

Marie



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MP for Chelmsford

What county council's devolution decision could mean for all of us

LAST Friday, Essex County Council took a significant step that's sure to spark conversations across the region. In a vote that signals big changes for local government, the council decided to pursue devolution and local government reorganisation while also agreeing to ask to postpone the scheduled May elections.

With so much at stake for Essex residents, I thought I'd take this opportunity to unpack what this could mean for all of us.

Devolution has long been touted as a way to bring decision-making closer to the people, shifting power from Westminster to local authorities.

Proponents argue it allows communities to tailor solutions to their unique challenges, whether that's improving transport, boosting local economies or delivering better social care.

Liberal Democrats are generally in favour of devolution, allowing decisions to be made at a more local level. But for devolution to work, it needs to be more than just a reshuffle of responsibilities; it must come with the funding and flexibility to make a real difference.

Local government reorganisation (LGR) in Essex would involve significant changes to the way decisions are made and services are delivered across the county. Currently, most of Essex operates under a two-tier system, with Essex County Council handling broad responsibilities like education, highways and social care, while city, district and borough councils focus on localised services such as housing, waste collection, and planning.

Reorganisation could mean moving to a unitary authority model, where a single council manages all local government functions for its area. This approach aims to streamline decision-making, reduce duplication, and cut costs. For residents, it could mean fewer layers of government to navigate when accessing services or raising concerns.

However, such a shift is not without challenges. Transitioning to a new structure would require time,



Marie Goldman MP asks about fair funding for community pharmacies at Prime Minister's Questions. She has also launched a petition

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investment and careful planning to avoid disruptions. There's also debate about whether centralising services would make councils less responsive to local needs. And there's concern about the possibility of losing local identities. Would the city of Chelmsford cease to exist in any meaningful sense after LGR?

If Essex embraces reorganisation, the key will be ensuring that the new structure prioritises efficiency while maintaining a strong connection to communities. As discussions continue, it's vital that residents' voices are heard to shape a system that truly works for everyone in the county.

The council's decision comes at a time when local authorities everywhere are grappling with financial pressures and increased demand for services. There's no denying the potential benefits of devolution – more local control over transport

budgets, housing priorities and even skills training. But I've heard from many constituents who are wary of what this might mean in practice.

Will Essex residents genuinely see improvements in their daily lives? Will our communities have a real say in shaping the future, or will this simply concentrate more power in fewer hands?

And with the proposal for an elected mayor on top of the structure, as part of a Combined Authority for Essex, there are concerns that rather than simplifying things, it will add another layer of bureaucracy and concentrate a lot of power in the hands of just one person.

The other part of last week's decision – postponing the May elections – has understandably raised eyebrows. Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, giving people the opportunity to hold their representatives accountable. Delaying them risks undermining trust in local government, even if the decision is made with good intentions.

In Chelmsford, I've already had conversations with residents concerned about this move. Some see it as a pragmatic step, ensuring conti-

nuity during what promises to be a period of significant transition. Others fear it sets a troubling precedent, putting the democratic process on hold when people most need their voices heard. Besides, Essex County Council elections were last held in 2021 – a lot has changed since then and the public should have the right to choose those who lead us through this momentous period of change, especially when it could be extending the term of the current council by three years.

For my part, I'll be keeping a close eye on how these decisions play out and working to ensure that the promises of devolution and LGR translate into tangible benefits for our communities. I'll also be advocating for clear, transparent communication from the council about what these changes mean for Essex residents, and why postponing the elections was deemed necessary.

As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts. What do you think about Essex's path towards devolution? Are you optimistic about the opportunities it could bring, or do you share some of the concerns I've heard from others? You can reach

me at marie.goldman.mp@parliament.uk.

Let's make sure that, whatever changes come, they truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the people who call Essex home.

In other news, readers of last week's column will know that I was planning to ask the Prime Minister an important question about fair funding for community pharmacies at last week's PMQs.

I'm pleased to report that I was able to ask my question as planned and received quite a sensible response from the Prime Minister, who asked me to provide more details by writing to him, which I did straight away.

But this crucial issue needs more attention from the media to heap pressure on the Government for change.

To help with this and to show how much the public care about this issue, I'm running a petition. Please show your support for our pharmacists by adding your name here: www.cml.d.org.uk/sop.

Thanks for reading, and I look forward to hearing from you.

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