mayor’ (and ‘mayoral’) and ‘local’ have been extended beyond their everyday constructions, so that the mayoral role is not what people would normally expect, and local is mainly a term used to distinguish higher-level authorities from central government.
7. The conventional definition of a mayor is ‘the chief executive, usually elected, of a city, village, or town’. While it could be argued that the more modern mayoral entities created elsewhere have already moved the concept beyond what most people have in mind when they hear the word, this further stretch to a whole county is misleading. Essentially, mayors in this new sense are not really administering local affairs in the same way as their traditional counterparts, so using the same term seems to be an attempt merely to project the virtues of the usual smaller-community role onto a county-wide one when it is not particularly applicable.
8. Similarly, ‘local’ for most people is their immediate community, typically their street, estate, village or parish, and in municipal terms is at its greatest extent their town or city council area. Newly created mayors or unitary authorities would not be local in the traditional

sense, and indeed the proposal to incorporate existing city and district councils into single unitary authorities actually 'de-localises' the structure (for instance Chelmsford City Council would be amalgamated with two or three other existing councils to form a larger more remote, disconnected replacement). Because of this, town and parish councils will have a greater responsibility in truly representing local communities' demands and needs and should therefore be actively consulted as the new structure is developed to help critique and fully strength-test the details of what is being proposed when they emerge.

9. However, engagement with town and parish councils should not be restricted to just this development phase. In future there should also be clear channels of two-way communication established between them and any new mayoral or unitary authorities. Also, town and parish councils should have ready reasonable access to non-elected policy implementation civil service experts, not just elected policy and budget-setting officials, as tends to be the current situation.
10. The precise funding model for any new structure is unclear from the consultation, and the Council understands why this should be so at such an early stage. However, as alluded to earlier in this response, the Council is concerned that the current overall funding (inadequate as it is already) will be reduced even further under the guise of efficiency savings. To avoid such legerdemain, there will need to be a clear, reasoned articulations of both the sources of all future revenues (and to whom they will be allocated) and how they are being directly mapped against all existing higher authority services and activities. If there are to be cuts, there should be absolute transparency in terms of upon which areas these will be imposed, and that this information should be published before elections under the new structure take place.
11. In addition, an important omission from the consultation paper is any indication of how the debts of badly run councils under the existing structure will be serviced and repaid. The Council would be concerned if, in effect, the burden falls on those new authorities which happen to include the miscreant areas. For instance, under the current structure the Council's community receives services from Chelmsford City Council which is a financially well managed authority – following any restructuring it would not expect its parishioners to suffer reduced services and/or higher Council Tax demands to pay off the debts of others. It should be made clear who will service and repay any outstanding debts when the new structure becomes effective. Conversely, it should also be made clear how the existing reserves of well-run councils be allocated under the new arrangements.
12. More generally, besides the absence of an explanation of debt servicing provisions, the consultation is also silent on any impact the new arrangements will have on the current levels of Council Tax paid by Essex householders, one way or the other. Again, complete transparency would be needed so that electors can assess their choices when voting under the revised structure (by understanding which candidates will be supporting any likely tax increases/decreases).
13. Similarly, the consultation makes no mention of whether the current arrangements town and parish councils operate under to request and collect their precepts will be altered. The Council would like clarity on how the system will alter, if at all. This is important because if the new structure means higher authorities' services or activities are to be reduced, each town or parish council will need to decide whether it should pick up the slack, meaning an increase in its precept requirements.
14. The Council has answered the specific points in Questions 10 to 16 in the way it has based upon the points made in this supplementary narrative. In particular, its answers reflect the current lack of information for it to be able to make fully formed assessments of the outcomes of introducing the new structure in terms of whether implementation will

(a) deliver benefits to the area, (b) support the economy of the area, (c) improve social outcomes in the area, (d) improve local government services in the area (the outcome may well be the reverse), (e) improve the local natural environment and overall national environment, or (f) support the interests and needs of local communities and reflect local identities (again, the reverse may be an unintended consequence).

15. Without more information the Council's is currently unable to offer a more positive assessment in relation to the proposals. A key factor in helping the Council (and no doubt other lower tier councils) to further consider the proposals will be to ensure there is active engagement with it during the restructuring formulation period, and it welcomes any and all future opportunities to contribute to the process by lending its expertise to identify the desired outcomes for itself and the parishioners it represents.