

County Councillor's Annual Report: 2019-2020

This year's report is being written in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, a situation that has put the County Council under enormous strain as the implications and impacts of the disease take hold. I will reflect on our budget decisions, achievements of the past year and our aspiration for this coming year, the latter is subject to change for obvious reasons as we move through this crisis to one of recovery.

As with previous years, the budget is planned well in advance and is developed in the context of an overarching medium-term financial strategy that seeks to attain stability over a number of years. This allows us to take into account the year on year reductions in Government revenue support grant, and our extensive programme of work to reduce costs overall.

Over the past decade the Administration has achieved savings approaching £1billion, this is no mean feat, but has been done by modernising systems such as electronic transactions, reorganising staff and generally improving efficiencies across the whole Council. As an organisation we encourage our staff to look for opportunities and have developed a number of innovative income streams to help support the services we provide.

Key services have been protected, many enhanced, and we take particular pride in ensuring that our Social Services are fully supported. We are looked at as leading exemplars in this field, with many other councils seeking our advice and expertise in both adult and children's social care.

The 2020-2021 ECC element of Council Tax for Band D properties has been set at £1,321.11, an increase of 1.99% plus a 2% social care precept. This is set in the context of budgeted expenditure over the ensuing 12 months and in the knowledge that funding gaps in future years have been predicted.

Four strategic aims underpin our work:

- **Securing inclusive economic growth:** *a strong economy to help secure our future.*
- **Helping people get the best start and age well:** *supporting the vulnerable and ensuring all have the best opportunities to live the best life they can.*
- **Helping create great places:** *ensuring Essex remains the great place that it is, through carefully planned housing growth and infrastructure development whilst protecting the great qualities of the Essex countryside and coast.*
- **Transforming the Council:** *striving for efficiency and productivity with a workforce culture of innovation and resourcefulness.*

Securing inclusive economic growth

Over the past 12 months your council has secured £318m from the Housing Infrastructure Fund to support economic growth. We have created 1000 jobs in small and medium sized businesses by delivering the European Regional Development Fund. Both the A120 and A12 have been identified as key routes for improvement because of ECC lobbying of the Government.

For the coming year we are developing a Local Industrial Strategy for the South East. With our local councils, we are looking to increase and enhance the availability of commercial and industrial sites to further encourage economic growth.

And with the £318m HIF bid funding, we will be investing in a new rapid transport system for Colchester and a new railway station in Chelmsford.

Work will start on the new M11 junction 7A at Harlow, this will relieve strain on the existing junction which causes tail backs onto the motorway.

Helping people get the best start and age well

During the past year our Children's Services have been rated outstanding by Ofsted for safeguarding the most vulnerable children. New ways of delivering the Youth Services has meant that we have engaged with 32,000 young people, up a third on the previous year. Youth work sessions have increased fourfold.

This year we will redesign our support for disabled children and young people to help improve their independence and life chances. We wish to grow the already successful foster care provision across the county. A new Early Years strategy will ensure all children will get a good start in life, leading to them being better prepared for school and all that follows.

We will continue to work with multi agency partners to drive out gangs, knife crime and 'county lines' from Essex.

Vulnerable adults, those with Learning Disabilities and Autism will be given extra support to help them live independently and lead productive lives. For those with dementia, we will improve awareness and support for them and their carers.

Life expectancy, although higher than the national average, differs widely across the County. During the past year we pledged £1m to help those with mental health issues. We have developed a community weight loss service, with 7000 participants.

This year we will establish four mental health hubs with our health and crime prevention partners. We will be delivering the first phase of £10m Sport England funding to improve physical activity for inactive people. 100 parish councils will be involved in developing Wellbeing Plans for their communities. 250 businesses will also be involved in improving the physical and mental health of their employees.

Helping create great places

During the past year £700,000 has been used to improve our footpaths and pavements across the County. £500,000 was assigned to the Police Fire and Crime Commissioner to help reduce gang activity and the exploitation of vulnerable people. A new library strategy was agreed and this year will see £3m invested into community libraries.

The environment is my focus, and we have already achieved a lot so far. Waste is showing modest year on year reductions, with black bag waste decreasing by 3.1% last year and recycling up by 1.5%. Our country parks were awarded 7 Green Flags. We are a key partner in the development of a rapid

charging station for electric vehicles in Braintree, and we have secured £750,000 to help promote the Essex Coast.

This year we will be launching the Essex Climate Commission, which will advise us how to quickly achieve the Government's net zero carbon target, whilst making Essex a centre for green technologies and enterprise. We will be planting 375,000 trees over the next five years, ultimately capturing 60,000 tonnes of Carbon.

During the year we consulted on the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy, and this will be published in 2020.

We wish to encourage more to make more sustainable travel choices, thereby reducing car traffic and attendant pollution problems. Our waste reduction programmes will continue to encourage our citizens to waste less and leading by example, we have already eliminated many single-use plastics from County Hall and other facilities across our estate.

Transforming the Council

For the second year running, we ranked in the Top 10 of the most productive councils in the Country. We have achieved £60m new savings and efficiencies, and generated £8m in fees and charges income, with more efficient pays for people to pay for our services. £10m has been generated through the sale of surplus assets, with this money reinvested across the County. During the coming year we will look to save a further £58m and develop improved business planning to make the organisation more focussed on our key priorities.

I continue to be Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action (note the job title change, recognising the importance given to us helping to reverse global warming). Aside from looking after Waste Disposal, Flood Prevention, New Nuclear Power Station Builds, Rural and Coastal Matters, Carbon Reduction Initiatives, Country Parks and Essex Outdoors (Education Centres), I sit on several external committees. These include the Lea Valley Regional Park Authority, Kent and Essex Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, two Environment Agency Regional Flood and Coastal Committees, Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB and Dedham Vale AONB Joint Advisory Board, and the Stansted Airport Community Consultative Committee which is important to reflect local concerns and issues.

Finally, as the implications of Coronavirus are fully realised, there may be a need to reshape our aspirations for the coming year. Our intention is to have a robust recovery plan and to get our services back to normal as soon as is possible.

We have already had to use reserves to provide extra funding across several services, particularly in social care; our prudent financial management over the past decade has allowed us to do that.

In order to do this your County Council Cabinet meets daily, over video link, to manage the County Council to ensure it is delivering the best service for the citizens of Essex through this crisis and to ensure we continue to in the future.

Simon Walsh, April 2020