

County Councillor's Report, February 2018

County Council announces £300m budget spending plan

A record programme of more than £300 million will be invested in roads, schools, new homes and supporting the economy across Essex, as part of the County Council's budget proposals for 2018/19.

The budget, which will go to Cabinet next week before it is put to the vote at Full Council on Tuesday 13 February, sets out the Council's proposed investment and spending programme for the coming year.

It also includes a continued commitment to innovation and digital technology, which is already having a positive impact on services such as adult social care, where tablet computers have more than halved the time it takes to complete assessments.

The continued reduction in central Government funding, which will disappear completely by 2020, combined with increasing demand for services, increases in inflation, business rates and National Living Wage payments, mean the Council is proposing to increase Council Tax for only the third time in the last eight years.

This will rise by 2% through the Government's social care precept, which will be ring-fenced to adult social care, and 2.99% to support the delivery of vital services such as highways, public transport, libraries and recycling centres.

The proposed rise means a £1.12 per week increase for the average Band D property.

Cllr David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council, said: "This is a positive, practical and prioritised set of proposals. It takes a balanced and realistic budget view but at the same time, proposes record investment in key services and infrastructure.

The Council has delivered over £350m of savings in the last four years by generating income and reducing costs.

In the last year, the Council created 2,500 new places in Essex schools, 92% of which are rated good or outstanding, and supported the creation of 11,370 apprenticeships.

It also repaired more than 5,000 potholes, resurfaced more than 400 miles of road, while bringing superfast broadband to another 100,000 homes in the county.

Council will meet next Tuesday to discuss and vote on the Council Tax proposals.

A131 Chelmsford to Braintree route improvements imminent

Works are due to start this month on a £7.3 million investment to improve the A131 Braintree Road and the A130 Essex Regiment Way.

The scheme is designed to ease congestion by increasing capacity and to improve road safety.

Works are planned for January to extend the existing bus lane on Essex Regiment Way and for improvements at Deres Bridge Roundabout. Additionally, cutting back vegetation is also planned at Nabbotts and Sheepcotes Roundabouts to clear the ground for future improvement works.

Programmed dates are:

- **Essex Regiment Way Bus Lane Extension – Winter/Spring 2018**
- **Deres Bridge Roundabout Improvements – Winter/Spring 2018**
- **Chelmer Valley Road Bus Lane Extension – Spring 2018**
- **Nabbotts Roundabout Improvements – Summer 2018**
- **Sheepcotes Roundabout Improvements – Spring/Summer 2019**

Traffic management will be used during the successive phases of work. We will use temporary restrictions including overnight closures, and the details of those will be advertised on sign boards in the area in advance of works.

The latest scheme updates can be found on our webpage under 'A131 Chelmsford to Braintree Route Improvements' at essex.gov.uk/majorschemes, as well as on the @EssexHighways Twitter feed.

Secondary school performance tables confirm Essex pupils are achieving above the national average in GCSEs

Secondary schools in Essex have cause for celebration today after new statistics confirmed the county's GCSE pupils again performed above the national average.

About 15,000 young people were entered into GCSEs at schools in Essex last year, which was the first since the Government introduced a new numerical (9 to 1) grading system.

Figures released by the Department for Education, alongside the secondary school performance tables, show the Attainment 8 score for Essex (average grade across a set of eight subjects) was 46.7 – above the national average of 46.4.

As a result of today's data, Essex is ranked 58 of all 151 local authorities.

The 65.3 per cent of pupils in Essex who achieved a standard pass at GCSE (9-4) in English and maths is also above the national average of 64.2 per cent

English language, English literature and maths were the only subjects to be graded under the new 9 to 1 scale, with others continuing to be graded A* to G. Most other subjects are expected to adopt numerical grades by 2019.

As well as releasing revised Key Stage 4 results today, the Department for Education has published revised A-Level results.

Up to 22 new schools to be built in Essex over the next decade with 22,000 new school

More than 22,000 new school places will be needed across Essex over the next decade, according to a new strategy published by Essex County Council.

The council's ten year plan, Meeting the demand for school places in Essex 2018 - 2027, provides the background to school place planning in Essex and outlines the anticipated demand for places in each district, as well as listing likely solutions.

Projections currently show an extra 12,201 new primary school places and 9,915 new secondary school places (22,116 in total) will be needed across the county between now and 2027.

Locally, they include:

- 1,608 places in Braintree (1,008 primary and 600 secondary)
- 2,561 places in Uttlesford (1,631 primary and 930secondary)

Essex County Council works closely with partners, including schools, district/borough councils and housing providers, to assess demand for school places and the ten year plan is updated regularly as projections change.

The plan also outlines the projects Essex County Council already has planned to meet the growing needs of the county, along with other potential future options.

The council spent about £74million creating 2,535 new permanent mainstream places across the county for the 2017/18 academic year and plans to create thousands more in the years to come.

In addition to its own projects, the council also continues to support the submission of free school applications to help meet demand.

It is currently estimated that up to 22 new mainstream schools will be needed over the next ten years in Essex, while a number of existing schools will also need to be expanded.

Among the new schools in the pipeline over the next decade are primary schools in Basildon, Braintree, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Colchester, Harlow, Maldon, Rochford, Tendring and Uttlesford.

There are also secondary schools set to be built in Colchester and Harlow, and all-through schools in Chelmsford and Colchester.

To find out more about the school places likely to be needed in your area and some of the potential solutions, please see our [10 Year Plan on meeting the demand for school places in Essex](#).

Leader lobbies government for "no strings" business rates deal

Essex County Council's leader Cllr David Finch lobbied MPs yesterday for urgent clarity over the Government's business rate reform plans.

Cllr Finch was invited to give evidence to the CLG Select Committee where he sought greater transparency on plans to let all local councils keep 75% of business rates from 2020/21 when central Government funding ceases, eventually moving to 100% retention.

In Essex, £625 million of rates are currently collected but just £304 million is spent locally – the rest goes back to the Treasury.

"Keeping business rates would give us the financial stability we need to realise our strategic ambitions for Essex and drive prosperity for all," said Cllr Finch.

"But there are still too many unanswered questions to enable us to plan effectively for our future.

"We have not built 100% retention into our financial projections because we don't have enough information, such as how much we could get, how the money will be distributed and what responsibilities will be devolved to us from Whitehall."

When central Government grant funding comes to an end in 2020/21, the Council estimates a funding gap of £94 million.

Cllr Finch added: "We are an innovative council. We explore commercial opportunities, we investigate alternative ways of providing vital services, and we focus on ensuring we are efficient and effective in everything we do.

"But we simply don't have enough money and we need the Government to trust and empower us by letting us keep 100% of our business rates, with no strings attached."

If the Council, along with Southend Borough Council, district, borough and city councils, had been chosen to become a 100% retention pilot area, local councils would have received £38 million of extra funding, including £8 million for Essex County Council.

Cllr Finch said: "The loss of this funding is significant. It could have provided 550,000 care hours or fixed 16,000 defects on our highways network.

"It is unclear if the 75% scheme even helps. The additional 25% comes with a series of commitments, such as business rates being used to fund items like public health, which is currently funded by a separate grant.

"So we will lose the specific grant but maintain the requirement to deliver the service. The majority of funding under the 75% scheme is therefore merely a transfer of funding streams, it does not provide any additional money.

"It must be recognised that local government services cannot be switched off overnight, so the sooner we have clarity on this issue, the better."