

Report to Parish Councils in the Maldon Division Regarding

Essex County Council

Full Council Meeting of 12 December 2017.

At the Essex County Council meeting on the 12 December 2017 the authority backed a motion to divert funds from the proposed retention of business rates to help fund social care.

Social Care costs account for 60p of every £1 of the Council's budget, with demand increasing as the population of the County ages.

The Council agreed a motion that when 100% of business rates are retained by councils, expected in 2020/21, the anticipated national surplus of £6.25 billion should be ring-fenced to social care, with Essex County Council receiving its share.

With the phasing out of the revenue support grant, Essex County Council welcomes the Government's plans to introduce programmes for the retention of business rates. Essex is a supporter of the benefits of devolved approaches to finance and the move to make Local Authorities more independent and the motion supported this while at the same time, tackling the largest single pressure on our finances.

The 100% Business Rate Retention scheme, due to come in in 2020/21 will provide additional financial support to local government and create a dividend of £6.25 billion.

This money is currently unallocated, so the Council have called upon the Government to use this pot of money to meet funding of pressures in social care. Essex County Council is keen to work with the Government to ensure the final arrangements work both nationally and for the benefit of Essex residents.

Primary school performance tables and annual Ofsted report round off another fantastic year for education in Essex

Essex schools capped another excellent year after statistics confirmed the percentage of Key Stage 2 pupils achieving the expected standard was above the national average.

Revised data released by the Department for Education alongside the annual primary school performance tables today shows 63 per cent of the county's Year 6 pupils achieved at least the expected standard in the combined reading, writing and maths measure, compared to an England average of 62 per cent.

78 per cent of 11-year-olds in the county achieved at least the expected standard in writing in 2017 – above the national average of 77 per cent.

In maths, 77 per cent achieved the expected standard, compared with 75 per cent nationally.

In reading, 74 per cent reached at least the expected standard, again higher than the England average of 72 per cent.

All of the Essex figures are also up compared with 2016, which was the first year since the government's new measures had been introduced.

The new statistics coincide with yesterday's publication of the 2017 Annual Ofsted Report, which is based on inspection data up to the end of August and shows 93 per cent of schools in Essex are rated as good or outstanding – above both the national and regional averages.

ESSEX County Council's first flagship property development moved a step closer to completion in December with another 379 homes in the pipeline countywide.

Essex Housing, the council's in-house property developer, was set up to help tackle the housing shortage by redeveloping empty taxpayer-owned buildings and brownfield land at risk of lying empty and drifting into disrepair.

Working with local councils and other public sector bodies like the NHS, the Council is spending £42 million to speed up the supply of much-needed housing, starting with 32 apartments in Goldlay Gardens, Chelmsford.

The Council's former library storage warehouse has been knocked down to make way for three blocks of one and two-bedroom apartments, all with balconies or terraces, roof mounted solar panels and car parking around a courtyard garden.

The Cabinet Member indicated that by acting as a developer, Essex County Council has been able to quickly transform the surplus piece of Brownfield land into a collection of apartments in the heart of Chelmsford.

The properties are of the highest quality and will bring much-needed housing stock to the market.

In Essex, we are committed to finding solutions for surplus Brownfield sites across the county and the Chancellor's recent £44 billion housebuilding boost will help that ambition.

But it's vital that we, and the rest of local government nationwide, view any new developments as strong, resilient communities, rather than just a collection of buildings. We must build the right homes in the right places with the right infrastructure – that's exactly what has been done in Chelmsford

Essex Housing is also currently working on another 32 homes at Waltham Glen in Moulsham Lodge, Chelmsford, and Norton Road, Brentwood, with 379 more homes in the pipeline, 194 of which already have planning permission.

Some 180 are dedicated to older people to help them live independently for longer.

Essex does not want to see vacant buildings and land drifting into disrepair, lying empty for years and becoming hotspots for vandalism, especially when there is such a shortage of homes on the market in Essex.

Sites owned by the public sector are owned by the taxpayer, so as custodians we have a duty to make the most of these assets.

This is a really innovative approach from the public sector. Essex County Council is not a housing authority, but we felt a duty to help our local council partners find a sustainable solution for housing in the county.

Prison book club is breaking down barriers

Prisoners are being given a chance to turn their lives around thanks to a unique book club run by Essex Libraries at Chelmsford prison.

The National Literacy Trust's Books Unlocked project enables prisoners, community book groups and school students to connect through books by reading and discussing Man Booker-Prize shortlisted titles for their own enjoyment.

It aims to break down barriers so young offenders and prisoners feel part of the wider community, build confidence and self-esteem, improve reading skills and ultimately reduce reoffending.

Listening to the opinions of others in a book group setting promotes tolerance and empathy, prompting prisoners to reflect on their own situation and make them less likely to commit future crimes.

At HMP/YOI Chelmsford, where Essex Libraries run the prison library service, prisoners received copies of *The Sisters Brothers* by Patrick DeWitt, a story about two hired assassins during the California Gold Rush.

Rectory Readers, a book club in Great Oakley, and a group of year 11 students from St Helena School in Colchester, read the same book before giving their thoughts and reviews to library staff to share with prisoners.

Two members of Rectory Readers then joined a discussion at the prison, which gave prisoners a rare chance to interact with the outside world, whilst also reflecting on their own crimes.

The cabinet member responsible for libraries visited Chelmsford Prison recently to see first-hand how the library is making a real difference in rehabilitating offenders. She stated that the library was a haven of calm and inspiration in an extremely challenging environment. Together with projects like Books Unlocked it is helping to improve reading and writing skills, which are so vital if the men are to play a positive part in our society upon their release.

Major research on life in Essex targets 23,000 households

Thousands of people will be invited to have their say on life in Essex as part of a large-scale social research project.

BMG Research, an independent research and analysis company, sent the annual satisfaction survey to 23,000 Essex households this week.

Essex County Council wants to improve our services, but to do that we need the help of residents. The annual residents' survey aims to find out what people think of life in Essex and the services we provide, and what issues need tackling.

Essex County Council has an annual budget of £1.8 billion but with falling central government funds putting pressure on already stretched resources, it is vital the Council takes stock and spends its resources where it matters most to people.

Residents feedback will help the authority's decision making, inform what services to provide in the future and how best the Council can deliver them.

Households were selected randomly, with an equal number selected from each of the 12 local authority districts to ensure the feedback is representative of the Essex population.

Residents have until Friday, 26 January, to complete the survey which covers a wide range of service provision, from household waste and recycling centres, libraries and parks, to highways and transport, community safety and health.

If you have received a survey, I would urge you to complete it and return it ASAP. This is a vital piece of research that will shape Essex County Council's priorities of the future.

Surveys can be completed online via the web link in the accompanying letter, or can be returned in the Freepost envelope provided.

Anyone who needs help completing it should contact BMG Research's confidential freephone helpline on 0800 358 0337 between 9am and 5pm or email EssexSurvey@bmgresearch.co.uk

Still time to make electricity savings

There is still time to make big savings on gas and electricity bills by signing up to be part of the Essex Energy Switch.

The scheme is open for applications until 12 February and could save households up to £250 on their energy bills. The Essex Energy Switch gives residents the opportunity to combine their buying power to demand a better deal from energy suppliers.

Everyone who registers will receive a personalised offer on 23 February, which details how much they could save by switching to the winning provider, or cheaper tariff.

There is no obligation to take up the offer after registering so there is really nothing to lose by signing up. Register for the next auction online or call 0800 0488285.

Extra crews thanks to government pothole funding

Extra pothole crews are set to hit the ground running in the New Year thanks to new government funding.

The Essex County Council Cabinet Member for Highways has promised the additional money will see six extra crews on the ground fixing Essex roads from January 2018. He stated that this money is timely and our rapid response will help deal with the extra potholes that often appear at this time of year as water gets into small cracks, freezes, expands and damages road surfaces.