

Report for Parish Councils from Cllr Iona Parker – March 2025

Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation in Essex.

The Government has announced that it wishes to extend devolution to all areas of England. Essex has taken the view that it should be at the forefront of this programme and has applied to be in the priority group. This request has been accepted.

Devolution will see powers, functions and funding passed from Whitehall to local areas and leaders. This will enable decisions which would otherwise be taken by ministers and civil servants in London to be taken at a more local level, tailoring the decisions to local needs, enabling more co-ordinated action and giving local areas more say over decisions which affect them.

The proposed model for Essex will see a directly elected mayor and the creation of a combined/strategic authority consisting of representatives from Essex County Council, Thurrock and Southend. Elections for the mayor would take place in May 2026.

The areas to be devolved include:

- Transport and local infrastructure, including buses, highways and train services
- Skills and employment support
- Housing and strategic planning
- Economic development and regeneration, including business support

The Government is consulting on these proposed changes and is seeking your views. Search Greater Essex Devolution Consultation on the Gov.uk website.

In addition to this (and separate from it) the Government is proposing to reorganise local government in 2 tier areas (ie where there are county and district/borough/city councils) and replace them with one unitary council. For Essex this will mean between 2 and 5 unitary councils. Essex has been asked to submit its initial proposals by 21st March with final proposals by 26th September. Leaders have formed cross party working groups to look at issues such as geography, size, number and value for money. Financial viability will be an important issue as will the need to maintain quality services. There also needs to be an understanding with the Government of how existing council debts will be handled.

Given the level of upheaval this will involve, the Government has agreed to postpone elections for Essex County Council due to take place this May for one year (although this may be extended).

Budget

BDC agreed its budget for the forthcoming year at its meeting on 24th February. Main highlights of relevance to my ward:

- Council tax to remain low. The BDC element of Council Tax will increase by 2.97% or £5.94 a year for a band D property. This means our Council Tax is still have one of the lowest in Essex and we are able to set a balanced budget.
- Transformation programme to be adjusted to reflect Local Government Reorganisation. This Programme is looking at how we can work more efficiently and make best use of our funds.
- £1.5m to invest in community assets across the District.
- Further funding for our cost of living fund to help low income households.

- £500k for temporary housing to meet the growing pressures for temporary housing for those who are homeless.
- No increase to garden waste collection charges.
- £50k for new litter and dog bins. (Thank you to the parish councils in my ward who have been pushing for new bins.)
- Street cleaning grants to parish councils to continue.
- Councillor Community Grants Scheme to continue.
- Twice yearly verge cutting to resume.

To remind you, 58% of our income comes from Council tax, 40% comes from business rates and 2% comes from Government grants. BDC collects Council tax on behalf of ECC, the police and fire authorities and town and parish councils. Of every £1 collected in Council tax, 9p is retained by the District Council.

Local Plan

The consultation on the Issues and Options for the new Local Plan has just closed. The next stage is the evaluation of the sites that have been put forward for development (housing and employment). Meetings will take place in May and June.

If any sites have been put forward in your parish, I would urge you to consider now how you wish to respond to these sites so you are ready to participate in these meetings if necessary.

Waste Review

The consultation on this has also just closed. Over 7,500 responses have been received. I hope to be able to update you on this at the meeting.

Sible Hedingham medical centre

Good news on this. The land for this was acquired by BDC as part of a s.106 agreement for the Bloor Homes development in Sible Hedingham. The land has now been transferred from BDC to One Medical who will be building the centre for the GP practices in Hedingham. Work on drainage is due to start shortly. One Medical will then go out to tender for the construction with work starting, all going well, in the autumn. The building already has planning permission.

Braintree Diagnostic Centre

Work has now started on this at the Braintree Community Hospital. We are extremely fortunate to have this facility which is only one of three being developed in the county. This will provide access to X-rays, MRI and CT scans and blood tests and save patients having to travel further afield.