



Chelmsford City Council

15 July 2026

Community Governance Review

Report by:
Leader of the Council

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Purpose

The purpose of this report is to update members in relation to the community governance review and city status.

Recommendations

1. That the outcome of the initial formal consultation be noted.
 2. That Council notes the position in relation to City Status.
 3. That Council agrees that no changes are made in relation to community governance and that the community governance review is concluded at this stage.
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1. Introduction

- 1.1. Members will recall that Council decided to undertake a Community Governance Review (CGR) of its own volition, with the publication of the Terms of Reference (as amended) and formal initial consultation commencing in September 2025 in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement In Health Act 2007. Chelmsford has 29 parishes, but the large urban central area is currently unparished.
- 1.2. This report provides details of the results of the consultation, an update in relation to city status and the options now available to the Council. The Connectivity and Local Democracy Working Group have provided a member steer that no further action should be taken in relation to the CGR and the review process is ended at this stage. Accordingly, the report sets out briefly the options that have been considered but focusses upon the preferred course of action supported by the working group.

2. Decision-making process and statutory criteria

- 2.1 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out two statutory criteria. Chelmsford City Council must, by law, have regard to the need to secure that community governance within the area under review:
 - (1) reflects the identities and interests of the community in that area, and
 - (2) is effective and convenient.
- 2.2 In addition, the Council must take into account the 2010 government guidance (published by DCLG at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/8312/1527635.pdf). The Council must also have due regard to responses submitted during the consultations and be open and transparent such that local stakeholders are made aware of the outcome of the decisions and the reasons behind those decisions.
- 2.3 Whilst Members are advised to read the DCLG guidance in its entirety, some key extracts are included below. Essentially, the guidance supports the 2007 Act requiring that local people are consulted, and that their views are taken into account during the CGR. Whilst City Councillors are the decision-makers, those decisions must be based on evidence submitted through the CGR consultation process. *Numbers refer to paragraph numbers in the DCLG guidance; emphasis added for clarity:*

7. The guidance supports and helps to implement key aspects of the 2006 white paper. The 2007 Act **requires that local people are consulted during a community governance review, that representations received in connection with the review are taken into account** and that steps are taken to notify them of the outcomes of such reviews including any decisions.

58. **It is clear that how people perceive where they live** - their neighbourhoods - is significant in considering the identities and interests of local communities and depends on a range of circumstances, often best defined by local residents. Some of the factors which help define neighbourhoods are the geography of an area, the make-up of the local community, sense of identity, and whether people live in a rural, suburban, or urban area.

95. The recommendations **must take account of any representations received and should be supported by evidence which demonstrates that the recommended community governance arrangements would meet the criteria set out in the 2007 Act**. Where a principal council has conducted a review following the receipt of a petition, it will remain open to the council to make a recommendation which is different to the recommendation the petitioners wished the review to make. This will particularly be the case where the recommendation is not in the interests of the wider local community, such as where giving effect to it would be likely to damage community relations by dividing communities along ethnic, religious or cultural lines.

2.4 It is important to note that it is Chelmsford City Council who decides community governance arrangements. Therefore, where difficult decisions must be made, consideration must be given to opposing and differing views in light of legislation, best practice, and official guidance.

2.5 Essentially, proposals for change should first identify the identities and interests of the communities and then consider the governance arrangements for that area.

2.6 Members are invited to note that the course of appeal is by way of Judicial Review, a potentially expensive and damaging mechanism open to local stakeholders if there is a failure in the decision-making process.

2.7 It is also important to recognise that the number of responses received is not necessarily strong evidence on the strength of feeling either for or against any particular viewpoint. It is true that stakeholders preferring the status quo may not make representations until and unless there is a suggestion of significant change that they would otherwise oppose. Therefore, where little response has been received, it cannot be assumed that local people are in favour of supporting the change proposed by a few submissions; they may well currently be unaware of those suggestions and happy with no change. That is why the second round of formal consultation is important, and why targeted requests for responses are recommended in areas where changes are proposed. Consultation documents so far were developed in conjunction with the Communications Team to ensure clarity for respondents and adherence to statutory criteria and best practice.

2.8 Members will be aware that the Government is currently in the process of reviewing local government arrangements in Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock with a view to replacing the current 15 authorities with 5 single- tier unitary authorities (this is referred to as LGR) . Once the Structural Changes Order for the area is made, a transitional period begins, and Chelmsford City Council would lose the power to implement the recommendations of the CGR, as that function would pass to the shadow, or successor, authority. It is anticipated that the Structural Change Order will be in place by the Autumn of 2026.

2.9 Members are reminded that the scope of the CGR is defined in law. Whilst some responses have been received that are outside of the scope of the CGR, this Council has no authority to make decisions or recommendations on those matters and so cannot engage in meaningful discussion about them. Specifically, the CGR cannot consider or determine:

- (1) Parliamentary constituency boundaries

- (2) County Divisions, other than requesting consequential amendments are made to align with any changes to parish boundaries, whilst the County still exists
- (3) City Wards, other than requesting consequential amendments are made to align with any changes to parish boundaries, whilst the City still exists
- (4) The number of County or City councillors
- (5) Any arrangements for the new unitary authorities that will be contained within the Structural Change Order for Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock
- (6) The powers and authority of different tiers of government

3. Initial Consultation

3.1 The initial consultation took place from 13th October 2025 to 4th January 2026, inviting respondents to give their views on community governance arrangements in the unparished part of Chelmsford City Council and in the adjoining parishes which border the unparished area.

3.2 A total of 617 responses to the initial consultation were received. Compared to CGR consultations conducted elsewhere and given that the consultation did not cover the whole of the city area, this is a substantial response. Given the broad and open nature of the initial consultation, a wide range of responses were received. These have been weighed against the statutory criteria and used to consider whether Draft Recommendations to make changes to community governance should be made.

3.3 Through the consultation to date, there have been a range of views expressed as to whether the unparished area should be parished or not. The majority of responses (549) came from the unparished city centre area, whilst only 22 came from outside of the area. A further 8 respondents were unsure. However, most comments did not reflect issues of identity and interests, nor effectiveness or convenience of local governance arrangements.

3.4 The survey asked whether respondents supported the establishment of a new form of community governance given that Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) would see the abolition of Chelmsford City Council, along with other local authorities in Essex, and how their views varied depending upon what form that reorganisation took. Out of a total of 598 responses to this question, 184 (30.77%) were against some form of community governance being established, whilst a further 22 (3.68%) were unsure. 313 (52.34%) of respondents favoured emparishment regardless of the outcome of LGR, whilst 61 (10.20%) were in favour only if Chelmsford was merged with two very large or more than two other authorities to give a population of over 420,000. A further 18 respondents (3.01%) were in favour only if Chelmsford merged with four or more other authorities to give a population of circa 564,000. Therefore, on the basis LGR proceeds, a total of 392 (65.5%) were in favour of establishing some form of community governance.

3.5 Respondents were then asked what form of community governance they would like to see established in the currently unparished city centre area. The pattern of responses broadly followed the previous question regarding whether the area would benefit from a new form of community governance. Of the 541 responses to this question, less than one quarter (117 or 21.63%) favoured retaining the status-quo with no changes introduced. There was a clear majority view in favour of some form of parish council, with 330 (61.00%) wanting to see an elected tier of local government (a parish council) introduced, whilst a further 53 (9.80%) were in favour of joining an existing parish area. In total, 383 (70.79%) were in favour of emparishment in some form. Only 41 (7.58%) of respondents were in favour of

some other form of community governance such as area committees or informally organised groups.

3.6 The Council also consulted the neighbouring parishes in light of the potential for a new parish to be created. The Council received suggestions from 3 parishes (Springfield, Great Baddow and Broomfield) as to boundary changes.

3.7 Consideration can also now be given to the impact a CGR might have upon city status. This is a complex, evolving and nuanced area which has required detailed consideration and legal advice. Whilst many Councils have been able to retain city status through reorganisation, the position for Chelmsford is different and has highlighted that there is currently no known mechanism to resolve this.

3.8 The latest update in relation to city status set out in this report was not known or consulted upon during the initial consultation. Similarly, the minded to decision which has now been made by government in relation to LGR was also not known at the time of the consultation. Accordingly, it should be noted that none of the respondents were made aware of these issues during the initial consultation. Of course, if the Council were to proceed with the CGR there would be a second stage of consultation and such matters would need to be addressed and consulted upon. The responses to the initial consultation should be considered in that context. The redacted responses can be found at appendix 1 to this report.

4. City status update

4.1 Chelmsford became a city in 2012 as part of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The letters patent granted by the late Queen Elizabeth II bestowed status upon 3 "towns" (this included Chelmsford as well as Perth in Scotland and St Asaph in Wales). City status was sought and granted across the whole of the Chelmsford City Council area through royal prerogative.

4.2 As is noted in the report, Chelmsford (along with 14 other Essex authorities) is in the process of local government reorganisation. The Council has consulted MHCLG about how city status can be retained. MHCLG cannot provide legal advice to the Council in this regard and so external legal advice has also been sought from Counsel.

4.3 Whilst some rights and interests are transferred through transitional laws and arrangements, city status is not automatically retained or transferred to the new unitary council that is proposed upon abolition of the city council.

4.4 The Council has been advised that city status cannot be transferred to a parish council which has a different footprint to that stated in the letters patent (eg the whole of the Chelmsford City Council area). Accordingly, the only tried and tested mechanism to retain Chelmsford's city status is through charter trustees. However, charter trustees are not available where an area is fully parished. Therefore, if the Council were to proceed to parish the unparished urban area, city status would be lost upon re-organisation in 2028.

4.5 Officers have explored various other options to retain city status including whether part of the unparished area could be parished (to avoid the loss of the charter trustee mechanism) and sought to establish whether it would be possible for further letters patent to be issued, but these discussions have not resulted in the requisite re-assurance concerning city status.

4.6 In light of the above update the Connectivity and Local Democracy Working Group were consulted on a proposal to take no further action in relation to the CGR and to conclude the

review now. The working group supports that approach and accordingly this report has been drafted with that option in mind.

4.7 Arrangements will need to be made by the Council in relation to charter trustees. A further report will be provided in relation to this at a later stage.

5. Options that have been considered for the currently unparished City Centre

5.1 The following options have been considered:-

- Proceed to fully parish the unparished area - this would include considering whether there should be one parish or a group of parishes, new parish warding/electoral arrangements as well as boundary changes that may arise for existing parishes that border any new parish. As explained above, as this would result in the loss of city status this option is not proposed or supported by the working group.
- Proceed to parish part of the unparished area – the responses to the consultation were consistent across the various wards and accordingly, based upon the evidence from the consultation, this option is not viable or justifiable.
- Seek further letters patent – there is no known mechanism for this to happen
- Take the decision not to make any community governance changes at this stage so the urban area remains unparished and the CGR ends at this stage. In accordance with the member steer from the working group next steps in relation to this option are considered further below.

5.2 To conclude the proposal is to agree option 4 - that no further action is taken in relation to the CGR and that the process is concluded at this stage.

6. Next steps

6.1 If Full Council agrees that the CGR now ends the Council will update the website accordingly and notify interested parties (eg Essex County Council and relevant parish councils) of the position concerning the CGR.

List of appendices:

Appendix 1 - Redacted responses

Background papers:

None

Corporate Implications

Legal/Constitutional: This is a non-executive matter which falls to Full Council to determine. The legal implications are set out in the report but it should be noted that the report focusses upon the preferred course of action indicated by the working group and further details including advice would be necessary should Council wish for alternative options to be explored further.

Financial: The Council made £165K budget provision when the CGR was commenced. Approximately £34k has been spent to date but it is anticipated that no further costs would arise in ending the review.

Potential impact on climate change and the environment: None.

Contribution toward achieving a net zero carbon position by 2030: None.

Personnel: None.

Risk Management: There is a risk that failing to follow the CGR process as set out in legislation and guidance may lead to a legal challenge by way of Judicial Review. This would represent a significant financial and reputational risk to the City Council. Not proceeding with the CGR would reduce the risk in relation to this.

Equality and Diversity: Changing community governance boundaries and local governance arrangements has no impact on equality and diversity. A small number of electors may be affected if their property becomes part of a different electoral area as their polling station may change as a result. However, polling places are outside of the immediate scope of this review and are reviewed and approved by Council, taking into account accessibility for all electors. The method of communication and community engagement for any consultation takes account of equality, diversity and accessibility. This report does not propose that any further action is taken and accordingly that would have no impact upon equality and diversity. .

Health and Safety: None.

Digital: None.

Other: None.

Consultees:

A full initial public consultation was carried out

Connectivity and Local Democracy Working Group

Relevant Policies and Strategies:

Our Chelmsford Our Plan – Bringing people together and working in partnership to encourage healthy, active lives, building stronger, more resilient communities so that people feel proud to live, work and study in the area.

[illegible]

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