

Essex County Council Annual Report

The 2017/18 year saw a funding reduction of £44M from Government through the Revenue Support Grant (RSG), with the RSG planned to be phased out completely by 2020, to be replaced by business rate retention.

ECC kept Council Tax low so supporting all our residents. Implementation of the 3% Social Care Levy raised an extra £17 million which supported the most vulnerable. The 2017/18 budget allowed for spend of £524m on adult social care, our greatest pressure.

In July 2017 a masterplan that will guide Essex County Council's work over the next four years and drive prosperity for everyone was approved at Full Council. The Organisation Strategy, which will help the Council deliver its ambitions by 2021 as it bids to become the nation's best local authority and a digital leader, is underpinned by four key principles.

1. Enable inclusive economic growth

Fostering economic growth will improve not only the living standards of people in Essex but also their health and wellbeing, opportunities and life chances.

Continuing on from the foundations laid in the 2017/18 year, amongst other things in 2018/19, we will develop a local Industrial Strategy for the County, invest £14m in broadband and £126m into major road schemes and maintenance. With an additional £3m set aside for potholes and footpath repairs. Invest £87m into mainstream schools and £17m into special schools bringing an additional 2,750 places.

2. Help people to get the best start and age well.

ECC has a critical role to safeguard and support the most vulnerable people in the county. One fifth of Essex's population (20%) is over 65 and this is projected to rise to 32% by 2030. With demand for services growing faster than income, especially in adult social care, we need to help people to help themselves, and make the best choices, working with communities and the NHS to achieve change. Therefore we need to continue our shift from a reactive service, to one that is focused on prevention, early intervention, recovery and enablement.

The council is a proactive children's service authority delivering integrated services to children and families, with just over 1,000 children in care. We have the third lowest rate of children subject to a child protection plan in the country.

Also, our continuing ambition is for all schools to be 'good' or 'outstanding'.

Some of our priorities for 2018/19 are:

Grow the Essex Fostering Service to increase market share, reducing placements in more expensive independent fostering agencies

Seek to increase the number of care providers rated good or outstanding by continuing to invest in the PROSPER programme; dementia training and rolling out the Gold Standards Framework for End of Life

Launch a major initiative to improve physical activity in the population

3. Help to create great places to grow up, live and work.

Investing in infrastructure will support great places to grow up in, live and work and the focus will be on building new communities where people can live, work and play, not dormitory towns. Great places are the products of their people and communities, supported by good public services, a thriving voluntary sector and private enterprise.

Essex will need to build at least 136,000 new homes over the next 20 years - a 22% increase in the current number of homes. We are committed to facilitating that housing growth in such a way that the characteristics of the county we cherish are protected and enhanced. We are not just building new homes, we are building communities.

The council has a key role to play as a custodian of our environment for this and future generations. Our stewardship requires that less waste is produced, less carbon emitted, more homes and businesses protected from flooding and the use of our green space is maximised. New housing growth in Essex has the potential to deliver more connected, healthier communities.

In 2018/19 we will develop a Great Green Plan for Essex to unlock the value of our green assets. Also we will bring forward a number of initiatives that should support communities to help themselves by seeking to foster and build community capacity and capability including developing a new citizen-led approach to enabling communities to improve well-being.

4. Transform the council to achieve more with less

To deliver our priorities and maximise our positive contribution to all in Essex, we need to continue to develop as a proactive, efficient and effective organisation. As a public body it is important that we spend taxpayer's money wisely, on matters that are important for our residents. To offset reductions in government funding, we must constantly manage demand, reshape, and reimagine services and look for opportunities to generate income. It is also imperative that we work to secure investment into Essex to make our county an even better place to work and live.

We are always conscious that the money that Essex County Council spends is taxpayers' money and we must invest it wisely on services that directly affect every resident and their communities and improve their lives. The Council needs to ensure effective services not just for today, but for the future. We will continue to develop a more commercial approach to enable further investment in services. Plus optimise the use of our buildings, through changing and modernising working practices.

In February 2018 Full Council agreed the budget for 2018/19. Local Government finances remain constrained and the funding from Government through the RSG was reduced by a further £28M. At the same time demand for many services continues to grow. However, the financial management of the Council is strong and will remain so and despite the issues and our pressures the Council has made excellent progress with the delivery of its objectives.

In the last year, we have:

Seen 94% of Essex schools judged good or outstanding - three points higher than the national average and created over 2,500 additional school places.

Signed over a hundred good causes up to receive funding from the Essex Lottery;

Helped 1,330 young people not in education, employment or training to move into employment or learning;

Promoted activities and delivered services which helped reduce the amount of household waste over the last 12 months by 32kg per household;

Continued to invest in our country parks which has increased visitor numbers by 7.5% to almost three qtrs. of a million;

Resurfaced over 400 miles of roads – nearly 4 times around the M25 – and filled in 5,000 potholes;

Reduced the number of delayed transfers of care due to social care to an average of 1,100 days per month;

Commissioned an independent review into ECC owned property following the Grenfell Fire;

Supported the creation of 11,370 apprenticeships in the county, and we'll continue to invest to ensure our economy has the skills it needs to thrive;

Given substantial business support to 22 firms resulting in about £2.3m finance raised and multiple new products brought to market;

Begun construction work on 64 housing units – 41 units for private sale and 23 units for independent living for people with learning disabilities

As well as all of this, the authority has an outstanding track record of ensuring value for tax-paying residents.

It has delivered £350m of savings in the last 4 years by driving out inefficiency, innovating, generating income and reducing costs. And will continue to do so with the 2018/19 budget based on delivering a further £59m of savings and efficiencies.

This track record has enabled the Council not only to maintain services in new and improved ways at lower cost, but also to invest for the future so that Essex is a better place in which to live and work.

High ambitions have been set for Essex and for Essex County Council in the face of a difficult financial context and the authority has a strong record of sound financial management, focusing on providing efficient services that matter to residents.

The Council has a legal responsibility to operate within a balanced budget. With the changes and reduction in grant funding, coupled with increasing and more complex demand for services like caring for the elderly, protecting vulnerable children and supporting those families who need it, the financial situation continues to be challenging and the Council continues to work to build a budget that works for Essex residents both now and in to the future.

The Council will spend a gross budget (including schools) of £1,847m and a capital programme of £299m to deliver our priorities in 2018/19.

Despite efforts, price increases, population growth and increasing demand for services, particularly for social care, means the Council during 2018/19 will need to utilise the 2% Social Care precept facility offered by government, and the agreed increase of Council Tax of 2.99%. The precept is being used to insulate Adult Social Care from the savings required across other portfolios. The council tax for a band D property for 2018/19 will be £1,221.75; this is an increase of £1.12 per household per week.

The 2018/19 budget process agreed a capital programme of £299m, an increase of £32m on that for 2017/18. This investment will help to deliver our strategic aims and priorities, and in some cases give a return on investment. The programme includes investment in independent living schemes for older and vulnerable adults, generating greater supply of housing, sufficiency of school places (including schools for children with special needs), and in schemes to promote economic growth, including improvements to the roads and footpaths that we all use daily. We are also providing an extra £3m investment in our highways over the coming twelve months.

Determined to achieve the best service for residents in the most efficient way, the Council will fully exploit the digital opportunity; therefore additional investment is provided for digital transformation. We are also investing in our skills and capability to become more commercial and seek out opportunities to drive up income, which will have a specific focus over 2018/19.

To conclude this report it is important to highlight three separate initiatives that were launched during 2017/18 that give local communities access to funding to make improvements in their local area:

- The Local Connections Fund - £500,000 committed to support community-led activity, using a crowdfunding platform known as The Essex Crowd Movement. Depending on the number of individual pledges (min. £2), ECC will match the fundraising efforts of qualifying projects up to the value of £5,000.

- The Local Services Fund - £500,000 to support more formal, traditional services by being more locally responsive and to improve local places. The fund is being administered by the Essex Association of Local Councils who publicise the fund to parish councils, housing associations, and other formally constituted local groups.
- The Essex Lottery – The lottery is open to anybody aged 16 or over who is physically based in Essex. Tickets cost £1 and the Jackpot can be £25,000.

The Local Connections Fund is run via the Essex Crowd (<https://www.spacehive.com/movement/theessexcrowd>), an online crowdfunding platform. This digital approach is designed to make it easier for more people to share and fund projects that would make their neighbourhoods better still. Essex County Council has committed over £500,000 to help back these ideas – with a maximum per project of £5,000.

There is no formal application cycle; people can upload their ideas when they have them, although individual crowdfunding campaigns will typically be no more than three months in duration.

Ideas come from local people, backed by individual and organisational financial and in-kind support. The Essex Crowd offers ECC the opportunity to back locally-popular projects that can make a difference – e.g. local crèches; community festivals and events; or Christmas lights.

The Local Services Fund

The Local Services Fund (<http://www.ealc.gov.uk/local-services-fund/>) is administered by the Essex Association of Local Councils on ECC's behalf. It offers revenue funding, providing formally constituted groups with the opportunity to submit proposals for localised services, capped at a maximum of £10,000 for a single year project or £5,000 for three year schemes.

The Fund allows local organisations to decide on service mix in their area - a different, more localised way of working. Match funding to see locally-appropriate activity – e.g. verge maintenance; community cafe offer; a community handyman; or a 'men's shed' service.

In the next and future rounds of funding, applicants will be required to seek endorsement from their local County Councillor before submitting an application. If this endorsement is not forthcoming, the application will not be considered.

A formal panel will meet on a twice-yearly basis and there is an expectation that the ECC contribution will be match funded by the bidding organisation.

The Essex Lottery

The Essex Lottery is an exciting weekly lottery which has been set up by Essex County Council to give local charities and good causes an easy and effective way to raise extra funds. In total 60p from every £1 ticket sale goes to the good causes – more than double the National Lottery.

Various charities and good causes from right across the county of Essex have signed up to benefit from the lottery. Tickets are available from www.essexlottery.co.uk

