

ECC Annual report 2021/22

It's hard to believe that a whole year has almost past since the May 2021 elections with a new Administration in place, but a great deal of work has been done since.

A bold and ambitious 100 Day Plan document was unveiled by the Conservative Administration which set out the pathway for the way Essex would govern during the next four years. Following a great deal of work by a very talented Policy Team Officers, the Inner and Outer Cabinet, the Scrutiny process and each of the Council's members, this document became Everyone's Essex, [Plans and strategies: Everyone's Essex - Essex County Council](#) which represents its Corporate Plan, and it is very much based on the core principles of Renewal, Equality and Ambition.

Since having taken office, we came out of the Pandemic with lasting effects of COVID still being felt throughout the Council. It is therefore vital and proper that besides running day-to-day services as effectively and efficiently as possible ECC should look to the future and the legacy of this administration.

Everyone's Essex has two main themes which are the Essex version of Levelling Up and how we tackle Climate Change. These aren't just restricted to two individual Cabinet members responsibilities, but resonate in everything the Council does, where people have equal opportunity, given the tools for them to succeed while at the same time ensuring the most vulnerable in our society are cared for, as a society is judged by the way it cares for older people and vulnerable people.

The Levelling-Up Agenda is being led by the Deputy Leader Cllr Louise McKinley, who did not wait for the Government to publish this but launched her own 'Essex Levelling Up White Paper' on 6th January at an event attended by the Rt Hon Justine Greening, designed to focus on both people and places. This work was recognised by the Rt Hon, who now fronts the Social Mobility Pledge across the country and described it as "nationally ground-breaking".

So far, Local Levelling Up launches have taken place in Harlow, Clacton / Jaywick, Basildon and Canvey Island. More to follow later in the summer with Harwich being the next inclusion.

Under the Levelling-Up Heading the Administration has also launched:

- The Community Challenge fund, designed to provide funding to empower local communities.
- The Family Friendly Employers' Charter
- £10m for economic growth and skills
- £4.8m digital skills programme

- The free Laptop Scheme which went beyond the government's initiative of supporting digital infrastructure provision during pandemic, and it's now looking at support that can be given to Ukrainian refugees.
- New Plan consulted upon for the future of Libraries, adopted at Cabinet on Tuesday 19th April, with the main headline that all our Libraries are to remain open!
- Safety Advisory Group: Plan launched in December with new initiatives underway.
- School based education programme – language and perception of women and girls and workshops on positive behaviour.
- Open spaces / Safer streets review underway leading to a pilot "Safe space" initiative being developed.
- A Youth Services review to be carried out over the coming weeks.

Above all this Cllr McKinley delivers regular speeches at Conferences and in the House of Commons and is rapidly becoming a leading light in the Local Government Association.

Our second big theme is **Climate Change** led superbly by Cllr Peter Schwier our Climate change Czar, the only politician in the country to have such a title and one in which he excels; in one short year he has led our ambition for Essex to become carbon-neutral in the future and this was confirmed in November, when the council declared its support for the Essex Climate Action Commission's report and recommendations – in the process unveiling a £200m climate action plan.

The commission had made over 100 recommendations on what organisations, communities and residents needed to do to tackle the climate crisis – covering all environmental issues, such as waste, transport, the built environment, and land-use.

The council now has a clear action plan in how it will play its part to implement the recommendations. In the process, ECC will also now track progress, producing annual reports on greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilience measures for both the county council and Essex as a whole.

The Administration has also

- campaigned to promote Sustainable Warmth funding for energy efficiency improvements which has seen 82 Essex homes benefit from £800k to date with over £20m funding still available;
- awarded over £100k to groups from the Climate Action Challenge Fund;
- developed three climate action toolkits, for residents, schools and businesses;
- delivered a series of events to promote Essex's climate achievements e.g. Electric Road to COP26, Carbon Battle Bus event.

Infrastructure is obviously a critical area – it needs clear thought, guidance, persuasion, and policy. Cllr. Lesley Wagland, Cabinet member for Planning and Housing, has been leading on this by continually working with all district and borough councils, universities, and business

groups and in conjunction with all our Essex portfolios, has delivered facilities from schools to independent living homes and connections from digital to a new station at Beaulieu Park.

So far, Lesley has led work for us in Rescuing 3700 homes across Essex for digital connections that would have been excluded without our Superfast broadband team.

- Hargrove House approved for a fully carbon neutral redevelopment.
- Junction 7A almost completed and will improve connections and ease congestion for Harlow and beyond
- A new improved purpose-built library redevelopment underway at Shenfield by Essex Housing.
- Major investment in a Commercial Workspace project jointly with TDC at Jaywick Sands.
- Retrieving Shire Hall from the Aquilla agreement and seeking a better scheme and uses in keeping with its importance to Chelmsford town centre.
- A successful Essex High Streets' summit and support for our districts and boroughs to mount their own.
- Approval of the hamburger roundabout design for the Army and Navy Roundabout and from DFT for the strategic outline business case.
- Approval of the Freeport East outline business case and formation of the shadow Board.
- Master Planning underway for Colchester Town Centre with special reference to the St Botolph's area.
- Business support and mentoring linking business support and investors with entrepreneurs through initiatives such as Backing Essex Business, Group2grow, Angels@Essex, and the £5m Essex Business Adaptation Grants.

Adult Social Care is one of the biggest areas that we look after and this immensely complicated world has some of the most dedicated people working in it and this also includes Cllr John Spence, a first-class Cabinet Member also responsible for Public Health, and let us not forget his amazing contribution during COVID. His leadership through this period along with Dr Mike Gogarty, Essex Director of Public Health, was exemplary to us all and the whole local government family.

It is a fact that almost two thirds of our £1 billion council tax raising budget is spent in this area on around 17,000 people, and rightly so – a society is judged by the way it cares for older people and vulnerable people. This is a message that isn't often explained to the public, so it is very pertinent to understand where the money goes and can feel, I hope, a sense of community and pride in the way we care for others.

John is now looking to innovation to help with rising costs and bring an even better level of care as we look to the future decades.

Children's Services under the expert care of Cllr Beverley Egan who is certainly no amateur in this area and knows as much as most of our staff through her previous roles in life, and it has been a very busy year in Children Services and Early Years. The impact of the pandemic is now showing and bringing many pressures to the fore particularly around emotional wellbeing. Our staff continue to work in this ever-changing landscape with passion and commitment.

We have launched the very ambitious Early Years and Childcare Strategy, and this will be followed by a refreshed Corporate Parenting Strategy shortly. Member's involvement in this extremely sensitive area has been greatly appreciated, whether in Fostering and Adoption panels, PAF Scrutiny or the Corporate Parenting panel.

Not much of this can be done without **Finance and Resources** and our Chancellor of Essex, Cllr Chris Whitbread has been keeping us on the straight and narrow, in continuing to maintain the Council's strong financial position by being prepared to take the tough decisions in the face of increasing challenges with inflation reaching 7% and increasing cost pressures. We have been able to support our ambitious Everyone's Essex agenda by creating a £45 million reserve from within existing finances.

We must think creatively to deliver our new Corporate Plan "Everyone's Essex". One way this is being done is through more intelligent use of our property. The new way of working post-pandemic has created a great opportunity for us to think about colocation with our district, borough, and city councils and to future-proof our remaining estate with better technology to enable hybrid working.

Waste Disposal is never the spiciest of subjects, but it is vital and Cllr Malcolm Buckley, Cabinet Member for Waste and Recycling, brings all his professional expertise in the building and health and safety world to this arena; he has had a challenging time especially with TOVI Eco Park in Basildon, who with his predecessor Cllr Simon Walsh, have rendered sterling work in resolving this issue with legal proceedings now progressing well despite a few delays. Notices to vary the contract have now been published which will enable the proceedings to be brought to a conclusion in the interests of Essex taxpayers. A further announcement is anticipated shortly but legal privilege prevents any more comment at this time.

As from 1st April all Essex Recycling Centres have now been taken back in-house; the transfer from Veolia has gone well and low staff morale has improved as a result. New bins and skips have also been ordered as well as leasing new plant, still diesel but the less polluting "Euro 6" compliant. All this has resulted in a substantial budget saving compared to outsourcing.

A van booking system for centres that take household waste has been introduced and this appears to have deterred many of the traders' vehicles and reduced queuing.

Waste Transfer Stations have also been taken back in house as part of budget savings.

A new Waste Strategy is being worked on with waste collection authorities to develop a new system to enable the commitments Everyone's Essex aims of zero waste to landfill and encouraging collection authorities to coordinate their services to reduce costs of collection and disposal.

The incoming Environment Act will impact on the service, but the regulations we are still being awaited to be published. The principle of producer pays is likely to impact on the mix of materials in the waste stream.

A new **Arts & Culture** Fund has been established to help and encourage all forms of artistic and cultural activity across the County. The double act of Cllr Graham Butland, Cabinet Member for Arts, Heritage, Culture and Devolution, and his Deputy Cllr Mark Durham – known as the Ant and Dec of Essex Arts, have well publicised and supported this sector which has badly suffered from the effects of the pandemic.

The initial response to the Fund has been overwhelming with nearly 200 applications being received. Graham and Mark are currently assessing every application and expect to make our first grants shortly.

The links with the Arts Council are being re-established and are actively supporting local organisations in their quest for external funding, and as part of the Levelling Up agenda we are encouraging Arts and Cultural organisations to work with disadvantaged communities. We are particularly delighted with the work being done to help those with dementia and supporting their careers.

This is a recognition to the significant contribution that the Performing and Creative Arts make to the County's economy, its tourism offers, and support to Social Care, and in addition, the Portfolio has maintained the upkeep of all Essex Country Parks, continued the expansion of the Essex Forest Initiative, and is developing a new Rural Strategy working with partners such as the Rural Community Council of Essex.

And then there's **Education, Skills, and Training** under the great direction of Cllr Tony Ball who has been ensuring that this area is a major building block in Everyone's Essex, making lifelong learning a reality for many, so they have equal access to learning and training opportunities throughout their life.

It means that ECC is setting the agenda for education and skills, enabling schools, skills providers and businesses to understand skills priorities and translate them into relevant and joined-up provision.

Skills is a critical area for Renewal, Equality and Ambition. Tony convened businesses and skills providers to start a Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) for Essex, even though Chambers wouldn't bid for us to be a Govt pilot area. And we lobbied Govt to ensure Greater Essex has its own plan in the national roll-out rather than being done at SELEP level.

Pleased to say this was absolutely the right call, we're now ahead of the curve and Government has recognised a Greater Essex LSIP is the right geography. We're now conveying the Skills Roundtable into an Essex Skills Board.

And we are delighted that last week the Government announced funding of nearly £8m over 3 years to support adult numeracy; the Education team are working up options on how to best spend this, so more details to follow shortly.

The Essex Education Taskforce is 11 months old and has successfully focused on supporting vulnerable pupils, mental health needs and the successful launch of the Essex Year of Reading

Although 88.5% of our schools judged good and outstanding by Ofsted out of 556 schools in total, Tony knows this figure must and will increase and he works tirelessly to improve the aspiration for the thousands of young and older students – Everyone's Essex means Everyone.

And finally, Highways, who could forget Highways. Cllr Lee Scott does the most amazing job and over the last year he has visited as many of all Essex Divisions as possible, to help sort out any local issues, within resources; the feedback from ALL members is that they have found this very helpful.

We have also tackled issues around the Green agenda, we are trying to encourage more people to use public transport and walking and cycling, through the Active Travel Fund, the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans and Bus Service Improvement Plans.

We're also looking hard at flooding: as we see our climate change this is becoming a major issue and we will look to set up a taskforce to address this.

In May last year this Administration set out with a very different agenda to that of its predecessors, and indeed many Councils around the UK.

It can't all be done in 12 months or even 4 years but we have embarked on a positive journey that will change and improve the lives of thousands of residents for better.