

## **Devolution and Unitary Councils – an update and overview**

Devolution and LGR started off as two separate initiatives. The point of devolution was a simplistic devolution of powers (such as bus franchising) from Central Govt to the County Council, which would bring decision making closer to the electorate. Whereas, Local Govt Reform (LGR)/Unitary Councils is about replacing Essex County Council (ECC), 2 existing Unitaries (Southend and Thurrock) and 15 District Councils (such as Chelmsford City Council CCC) with 3, 4, or 5 Unitary Councils – which cover all the responsibilities of ECC and the District Councils. So, instead of there being one County Council responsible for Roads, Social Care, Education, Children’s services, etc) with 15 District Councils (Planning, Waste Collection, Housing etc), Essex would be split into a small number of Unitary Councils, each having responsibility for all these services. So, CCC will need to merge with some of its neighbouring towns, yet to be determined). The number of Unitaries hasn’t been determined yet – it is aimed at around 500,000 people per unitary. The other change will be that there will be a directly elected Mayor, not for each Unitary, but a single one across all of Essex. The Mayor will also take on the role of the Police Commissioner. In order to do this, the May 2025 County Council elections have to be postponed by a year. The reality is that a year isn’t enough and further legislation will be required to postpone further. So, the best prediction at the moment is that:

**May 2025** – ECC elections postponed by at least a year. Further extensions will be required and Cllrs will probably serve another 3 years until March 2028

**May 2026** – elections for cross-Essex Mayor

**May 2027** – CCC elections postponed for a year

**May 2027** - Unitary Councils “shadow” elections, ready to take control in March 2028. They will spend their first year setting up the organisation and budgets,

**March 2028** - ECC, Southend & Thurrock Unitaries and all the 15 District Councils abolished and replaced by TBD Unitary Councils

For me, this means that I was expecting to have to stand again for ECC in May 2025, but I won’t and I probably have a 3 year extension. As a City Cllr for Broomfield and the Walthams, I would have also had to stand for election in May 2027, but I will likely get a year extension on that. I know many people feel that this is a suspension of democracy, but the overriding factor seems to be that if we don’t sign up to this approach, we will have it done to us!

I reserve judgement on the whole concept! Chelmsford City Council, whether under the Conservatives, or Lib-Dems, is one of the better managed authorities, with good services and low debt. Many of the other councils carry a large debt and this is likely to be shared out. However, I can see the benefit of Unitaries, after all as an ECC, CCC, and PC Cllr, I personally operate as one. But, this is all going to be a big upheaval, and you might have detected that I’m not a big fan of the direction we are going in!

I believe there is a public consultation - <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/greater-essex-devolution>

### **Love Your Bus**

Two of my Parish Councils have applied to this initiative – Good Easter and Chignal, jointly. I have provided my written support. Deadline for submission was 21<sup>st</sup> Feb – I don't know the outcome yet, but I have also given my verbal support to the Head of IPTU

### **Member Highways Initiative**

I have continued to make use of the additional “Winter Maintenance” Members’ Highways Initiative. This scheme was added because, unlike me, not all Cllrs used their MHI allowance, so there was spare capacity. Some holes in Highwood and Broomfield (at the crossing) have already been fixed. Also, on the list now are the road to Pleshey, Writtle (St Johns Green and Bridge Street), Chignal (outside Gardening Express) and the A131 near Gt Leighs.

### **Drainage issue on Grange Road**

I reported to the last meeting that I had met with the Flood team lead at Grange Road, on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> Feb 25, and also talked to the residents. And that we believe that there must be an under-road pipe which should take the water from the ditch on the west, to the one on the right. We can't jet that pipe through unless we can find the entrances at either end. So far, they have not been located. We can see a slight raise in the road, which would indicate where such a pipe is located. The resident (responsibility for the west ditch, is going to try and cut back into the verge to see if they can locate the pipe. If they can, I can arrange for it to be jetted. If it can't be located, I need to apply for a new pipe to be laid – which may take some time. I have no further feedback than this.

### **Lamppost SIDs**

I am working with a Cllr colleague to try to push this through as an LHP scheme, so that any Parish Council can request it – by paying a set price to have a number of lampposts assessed for installation of a SID. The mechanics and proof of concept have been worked through by Highways, but we are still waiting for approval by Cabinet Highways Member to open the scheme for applications. Until such approval, I can't say that it is available for use!

### **Road Safety Issues**

In terms of road safety, I am a big advocate of reducing speeds on the fast rural roads of Essex and Safer Essex Roads Partnership (SERP) <https://saferessexroads.org/> and especially their Vision Zero initiative. I am pleased to say that there is a proposal to reduce the speed limits on the A414 between the Widford Roundabout and the B181 Tylers Green. This speed limit reduction is being sought for safety reasons following a high number of fatal collisions in the past 12-18 months. Whilst investigations are still underway, a reduction in speed is seen as a positive measure by which to mitigate the risk of future fatal collisions. Of course I have said that I welcome any initiative that would improve the situation, but that I would propose going further. The current situation does create some confusion in that travelling from Chelmsford to the M11 junction, a driver goes through 7 different speed limits. The proposal lessens this to 6, but still has numerous changes, which leaves a driver wondering what speed limit they are in. My suggestion is that the whole road is made 40mph, except the 30mph through a couple of populated areas.

Also, I stated that I would welcome similar consideration for the A1060.

The Casualty Reduction Team tell me that the Police's investigation / Forensics report is still be ongoing so they can't publish their internal report yet which is still being collated ready for internal review

Whilst we could raise an LHP request, I think Casualty Reduction recommendation is the quickest way to go.

The LHP budget is already allocated for 25/26. So, it would have to wait until 26/27 for design (if even selected by the LHP), and then 27/28 for implementation. Since we don't make a decision on 26/27 budget until Feb 27, we might as well wait for Casualty Reduction to report.

### **Pylons – targeted consultation**

The targeted consultation has now opened for the Essex (and Thurrock) region and will run until 27<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

Feedback can be provided at [www.nationalgrid.com/norwich-to-tilbury](http://www.nationalgrid.com/norwich-to-tilbury)

Most of these changes have been identified from feedback from the last consultation and NGET have stated that before they make any decisions, they want to consult with those people living near these proposed changes.

The changes can be found here - [Norwich to Tilbury | Document library | National Grid ET](#)

There are also a series of Webinars and events that can be accessed from the website.

I had a call with NGET 26<sup>th</sup> Feb (for the City Cllrs – affects around 6 Cllrs, but only 2 of us attended – myself and Cllr Whitehead). On the call NGET made it clear that this consultation is purely about the changes, and is not about off-shore, or underground options, although I suspect that people will still comment on this. I did ask about these and was told that NGET are operating within the framework of Central Govt, and options such as underground, would only be considered if Central Govt changed the rules – e.g., moved away from the requirement of providing the cheapest solution.

The latest proposal includes just 3 areas around Chelmsford:

- Essex 7 – around Gt Leighs – this is mainly about timing and synchronising with the ECC new Minerals Plan
- Essex 8 – the Waltham Gap – lower height pylons (37m rather than 50m), but wider. From what I can see, this would reduce visibility of the pylons from a distance, but brings one closer to the road (and a house) and so be more intrusive close up.
- Essex 9 – around Margaretting – temp construction laydown area repositioned north of Ivy Barnes Lane

It seems all other areas have not experienced sufficient change to warrant comment.

NGET assured me that the proposals were subject to feedback and if, for example, the Waltham residents would rather have the previous proposal, it would be considered. It is the Waltham Gap which seems to be the major change in this consultation, and is a trade-off between lower height pylons but they are more intrusive (being nearer the road and housing). I will probably

comment that we would like the lower height pylons, but in the old positions, in the middle of the fields. I don't know if that is possible, as the lower height pylons may have less span.

### **Pylons – Central Govt**

As stated above, NGET are operating within the rules set down by Central Govt which pushes totally towards a overhead pylon solution. Alternatives such as off-shore, or underground, would need a change of approach from Govt. Hence, our MP Kemi, and myself, continue to push on this. At ECC and CCC level I have pushed both organisations to resist pylons, and ECC has joined forces with not only Suffolk and Norfolk, but also Lincolnshire.

If you are keeping up with it on the press, you will know that the Labour Govt, and Ed Miliband in particular, is not only pushing the Development Consent Order (DCO), but also clearing the path in front of it, to make National Infrastructure projects get a smoother run through. The DCO is likely to be mid/late 2025.

Kemi has continued to join forces with other Conservative MPs - Bernard Jenkins, James Cartlidge, Alex Burghart , Jerome Mayhew, James Wilde, Priti Patel, Victoria Atkins, Steve Barclay, James McMurdock, to oppose this blight on the countryside. We even seem to have Nigel Farage aligning with us "*Farage called the proposed 114-mile pylon network from Norwich to Tilbury an "absolute disaster and aesthetic blight on landscapes and seascapes "* – what strange bedfellows such controversy makes!

Jointly, Kemi and I, have:

- *Expressed concerns about the 'Pylon Presumption' and sought constructive solutions for transmission infrastructure*
- *The group of MPs have requested that NESO include a national strategic option in the CSNP for an onshore grid that prioritized underground HVDC (U-DC), mirroring the East Anglia approach but on a nationwide scale.*
- *Promoted underground HVDC on the basis that it is cheaper if the target date of 2034 is accepted.*
- *Promoted shorter sections of HVAC underground past areas such as the Waltham Gap and West of Chelmsford where the conversion to AC short runs, is less onerous.*

We accept that the push to net zero is necessary, but we need to take the people with along with us and look at technologies that are acceptable, even if they cost more in the short term!