

Article from Cllr. David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council, for EALC/Parish newsletters, Sep 2020:

The future shape of local councils in Essex is being discussed, writes Cllr David Finch, the Leader of Essex County Council, with the opportunity to simplify the current system coming soon.

This month (September), The Government is expected to bring forward a white paper, which will begin the process of reforming local councils in 'two-tier' County Council areas.

From our discussions with the Government, it is clear that it sees the current two-tier system of county and district councils, or county and city or borough councils as imperfect, and that unitary authorities, which are responsible for all council services in a defined area, are seen as a better option for delivering services. In Essex, for example, this might lead to between two and four new unitary councils.

In a recent speech, the Minister for Local Government, Simon Clarke MP, also pointed to the importance of the future role of town and parish councils, as the Government looks at the potential to devolve more decision making to local level.

In Essex work has begun on what the new 'map' of Essex Councils might look like, with initial discussions having taken place over the summer. Across Essex, we have one of the most complex local government structures in the UK – one county council, 12 district/borough/city councils and two unitary councils in Southend and Thurrock.

There is a real commitment and ambition to consider how much more can be achieved with a simplified system.

Alongside this, and providing new unitary councils are agreed, the Government will also allow us to submit proposals for a 'Combined Authority', led by a directly elected Mayor. A combined authority would be represented by the leaders of the new unitary councils, and would be able to secure funding for investment in our economy and infrastructure. The ambition in Essex is to have proposals ready to submit following the publication of the White Paper.

I would stress that alongside this work, we will keep a focus on working with our partners and delivering for our residents and businesses throughout this period.

We have a made a positive start on this work. Keeping residents and businesses at the heart of our thinking, and ensuring we get the best possible deal and structures to support them in the future, is what will guide our thinking.

Cllr David Finch
Leader, Essex County Council

