

Marie Goldman

MP for Chelmsford



Important issues on the horizon as we celebrate a successful summer

WELCOME to autumn. As schools go back, holiday memories fade into the distance and the days start to become noticeably shorter,

I sometimes find it tempting at this time of the year to wish my time away, to start planning for Christmas, and then next summer's holiday already. But in truth, September is often a lovely month. The weather is often quite settled and reasonably reliable (cue huge thunderstorms and torrential rain!), and if you were lucky enough to get a bit of a break in August, hopefully, like me, you'll feel a bit more refreshed and more prepared to take on the challenges ahead.

But before I look at what's coming up, I want to say a quick word about August. Because, of course, last month saw hundreds of thousands of young people receiving their GCSE and A Level results, including my own children. I know how hard many of them worked and how they will have been anxiously waiting to see what next steps their results allowed them to take. Well done to everyone involved in these crucial times in a young person's life – from the parents encouraging their less-than-enthusiastic teenager to put down their phone and pick up some revision, to the teachers holding their breath while waiting to find out whether they got across everything they needed to the students in their classes, only to start the whole process over again as the new academic year begins. It's no mean feat – and, regardless of the grades achieved, it's a key milestone. Congratulations on getting through it. Onwards and upwards!

August also brought long-awaited good news for Chelmsford: the new Beaulieu Healthcare Centre is due to open very soon. The Elizabeth Courttauld Partnership, who already run the North Chelmsford Health Centre, have publicly announced that they will be opening the Beaulieu Healthcare Centre this autumn. It's been a long road to get here and I'm pleased to have played a small role in working with the partnership and Chelmsford City Council to help get this over the line. The new centre will create much-needed extra capacity in the health services available in that part of Chelmsford. I

Marie Goldman MP and Lib Dem city councillor Dan Clark in front of the new Beaulieu Healthcare Centre



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know local residents have been very keen to see it open, especially as the building itself has been ready for quite some time. There isn't an exact date for the opening yet, with the partnership simply saying 'early autumn' on their website, so keep an eye there for more details: <https://nchc.gpsurgery.net/beaulieu-healthcare-centre-opening-in-2025>.

Parliament returned after Summer Recess on Monday, September 1. It will be sitting for about two-and-a-half weeks before it rises again for Conference Recess – returning on October 13.

This is the period when each of the political parties hold their big autumn conferences. I'll be attending the Liberal Democrats' conference, which this year will be returning to Bournemouth. More about that nearer the time.

In the meantime, there's lots of parliamentary business to get through. This week saw the Second Reading (a debate on the principles of a proposed draft law before it can progress to the next stages of debate and scrutiny) of the English Devolu-

tion and Community Empowerment Bill. This directly affects us here in Chelmsford and across Essex because we are in the first wave of the proposed devolution. In its most basic form, I agree with the guiding principles of this bill, which is supposed to move power away from Westminster and bring it closer to local communities. In theory, this should mean the ability for local politicians to listen to the needs of local people and have direct control over things like strategic transport, housing, and skills funding.

That sounds like a good thing, doesn't it? It's certainly a core liberal principle to have power devolved down to the lowest level that makes sense. (As a slight aside, the caveat here about the lowest level "that makes sense" is important – obviously, the absolute lowest level is an individual, but you can't have a cohesive, efficient and effective society if individuals are all trying to pull in different directions.) My concern, however, is how this is being done.

It's all coupled together with something called Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). In Essex, this means scrapping Essex County Council, all 12 of the district councils, including Chelmsford City

Council, as well as the two existing unitary authorities Thurrock and Southend. These will all be thrown into a melting pot and replaced with a huge combined mayoral authority to receive and administer the devolved strategic powers from Westminster.

There will also then probably be between three and five unitary authorities to do nearly everything else (town and parish councils will continue as they are, although there may end up being more of them).

These new unitary authorities will be much bigger than the existing district councils.

Even if we end up with five unitaries – a proposal supported by a majority of Essex's district councils and something that I would prefer to see – they will easily dwarf the current local councils. Under the five unitaries model, it is likely that Chelmsford would join together with Maldon and Brentwood to create a new unitary in this area.

My problem is that this is the exact opposite of devolution. Far from bringing power closer to the people it affects, these large unitaries will necessarily be more distant from the communities they serve. I worry that this will lead to less responsiveness

and less understanding of the needs of different communities.

It's a concern I intend to continue voicing in Parliament, alongside challenging the government's assumption that this reorganisation will save money. Recent reports suggest that there is no evidence for this and, with councils having to focus on LGR rather than tackling things like the housing crisis or adult social care, it feels a lot like a waste of resources to me. Time will tell, but I am very sceptical about any benefits it might bring.

Finally, we are still expecting the Government to release a White Paper this autumn outlining their plans for reforming the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system.

I've been contacted by several parents over the summer concerned that the Government is going to scrap the EHCP system and possibly remove parents' rights to appeal SEND decisions from local authorities. Before the summer recess, I challenged the government to confirm that it would be listening to parents and genuinely hearing their concerns. I sincerely hope they will demonstrate they have done that. We will all have to wait and see.