

ECC Report March 2026

New film challenges perceptions of care leavers



We've made an emotive new film, 'The Unseen,' with our Essex Year of Opportunity campaign. It challenges employers' perceptions of young people leaving care.

The film follows the journeys of young care leavers. It shows their experiences in the workplace and how resilient and hardworking care leavers can be.

[You can watch the film on our YouTube channel here.](#)

Leading the campaign is Councillor Tony Ball, Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Lifelong Learning and Employability. He said: "The Essex Year of Opportunity is here to help everyone in Essex thrive. The Unseen shows how these young people can bring special qualities to our workplaces."

Looked-after children in Essex

Essex had around 1,164 children and young people in looked-after settings in 2024. That's expected to increase to 1,221 by this summer.

48% of children and young people requiring provision have a care order. The majority are between 10 and 15 years old.

Olympian supports The Unseen

Fatima Whitbread grew up in care before she set the world record for the longest throw of a javelin. She is supporting the campaign and calling on businesses to help.

She said: "Care leavers face bigger challenges than others trying to get a foot on the career ladder. They face negative stereotypes about being a 'child in care', through no fault of their own.

"When you're a care leaver you have no parent to drive you to your first job interview, or help with a CV, it's hard. But these young people have grown up quicker than others and can be much more resilient and hardworking.

"Businesses in Essex could benefit from hiring a care leaver. I'd encourage employers to give a care leaver an opportunity."

'The Unseen' is a thought-provoking film. It's created from a series of care leavers' stories from across the county.

It explores how challenging it can be for care leavers to step into adulthood and find their first job.

Grace's story

Out of all the actors in the film, one young care leaver wanted to tell her own story. Grace is an Essex-based care leaver. She

benefited from a protected position at Ginger Nut, a training apprenticeship supplier.

Grace said: “It was terrifying leaving care and having to get a job, it was like being an adult before I really felt ready. But Ginger Nut offered me a scholarship and I’m now about to start an apprenticeship with them. It’s been incredible, and I’m so excited for the next couple of years!”

Jemma Moorey at Ginger Nut, said: “We have a protected position for care leavers. We promote diversity but we also want to do it. Having Grace in the office makes us more considerate to others, we now want to care for each other. It’s helped improve our business and boosted staff retention.”

You can find training and employment opportunities on the [Essex Year of Opportunity website](#).

Essex Libraries to receive £120,000 funding boost



On Budget Day 12th February, Cllr Louise McKinley announced a new £120,000 Essex Libraries Books and Resources Fund.

This fund will further strengthen literacy support across the county.

The new fund was announced as part of our 2026/27 budget.

Essex Libraries play a central role in improving literacy outcomes for children.

The £120,000 investment will allow Essex Libraries to refresh and expand:

- book stock
- library resources
- literacy focused events.

Councillor McKinlay, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Communities, Transformation and Economic Growth, said:

“We have invested considerably in literacy over the last few years, with outcomes for children improving across all targeted areas in Essex.

“Essex Libraries have been instrumental in achieving this and in helping children and young people develop a love of reading and improve their literacy skills.

“This investment will build on that and will help us continue to improve reading skills for children, particularly in the parts of Essex where support is needed most.”

- The Harwich Library renovation work was completed in full last year and reopened in October last year after £1.16m refurbishment works.
- And final arrangements are being made for the temporary relocation of the Clacton Library in preparation of the construction of a brand-new building that will include a state-of-the-art new library; a centre for Adult Community Learning (ACL); and local registration services.

Green light for Essex County Council budget



On 12th February our budget and annual plan for 2026/27 were approved by Full Council. This sets out how we will spend the £2 billion we are responsible for.

Next year's budget has been shaped by what people told us matters most - improving roads, supporting vulnerable people and investing in the county's future.

As a result, we are investing £82 million in key services in 2026/27 and putting an extra £6 million into repairing our highways. Our capital programme will also continue to create new school places and deliver major infrastructure projects.

Despite rising national costs, we have kept the council tax increase to 3.95%. This is equal to £1.20 a week for a Band D property and below the maximum allowed. We will also deliver £41 million of efficiencies next year to protect frontline services. This is supported by a wider transformation programme aiming to save £100 million in future years.

Councillor Chris Whitbread, Chancellor of Essex, said: "This is without doubt a budget for the people and businesses of Essex. We are on your side. The budget is built on sound finance and shaped

by what people have told us matters most. That's why we're pleased to confirm the extra funding for highways.

“We never forget that every pound we spend comes from hardworking residents and we will never tax people a pound more than we absolutely must. Despite the financial pressures facing councils across the country, we have kept council tax as low as possible while still investing in the services residents rely on – including further funding for our highways and additional support for Children’s Services, SEND and Adult Social Care.

“Our plan - Everyone’s Essex - is not just about spending more, it is about delivering better value from every pound and changing the way we work so we can continue to provide the frontline services our residents deserve.

“We have a strong track record of efficiency, and our ambitious transformation programme means we can continue to protect frontline services while investing in the future of our great county.”
Read more about [our budget for next year](#).

Consider running for election to Essex County Council



People living or working in Essex can consider running for election to the county council at the next elections on 7 May 2026.

A county councillor represents local residents by shaping decisions on vital services. These include:

- Arts and culture
- Communities
- Country parks
- Economy
- Education
- Environment
- Highways
- Libraries
- Public health
- Social care
- Transport
- Waste and recycling
- Youth services

County councillors also:

- champion local needs
- influence budget priorities
- ensure the council is transparent, accountable and responsive to the people it serves

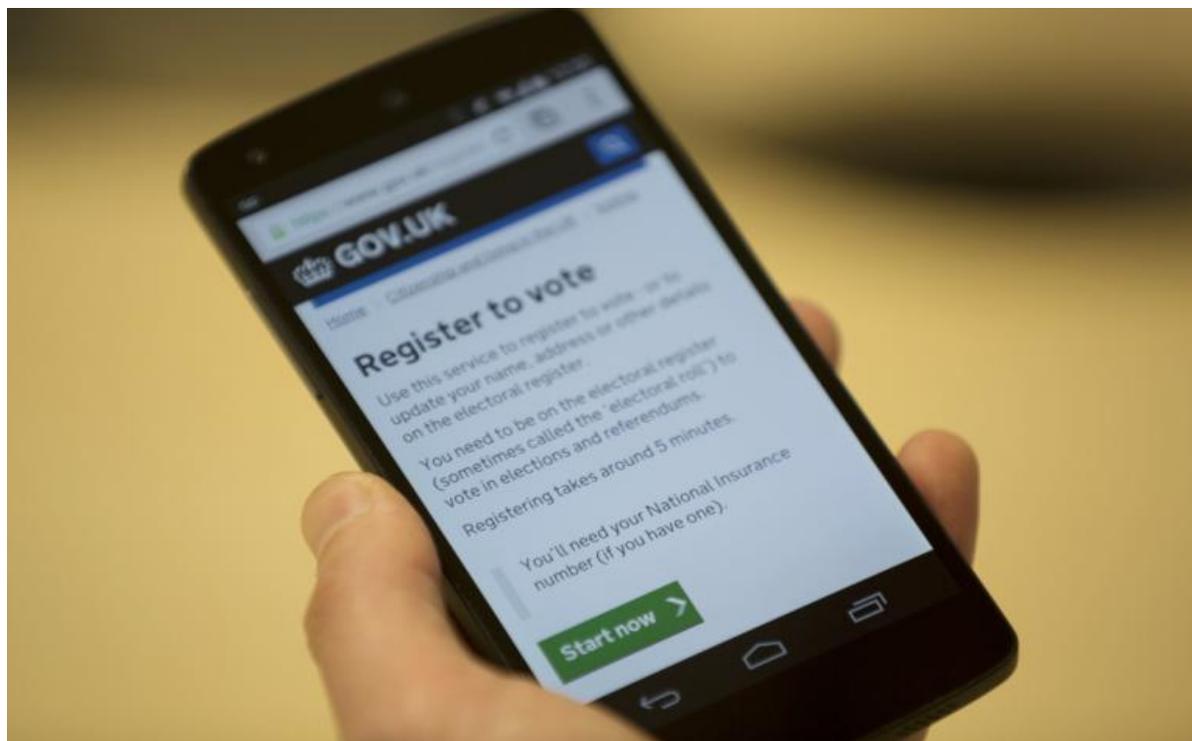
In-person and virtual events are being held about becoming a county councillor. These will cover useful information on how to stand as a candidate. [Fill out the online form](#) to register your interest or [contact our elections team](#).

Further information, including a [guide](#), is available on the [county council website](#). There is also [a guide for disabled people](#) by the Local Government Association.

Prospective candidates must have lived, worked or owned or rented land in Essex for at least 12 months before the elections. They must also be at least 18 years old and a British, Commonwealth or qualifying EU citizen.

To find out more about eligibility to stand, visit the [Electoral Commission website](#).

Register to vote ahead of Essex County Council elections



Residents are urged to register to vote for the Essex County Council elections being held on Thursday 7 May 2026.

The number of seats on Essex County Council will rise from 75 to 78 in 2026. This follows a review by the [Local Government Boundary Commission for England](#) (LGBCE).

There will also be new division boundaries and no more two-member divisions. This means each division will be represented by one councillor.

You can [register online to vote](#) and [apply for a postal vote](#).

Events are also being held for people who may want to consider running for election to Essex County Council. [Contact our elections team](#) or complete the [online form](#) to find out more.

Joanna Boaler, Assistant Director of Democracy & Transparency at Essex County Council, said: “We are working hard to make sure Essex residents are able to cast their vote on 7 May 2026.

“If you are thinking about voting by post, you can apply now. This will make sure your application is processed early and your postal vote can be sent to you more quickly.

“Remember you need to be registered to be able to vote - don’t miss your opportunity to have your say.”