

Annual Report Regarding Essex County Council

Local Government finances continue to be constrained.

The Revenue Support Grant has been reduced again with the funding from Government through the Revenue Support Grant being reduced by £44m in 17/18 and will be phased out completely by 2020 to be replaced by business rate retention.

At the same time demand for services continues to grow.

The Council anticipates saving £106m by the end of 2017/18, these savings being in addition to the £597m over the last seven years. The Council even though making savings has kept Council Tax as low as possible to assist all residents, while at the same time investing wisely in front line services.

It was agreed at the relatively recent budget meeting of the County Council to not increase the Core Council Tax at all.

However, in Essex we currently spend over £1.4 million a day on adult social care alone. Over the next 12 years the number of people over 85 needing social care will grow by 50 per cent.

The Government has again given councils the power to add a 'Social Care Levy' onto Council Tax bills. Bearing this in mind The Council decided to implement the 3% Social Care Levy. It will raise an extra £17 million that can be used to support the most vulnerable in our society.

This means that a resident living in an average Band D property will pay 65 pence more each week in council tax or £34 a year in total for 17/18. But it also means the Council will be able to continue to support the vulnerable people in our communities.

Despite the reduction in funding from central government the budget agreed by the Council will allow spending of::

- £524m on adult social care
- £127m on children and families
- £668m on education and lifelong learning
- £233m on highways, infrastructure and public transport
- £92m on health

The budget also allows the authority to invest to deliver four priorities for Essex.

The four priorities supported by the budget are: Economic Growth; Enabling People to live as independently as possible ; Helping create great places to live and work; Sustainable Public Services.

Throughout the year the Council has continued to be proactive to help create the conditions for an even stronger economy in Essex. To assist businesses to flourish

The Council has previously indicated it wants to boost the Essex economy from £33 billion to £60 billion by 2025, it recognises that economic growth is key to creating a prosperous and healthy county.

The Independent Economic Commission for Essex chaired by Dr Andrew Sentence (renowned economist) published its first report identifying a number of key challenges that need to be addressed including:

- Raising skills and qualifications
- Improving transport infrastructure
- Supporting businesses to grow

The Council has invested in new school places and has agreed it will continue to invest in more new school places .

The Council is investing £7m capital in:

- Two Innovation Centres, Harlow MedTech and the University of Essex Innovation Centre in Colchester, which are aimed at supporting small and medium size businesses to grow and develop, providing flexible space and access to technology. And;
- Further education colleges that will deliver skill centres focussed on the teaching of science, technology, engineering and maths.

The authority has invested in and continues investing significantly into roads and transport infrastructure to ease congestion and help people commute and travel across the county. Work will begin to deliver improved slip roads on the A120 in Braintree, a new railway station in Chelmsford and improvements to M11 J8.

Due to investment over the last year and the two before that , the 5,000 mile road network is now among the best maintained in the whole country, and in the coming year the authority will invest over £108m in our footpaths, bridges and local roads.

Investment in new homes last year will continue into 17/18, working with partners to increase the flow of affordable housing.

The authority has determined that the elderly and most vulnerable in our society are supported to live independently and can access care and support if they need it.

Social Care has been one of the areas of greatest spend for the authority and in 2017/18 the budget agreed will mean the Council will be spending £524 million on adult social care. It is the greatest area of spend and of pressure.

By 2039 our older population is set to grow from 21% to 27%.

The children's social care teams continued their good work with children and families throughout the year. The number of children in care has reduced to just 1,000, where as almost every other area in the country has seen an increase.

For the second time in the last few years, an Essex social worker won the national social worker of the year award.

Investment the Council has made and is making in the infrastructure to make Essex communities good places to live and work has assisted the Council's priority with respect to that aim. However, the Council has recognised the importance of localism and appreciates that many of the solutions to the challenges the Council faces exist in our Communities and a priority is to give local communities a greater role.

At the budget meeting it was announced that new initiatives will be launched later in 17/18. The Supporting Communities Fund and Essex Lottery. The Supporting Communities Fund and the Essex Lottery. The Council is committing a total of £1M via the new Sustainable Communities Fund to support two distinct types of local scheme: local services that by being more locally responsive improve local places and local action – community –led activities that build social capital and local connections. It will help local communities to deliver new and innovative activities to improve their area. The fund assisting to get schemes off the ground.

The Essex Lottery will provide funding to community projects that already exist.

The fourth priority –delivering public services that are not only high quality, but are sustainable well into the future. Joining up public services to be in a position to respond strategically to the challenges is key and the authority has been working with partners to agree a Vision for what the County needs to look like so that in an increasingly competitive world Essex can speak with one voice and punch above its weight where it really matters.

More joined-up public services means making real differences to how the Council and others operate..

Essex County Council's(ECC) library service is a shining example of this. By turning libraries into community hubs ECC have brought together services across local government, health and the police to provide a seamless service, tailored to local needs. This is bringing more people into libraries 2.25m visited between October – December 2016 compared with 2m in 15/16.

LED Street Lights

In October 2016 it was stated that over 1,000 energy-saving LED street lights had been installed in the county since August when ECC began rollout of a two year project to upgrade 19,000 street lights. The LED programme is on schedule and will save taxpayers £600,000 a year on energy, maintenance and carbon tax costs.

10,000 energy-saving LED streetlights have now been installed across the county. These are the first phase of the £9.2 million programme to replace 19,000 conventional lights with LEDs on main roads and junctions in Essex.

The number of streetlights across Essex not working on 31 March 2017 was 3,726 or 2.93 percent of over 127,000 streetlights – a 15 percent reduction since January.

A number of these broken streetlights are waiting to be replaced with LED lights as the programme rolls out across the county.

New Wi-Fi scheme launched for communities in Essex

Local communities under the scheme launched above would be able to access a public Wi-Fi service in community buildings or 'hubs'. It is a new scheme by our Superfast Essex broadband improvement programme. Under the scheme, village halls, community centres and other hubs could buy a broadband service from two approved suppliers, APC Solutions or County Broadband. Initial set up costs would be supported by the ECC small grants scheme - the Community Initiatives Fund (CIF) which funds community projects. Up to £400 could be claimed per community hub by completing a short online form similar to the general CIF application process. Community hubs will subsequently need to pay a monthly service charge. Several Parishes indicated an interest soon after the launch.

Broomfield Hospital Shuttle Bus

Park and Ride buses to Broomfield Hospital are set to become more frequent as part of a new agreement. The new service began on 5 December 2016 and is operated by Essex County Council's own in-house minibus fleet "Community Link". The new buses run every 23 minutes and are fully accessible with specifically trained staff and specialist equipment for any users who may require assistance boarding and alighting the vehicle safely. It runs as part of the ordinary £3.00 Chelmsford Park and Ride ticket with discounted fares for under 16s. Concessionary pass holders qualify for free travel after 9am.

Extra £250k for gully cleansing during winter 16/17

Blocked drains on the highway were tackled with a dedicated £250,000 investment from Essex County Council. The money paid for an additional gully cleansing machine to target flooding issues caused by blockages on highway gullies.

£27.7 million Independent Living programme

The Independent Living Programme – ECC's innovative approach to housing and care for older people - was welcomed in Parliament as an example for other local authorities to follow and is proving a hit with Essex residents too.

Independent Living is attractive, self-contained housing with 24 hour care and support on-site. Around 2,000 Essex residents will benefit from a £27.7 million investment in the programme between now and 2021. The investment will enable eligible older people who would otherwise be living in residential care, or who are receiving domiciliary care in their own home - to live independently. We are now working with all district councils to identify suitable land for development to meet local demand for Independent Living housing.

Turning community project dreams into reality

A £1.5 million funding pot ECC set aside for community projects across the county attracted over 175 bids from community groups, sports clubs, youth groups, parish councils and charitable organisations.

The Community Initiatives Fund (CIF) enabled local communities to bid for up to £20,000 to turn their community project dreams into reality. Dedicated selection panels comprising representatives from parish and town councils, local CVS (Community Voluntary Service) and other voluntary and charitable organisations met to consider each application received for their locality. Many projects considered will benefit. ECC has invested almost £20 million over the past decade into a range of projects that seek to protect or improve the social, environmental or economic well-being of local areas.

Essex is trailblazing homelessness prevention

Essex was one of 28 local authorities nationwide chosen to become one of the Government's network of homeless prevention 'trailblazers', following an announcement of £50m funding for new homelessness prevention schemes nationwide. The far reaching and ambitious homeless prevention project – the first collaborative effort of its kind in Essex - has secured £890,000 of funding and could have a massive impact on how we tackle homelessness in the county, helping people before they lose their homes. Although direct responsibility for homelessness sits with district councils, Essex County Council bid for the funding to ensure a countywide approach was taken to homelessness, helping those most in need.

Superfast Broadband and Super Sam

Essex County Council's broadband mascot Super Sam travelled across the county during 2016 to highlight the benefits of superfast broadband and the work undertaken by Superfast Essex to rollout superfast speeds of 24Mbps and above. Super Sam visited five locations across Essex in an effort to raise awareness of the new technology installed by Superfast Essex, reaching over 270,000 people in 8 months.

The efforts led to a significant increase in the take up of superfast services which will help to bring more investment back into extending the programme. Reinvestment of over £1.9 million is already being used to enable even more homes and businesses with a superfast connection. The Superfast Essex programme is working to enable over 120,000 homes and businesses in Essex with superfast broadband by 2020.

So far over 75,000 homes and businesses have been enabled with superfast broadband with the programme running three months ahead of schedule. Last year Superfast Essex announced plans for a Phase 3 to enable even more premises to gain access to superfast speeds. Phase 3 is currently in procurement and rollout plans should be available Spring/Summer of 2017. More information can be found on the Superfast Essex Web Site. The interactive site is now premise sensitive rather than postcode sensitive so you can look up your own address.

Primary school performance tables .

Essex schools rounded off a fantastic year for education in the county after statistics confirmed the percentage of Key Stage 2 pupils achieving the Government's new expected standard was above the national average.

The annual primary school performance tables, published by the Department for Education showed 76 per cent of 11-year-olds in the county achieved at least the expected standard in writing in 2016 – above the England average of 74 per cent. In maths, 71 per cent achieved the expected standard, compared with 70 per cent nationally. In reading, 67 per cent of Essex pupils achieved the expected standard – again higher than the national average of 66 per cent.

More than half of Essex pupils (56 per cent) achieved at least the expected standard in the combined reading, writing and maths measure – compared with an England average of 53 per cent.

Comparisons with previous years are not possible because this is the first year the new measures have been used.

The statistics are just the latest cause for celebration for Essex schools and come after Ofsted's Annual Report showed the county is enjoying its best ever educational performance. According to the report, which is based on inspection data up to the end of August, 95 per cent of secondary school pupils and 91 per cent of the primary school pupils attend schools rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted.

Foster Carers Required

About 100 new foster families will be needed across Essex in 2017, with the impending arrival of more unaccompanied asylum seeking children expected to increase the demand for placements. Essex County Council's foster carers provide loving and safe homes for hundreds of children each year, but with a number retiring and demand continuing to be high, many more are still needed.

To find out more about fostering or make an enquiry, please visit <http://www.essexadoptionandfostering.co.uk/fostering/>

Highways Maintenance

Following previous improvements to Essex's main roads, additional funding was provided to repair potholes on local roads from July until the end of December 2016. Pothole numbers on these local roads throughout Essex dropped from 4,954 to 3,961 during this period, despite the extra problems caused by worsening weather conditions.

During this time crews fixed more than 3,200 potholes, with fewer potholes developing thanks to a record-breaking road surfacing programme over the summer. The improvements come as the Government has announced an extra £1,869,000 for Essex as part of the national Pothole Action Fund for the financial year 2017/18.

This complements the long-term approach to improving our roads which saw a record 3.24 million square metres of road surface dressing last summer alone. The latest road condition survey, which includes laser survey data from all Essex roads, shows that only 2 per cent (down from 6 per cent in 2013) of priority routes

require maintenance, and local roads are down from the target level of 13 per cent to 12 per cent.

A130

Work to facilitate the opening of new third lanes in both directions along the A130 between Howe Green and the Rettendon Turnpike has been taking place. The additional lanes have been completed but remain coned off after a routine inspection highlighted issues with crash barriers along the route. Further investigation work over recent months has revealed a need to reconstruct the ground alongside the carriageway as a preventative measure to protect against the risk of slippage in the long-term.

New buses for Park and Ride in Chelmsford

Free Wi-Fi and air conditioning are just some of the new benefits Park and Ride users in Chelmsford can expect. Nine high-tech vehicles linking both Sandon and Chelmer Valley Park and Ride sites to the city will be fitted with the welcome extras. Advantages of the new buses will be free Wi-Fi, temperature-controlled air conditioning and announcements detailing the next stop.

Feel safe and cared for

Essex County Council, working with boroughs, districts and care providers, asked residents to consider working in the care sector to help fill the high number of vacancies and improve the lives of elderly and vulnerable people.

Job fairs in Maldon, Braintree, Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow and Clacton gave job seekers the chance to meet local employers and find out about current vacancies and the rewards of caring for others. The job fairs and 'be the reason...' message were part of The Gift of Care campaign launched last year to change the perception of working in social care and reduce the recruitment shortfall.

More than 450 vacancies are advertised each month by the county's 1,300 care providers, and demand for care is growing as our older population increases.

To help employers Essex County Council is covering the costs of DBS (criminal records) checks on all new recruits employed through the campaign and funding the jobs fairs and promotion.

A record number of children who are due to start secondary school for the first time in September have been offered their parents' top preference of school.

More than 15,000 parents in Essex discovered the outcome of their secondary school applications on 1 March, with those who applied online getting confirmation by email or via the Essex County Council website.

Although the county continues to grow, the council's investment in creating new school places means an all-time high of 87.58 per cent of pupils have been offered their parents' first preference of school – a 1.6 per cent increase on last year. A further 6.78 per cent have been offered their second preference, meaning 94.36 per cent have been offered either their first or second preference.

The record statistics come with more than 90 per cent of the county's schools currently rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted.

A record percentage of children in Essex have been offered a place at their parents' first preference of primary school

About 16,300 parents in Essex will discover the outcome of their primary school place applications today (Tuesday, 18 April 2017), with those who applied online receiving email notification.

A record 89.37 per cent of children due to start Reception in September have been offered their parents' first preference – up from 87.40 per cent last year.

A further 6.23 per cent have been offered their second preference, meaning an all-time high of 95.60 per cent have been offered one of their top two preferences – compared with 94.08 per cent in 2016.

The percentage of parents who could not be offered any of their preferences and were instead offered a place at the nearest school with an available place also fell below 2 per cent for the first time.

Having already spent millions of pounds creating more than 5,500 new school places during the last two academic years, a further 2,200 more are due to be available from September.

The council has also allocated £230million for creating about 13,000 more mainstream school places in Essex by September 2019.

There are fewer unemployed young people in Essex thanks to the work being done by the Essex Employability and Skills Unit.

For the third year in a row the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) has fallen; now just 2.6% of 16 and 17 year-olds are not working or learning. The Unit has also seen huge success in tracking and making contact with young people in need of advice, reducing the number of 16 and 17 year-olds identified as NEET and not receiving advice from 4.1% in 2013-14 to just 1.7% this year.

In the last five years the team has helped in excess of 6,899 young people into education, training and employment. This success is estimated to save taxpayers over £900 million in the long term.

The share of people of working age in employment in Essex is higher at 76.4% than the UK's 73.5% average, a key point raised in the Essex Economic Commission's independent report published last month.

A series of exciting events helped ambitious young people kick start their careers as part of Apprenticeship Week which started on 3 March 2017.

The events included the chance for apprentices to explore opportunities with Essex businesses at job fairs; creating better links between Essex employers and the

county's secondary schools and a huge apprenticeship event took place at Anglia Ruskin University.

Essex County Council's Adult Community Learning service has already helped thousands of young people get their foot on the first rung of the career ladder by taking advantage of the opportunities an apprenticeship presents. Just last year more than 11,000 people in Essex started an apprenticeship.

Digital leaders have stated that health and social care providers could see the biggest benefit from public sector digital services when polled at the Smart Essex Digital Summit.

The event, held at the BT Tower, brought together leading technology partners to investigate how a digital strategy can improve people's lives, reshape and streamline public services and drive prosperity.

61% of the attendees strongly agreed that public services can successfully embrace digital to redesign the way they meet the needs of businesses and residents. When asked how the public sector will benefit most from streamlining services with digital technology; 45% stated to prepare for the future while 23% said cost saving followed by reducing administration (17%) and data capture (15%). Over two-thirds of the attendees (71%) agreed that the biggest difference that digital can make to the services that councils provide is to help people live independently followed by supporting businesses (19%).

In order to prepare for the challenges of the future, ECC must ensure that digital plays a central role in the way we deliver public services.