

North Essex Councils



Report to:	Cabinet
Date:	30 November 2023
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Dan Swords, Leader of the Council
Lead Officer:	Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive (01279) 446000
Key Decision:	Yes
Forward Plan:	Forward Plan number I016389
Call In:	This item is subject to call in procedures
Corporate Priorities:	Secure Investment into Harlow Improve Council Services
Wards Affected:	All

Recommended that Cabinet agrees:

- A** That the council will work in partnership with other councils in North Essex under the banner of North Essex Councils (NEC).
- B** To jointly resource a small team to collectively represent North Essex Councils, establish a detailed terms of reference for NEC and develop a clear programme of work.
- C** That the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive continue to represent the council on the North Essex Councils Partnership with the appropriate delegation to act in line with the principles outlined in the report.
- D** That the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive report progress of the workstreams to Cabinet at least once per financial year.

Reason for decision

- A** To update Cabinet on progress since agreeing the North Essex Authorities' (NEA) Memorandum of Understanding in December 2022, and seek approval to establish the

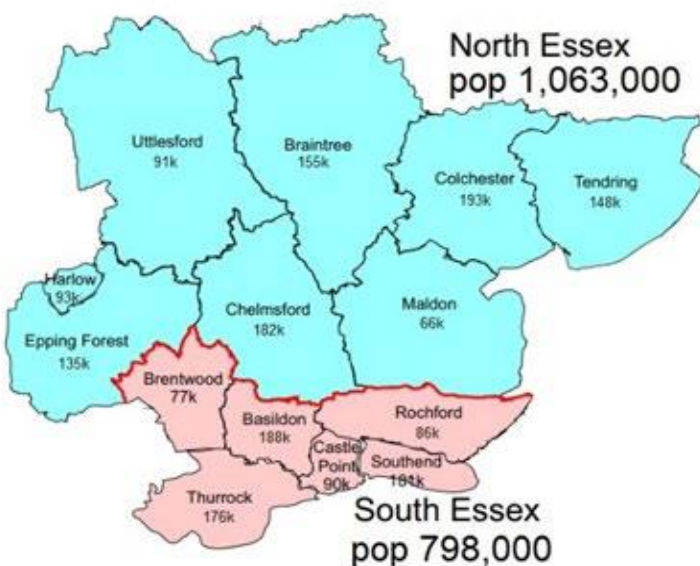
North Essex Councils partnership and commit resources to enable its objectives to be delivered.

Other Options

- A** Harlow Council could opt not to participate in the North Essex Councils structure and thereby not contribute to the funding of this. Whilst this would result in a modest financial saving, the Council would lose the ability to participate in the opportunities presented by the potential for shared services as well as those created by the devolution agenda. All other authorities are committed to participating in the North Essex structure.

Background

1. For the purposes of this report, North Essex comprises the following Councils:
 - a) Braintree District Council
 - b) Chelmsford City Council
 - c) Colchester City Council
 - d) Epping Forest District Council
 - e) Essex County Council
 - f) Harlow Council
 - g) Maldon District Council
 - h) Tendring District Council
 - i) Uttlesford District Council



2. In December 2022, the Leader agreed to enter into an informal Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the other councils in North Essex (Appendix A) setting up the basis for a new strategic partnership to deliver place leadership across North Essex.
3. During 2023, Chief Executives from each of the North Essex councils have been meeting regularly to discuss and develop actions to deliver the aims set out in the MoU.
4. At a meeting of North Essex Council leaders on 20 July 2023, it was agreed to formalise the partnership and committed to taking a common report through their relevant governance processes. A further workshop session on 9 November 2023 began to develop a shared understanding of priorities which included housing, economic development and transformed public services/local authority resilience. The NEC Chief Executives will now work on the development of a more detailed programme for delivery.

Issues/Proposals

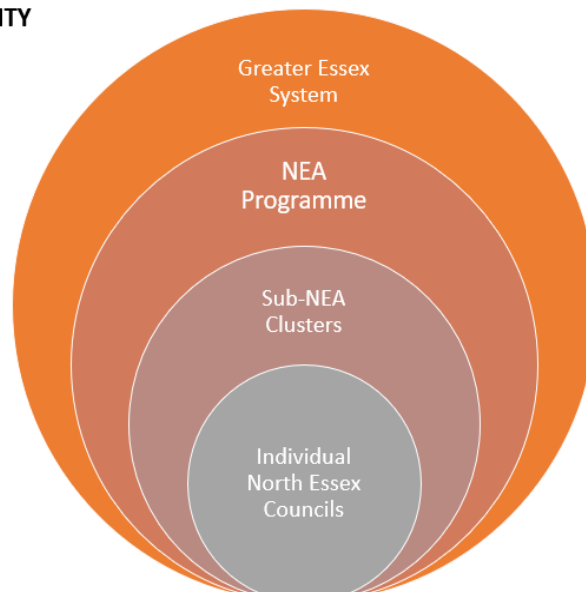
5. It is proposed that:
 - a) NEC will identify common issues and develop shared solutions that add value beyond what any individual council can do on their own.
 - b) NEC will convene partnerships that deliver improved outcomes on Economic Development, through the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB), Finance, Housing, Climate Change, Shared Services and Devolution.
 - c) Within NEC, partnership working will happen at all levels, may involve different groups of NEC councils working together, and collaboration may reach beyond North Essex where this serves to the purpose of NEC.
6. NEC Leaders have reached a shared understanding of some of the key benefits of joint work, including but not limited to:
 - a) Improving shared evidence, data and insights to inform collaboration.
 - b) Enhancing Organisational Capacity & Resilience.
 - c) Improving core service quality, efficiency and outcomes.
 - d) Delivering key strategic programmes of work together.
 - e) Influencing and supporting responses to legislative changes.
 - f) Provide the basis for district, city and borough nominations to a future Greater Essex Combined Authority.

- g) Achieving financial security and increased investment.
- h) Influencing policy through a stronger collective voice – nationally, regionally and within Greater Essex.
- i) Driving forward new Shared Services opportunities.
- j) Engaging businesses effectively to support the responsibilities of the LEP across North Essex.

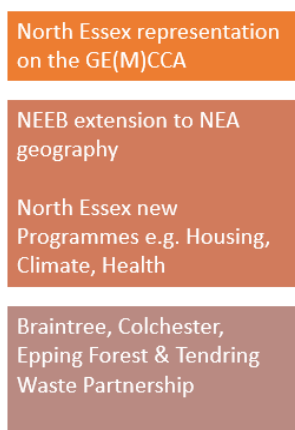
7. The outcomes listed in paragraph 6 will be achieved at different spatial levels. The diagram below illustrates how this would work in practice:

NEA system working and scales of activity

CURRENT / EMERGING ACTIVITY



FUTURE POTENTIAL



- 8. The NEC structure will also have a direct role in any devolution deal that is agreed for Greater Essex. Both NEC and the equivalent body in South Essex, will have representation on the Combined Authority. Additionally, where any additional funding is identified for broader devolution, it will be the North Essex Councils body that will provide oversight of this. Harlow's participation in NEC is therefore essential for the Council to have direct involvement in the devolution agenda.
- 9. Delivering this ambitious approach to sub-regional working will not be possible without each partner council contributing resources to the NEC programme. Each constituent council will be required to contribute £20,000 in both 2023/24 and 2024/25, enabling the partnership to secure resource to develop and implement a programme of activity.

10. During 2024/25 a review will be undertaken to identify future ambitions for the partnership, opportunities for further joint working and any resulting financial implications beyond March 2025.
11. If the recommendations in this report are supported, the North Essex Councils strategic partnership will be able to progress with the development of a joint programme and the recruitment of staffing resource to support the activity.

Implications

Equalities and Diversity

None at this stage.

Climate Change

Climate Change has been identified during the discussions over the last year as an issue where greater impact may be made by the eight authorities working together and, potentially, sharing resources. This will be discussed during the development of a work programme over the next few months and opportunities identified for collaborative working.

Communities and Environment

None at this stage.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Finance

The Annual contribution of £20,000 will be an additional budget requirement across the 2023/24 and 2024/25 financial years. As these are effectively one-off short-term requirements the funding will be identified as part of the S151 Officers annual review of Reserves. Any funding required beyond March 2025 will be considered as part of the MTFP and Budget process for 2025/26 and future years.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Governance and Corporate Services

The proposals, as they stand currently, do not require the entering into a 'formal' arrangement. However it is expected that from the range of work likely to proceed, a formal joint arrangement will be required similar to that proposed for the HGGT. As such, if powers are to be eventually shared it may trigger Constitutional change which would be a matter for Full Council to determine. Officers from Governance have already participated in sessions looking at where there are advantages for matters such as joint services. The proposal also provides a vehicle for seeking representation on any future Greater Essex Combined Authority.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Services

Housing

The development of a NEC structure will allow future investment and joint initiatives to be developed to cover a range of policy and operational areas to the benefit of HDC residents.

Author: Neil Euesden, Interim Director of Housing

Strategic Growth and Regeneration

Harlow Council's ability to participate in wider external partnerships was identified in the February 2023 Corporate Peer Challenge as an important activity for the Council. The development of the NEC structure is likely to create more opportunity for investment

Author: Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive

Appendices

Appendix A – Memorandum of Understanding

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used:

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

NEC – North Essex Councils