

Cllr Finch Parish Update – February 2021

Essex in top 10

Essex County Council continues to be ranked in the Top 10 most effective top tier authorities in the country, as independently ranked by iMPower. Since 2018 we have been in the top ten in terms of productivity, demonstrating how we achieve better outcomes for residents from a less-than-average spend per head.

Over the last decade we have invested heavily in transformation for long-term sustainability and as a result we have been able to improve the quality of the services we provide, putting the resident, not institutions, at the heart of our services.

- 89% of our children now attend a school that is rated as Good or Outstanding
- We have improved our Adult Community Learning offer to nearly 11,000 students.
- We have an award-winning broadband team, enabling over 150,000 Essex homes and businesses to access superfast broadband.
- We engage 32,000 young people through our nationally recognised youth service.
- The condition of our roads is now among the best in the country.
- We have invested billions in improving and maintaining our infrastructure.

Council Tax

This year, for the sixth time in the last ten years, we announced no increase in council tax, and only a 1.5% increase in our social care precept this year. Very few authorities across the country are in a position to act with this level of confidence. Most are increasing their rates by two or three times this amount.

In fact, since 2010, while inflation has increased by around 35%, the cumulative impact on council tax has been much less, at around 22%.

Outstanding Childrens Services

We have one of the best children and families services in the country, with some of the lowest spend, rated by Ofsted as outstanding. We did this by investing heavily in the right leadership, early intervention, and innovation in practice.

COVID-19

Rates of infection are gradually reducing, and the number across the county is well below 100 per 100,000. Our children are returning to school as part of the government's roadmap to reopening and our focus is shifting to the recovery for Essex.

ECC Budget

At Full Council on 23 February we approved our budget for the next year. We also announced some additional initiatives

- An additional £2million investment in economic development to ensure a successful reopening of the Essex economy.
- £1.5million to support the Educational Recovery Task Force which will lead and oversee the educational recovery of all Essex children.
- A further £1million investment in mental health support for children and our health and care workforce.
- A further £1million community action fund for environmental initiatives to help communities create less waste, travel sustainably, use renewable energy and produce less carbon.
- A further £500,000 to break the cycle of violence and protect young people from gangs.
- A further £7.2million of capital funding for Local Highways Panels (LHP) - £200K more for each panel, each year, for the next three years.
- An additional £180,000 added to LHP revenue budgets for smaller highways projects.

Major Capital programmes

In March we agree the unlocking of grant funding worth over £200 million for Chelmsford North East By-pass and a new rail station at Beaulieu Park.

In total 14,109 new homes will be built through these two projects. By securing the funding, ECC has delivered an Infrastructure First approach whereby the infrastructure schemes will be brought forward earlier than would otherwise have been the case and existing residents will see the benefit as early as possible.

This funding is in addition to the £99m secured by ECC to support a new Link Road and Rapid Transport System to the east of Colchester. The Chelmsford and Colchester funds combine to over £300m, which will help drive economic recovery from Covid-19 by supporting thousands of construction jobs in Essex and adding 10bn to the economy.

Freeports

Felixstowe/Harwich and the Thames Freeport proposals have been chosen by the Chancellor as two of the 8 new Freeports in the UK. This will be a huge boost to the wider North and South Essex economies, and the county and country as a whole. Again, Essex County Council's work supporting and influencing these outcomes has paid off.

Essex and the East of England will play a leading role in powering local and national economic growth. We can drive the regional recovery from the challenges of Covid-19 – while helping lead the rest of the nation down the path of increased prosperity.

Climate Commission

The Climate Commission, set up in early 2020, has met regularly over the last year and we have continued to invest in and commit to environmental action and innovation.

The commission has produced its interim report, and we have published our response to this. This response outlines our commitment to short term actions that will begin to draw the roadmap to net zero carbon emissions by 2030. The final report of the Commission will follow soon after, helping to clarify our roadmap further, and we will be responding to that in the summer.

In the interim we are taking action, and you will have seen that I announced an additional £1m for climate change action at our Budget meeting last month. This included £500k for a competition to help four communities in Essex go further and become national pioneers in becoming net zero carbon communities – this is something you may wish to consider whether you'd be interested in pursuing.

We are already building net zero school buildings, already converting our streetlights to LED and we are already using innovative low carbon techniques, such as Leaky Dams and Natural Flood Management. The Essex Forest Initiative – 375,000 new trees for our county – is ahead of schedule, we have planted tens of thousands of new trees this winter.

We also announced how we will spend the first £2.5m of the £5m Climate Reserve. We are using that money delivering green growth, net zero buildings, renewable energy and electric transport solutions, while making our county more resilient to the impacts of climate change, supporting our natural environment and bringing in millions of pounds of national funding

Education Recovery and Young People

We worked hard to support children during the last year. We supported them with meals and spent £900,000 on 5,000 laptops to those who needed them for remote learning. An unprecedented amount of education time has been disrupted or lost by every single child. This will leave a lasting legacy. This will not just be lost learning – though this will clearly be an important part. It will also be missed opportunities to develop sporting, social, interpersonal and cultural skills; with potentially long term mental and physical health challenges.

The sooner we begin to address this issue, the easier it will be to solve. We will establish an Education Recovery Task Force to lead and oversee the recovery of our children. The Task Force will work alongside the county's committed education leaders to re-establish young people's hope and aspiration for a successful future. It will have an independent chair who can work with the newly appointed National Education Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins.

In the short term the focus will be on supporting our children and young people in their exam years, supporting our most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of all of our young people. We have set aside £1.5m in a reserve to support this.

We will begin by supporting our children through the summer, setting them up for the school year ahead. We are already offering our most comprehensive summer activity programme ever, to a wider group than just those in receipt of free school meals.

We will allocate another half a million to support children's emotional wellbeing and mental health. We will ask the Education Recovery Task Force to assess the impact of the pandemic on children's emotional wellbeing and mental health and from that assessment determine where best to allocate this funding.