

Autumn Statement

Thank you Madam Chairman.

And can I start by echoing the words of Cllr Ball, and pay tribute to all the officers and school staff who, as so often before, have stepped up, quickly and efficiently, to deal with the challenges around RAAC.

And also to Cllr Ball himself for the leadership he has shown on this issue.

Madam chairman,

In listening to the leader's statement, and then to Cllr Ball, I think what we've heard, in broad terms, is a story of:

Opportunity; Challenge; and Work

Opportunity – with devolution;

Challenge – with the RAAC issue; and

Work – the sheer amount of hard work that's been done, and still needs to be done, to tackle these challenges, and seize the opportunities.

And that, for me, actually sums up the situation for us generally as a council at the moment: Opportunity, challenge, work.

I am a great believer that in life you create your own opportunities. So often, seeking out opportunities can only come with the security of strong foundations – and in the case of Essex County Council, it is those years of sound financial management that have enabled us to look up from the balance sheets, cast our eyes to the horizon, and seek to develop and build our positive vision for the future.

In his first executive statement in this chamber back in 2021, the leader did just that: unveiling Everyone's Essex, our ambitious plan for the county – designed not just for the current four-year term, and also the longer term - planting the seeds that will bear fruit in the years to come.

He talked of:

- levelling up
- growing the economy
- developing skills
- improving infrastructure
- helping people have the best start in life.

And, across the board, we are staying true to these ambitions while, at the same time, ensuring our core responsibilities are delivered, including:

- Supporting 16,000 adults in long-term care,
- Helping around 2,600 children in need or in care,
- Disposing nearly 350,000 tonnes of residual household waste;

And, madam chairman:

- Maintaining over 5,000 miles of road and over 4,000 miles of footway.

We have never lost sight of the perennial need to maintain the county's roads and footways – to fix the potholes.

This year alone, following one of the worst winters for roads nationwide, we have allocated an extra £12 million investment in roads and footways.

And underpinning everything, is a clear recognition that every penny the council spends comes from residents, and is being spent on their behalf.

We recognise and understand the problems faced by people in our county, struggling with the cost of living.

That is why, as long as I am Chancellor of Essex, council tax rises will only ever be a last resort, not a first response.

So wherever we can, we are seeking out and seizing opportunity, whether in developing new infrastructure, protecting the environment, helping people remain independent and much else besides.

And doing this can never just be about spending more money. We must also be tireless in creating other opportunities, such as:

- **Innovation** - harnessing the power of new thinking and technological advances; and
- **Partnership working** - building stronger relationships with our partners to enable shared ideas, resources and services.

And to this we can now add the opportunity of devolution, which promises to bring greater local control on issues that affect us all and, ultimately, greater benefits for Essex residents and businesses.

So far, so positive.

But while it's right to look at the positives, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't highlight to you all the real and present dangers that currently exist within local government finance.

You don't have to look far to see the problems being faced by local councils.

So yes, we are in a relatively good position. Yes, we do have positive opportunities within our grasp. Yes, we are determined to go further on these. But no, we are definitely not immune to the economic realities we are seeing up and down the country.

Madam Chairman, I've been around local government for quite a while – not as long as some members, of course, but long enough! And I believe that the combination of financial pressures we face as a council, and that people across our county face in managing their finances, make the current time exceptional.

As we work on the 24/25 budget, we have been confronted by a range of challenges. Top of the list is inflation, for which:

- £68m has been budgeted in the current year
- £44m currently budgeted for next year;

Within the headline inflation rate, the on-going uncertainty over energy and fuel costs is a particular challenge – being central to so much the council does.

We must also recognise the impact of inflation on our wage costs. As wage discussions take place over the coming weeks, we will never lose sight of the service that our employees and supplier workforces provide, for us and for the people of Essex - I know this is valued by all of us in this chamber.

As well as the corporate pressures, other challenges have arisen in service areas during the year.

In Childrens Services we have seen a significant and worrying increase in pressures on the service.

This has led to a current, projected overspend of £16m, a figure which has doubled in three months, and presents a significant challenge, not only in terms of this year's budget, but for ensuring a sustainable model in future years.

In adult social care, the demand for re-ablement has been a key driver in added cost pressures of nearly £5m.

Across our council, the pressure is felt; the challenge is real.

As leaders, we must, and will, respond with purpose, determination and resolve.

The programme of whole-council transformation we are developing will come into its own in the years ahead – helping us to develop a council that is even stronger, more

resilient and agile – ready to adapt and respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow, and seizing opportunities.

At the same time, we must always remain a compassionate council – we are an organisation of people and for people, and that must never be forgotten.

Madam Chairman,

The Leader, as many will be aware, has a passion for sailing, a pursuit which demands some exceptional qualities:

- the paramount need to set a clear, ambitious course:
- the capacity to make best use of the resources and elements at your disposal to power and steer your way forward; and
- the sheer hard work involved in keeping all this going.

These qualities, essential whether in the Mediterranean or the Strood, are qualities we would recognise as being essential in facing the challenges we have in local government.

We have set that clear and ambitious course.

We are determined to use our resources well – to gain the maximum benefit from the resources we have.

And yes, we are here to work, and work hard, for the people of Essex.

The leader has set out a clear destination.

By keeping that in sight:

- we can seize the opportunities, face up to the challenges, and bring our unstinting work-ethic to the fore.
- we can navigate the choppy waters and stormy weather ahead, with confidence and resolve.
- and, madam chairman, you can be sure that we will do all we can to deliver for the people of Essex.