

# Essex County Council

## Organisational Assessment

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Provided under embargo



for an independent overview  
of local public services

## Essex County Council

Overall, Essex County Council performs adequately

Managing performance	2 out of 4
Use of resources	3 out of 4
Managing finances	3 out of 4
Governing the business	2 out of 4
Managing resources	3 out of 4

Description of scores:

1. An organisation that does not meet minimum requirements, Performs Poorly
2. An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately
3. An organisation that exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Well
4. An organisation that significantly exceeds minimum requirements, Performs Excellently

## Summary

Overall Essex County Council performs adequately. This is because the Council delivers many quality services that meet local need and manages its finances well. However, children's services are not performing adequately notably in ensuring that children are safe and therefore overall the Council's performance is adequate.

The Council scores 2 out of 4 for managing performance. This is because it is delivering some priority services well and has the capability to continue to improve. The Council has demonstrated an agile and assertive response to the challenges of the recession and is actively supporting the local economy. Services are increasingly being delivered to meet the needs of service users. For example services to support older people to remain independent are effective and having a real impact on the quality of their lives.

Most partnership working is effective and delivering good outcomes for local people. This includes significantly reducing the number of people who are killed or seriously injured on the County's roads. Elsewhere a clear partnership and effective initiatives are reducing the already low crime rates in the County. As a result fear of crime is also reducing. The Council is successfully delivering a number of significant projects and working well with partners. It is also proactive in monitoring the impact services have on the environment and designing services that are sustainable.

The Council is responding proactively to the challenge of an increasing older population. Many services are being provided through Essex Cares, one of the first local authority trading companies for social care services. Support for older people to remain independent has been successful.

The Council and partners are working well to improve the health of people in Essex such as reducing smoking and teenage pregnancy.

Services for children and young people at risk and requiring safeguarding are inadequate. Staff shortages, high workloads and partners being unclear of their roles are recognised as being key areas for improvement which are detracting from safeguarding children. However, the Council is responding to weaknesses with a range of measures such as reviewing the Children's Trust and taking a proactive approach to recruitment, although it is not clear if this will give sufficient capacity. Progress in bringing about necessary improvements has been slow.

The Council is aware of some aspects of the democratic processes that need strengthening. This includes the timely distribution of papers before formal meetings and improving the timing of publishing member expenses information.

The Council scores 3 out of 4 for Use of Resources. The Council is good at managing finances. It is pro-active at taking action in response to financial issues and has an ambitious cost saving programme which has made significant savings. The Council is generally effective at governing its business. Procurement has become more streamlined but improvements are required. Service design generally supports value for money and the Council is addressing the need to improve its IT arrangements. The framework for data quality in the Council is generally sound, although data quality for partnerships needs to improve. Data security and business continuity arrangements have improved. Risk management arrangements are in place but member involvement needs to improve. Internal audit and counter fraud arrangements are strong but there are system control weaknesses. The Council is strong at managing other resources. It has made significant progress in its approach to managing natural resources effectively. The Council has a clear understanding of its CO2 emissions and how it plans to reduce them. Partnership working is effective to address environmental issues including waste management. Assets are managed pro actively to achieve value for money and the Council is working effectively with partners to use buildings jointly.

The Council's overall organisational assessment is adequate. Whilst the Council manages its finances well and delivers many quality outcomes, services for safeguarding children in Essex are inadequate.

## About Essex County Council

Essex is the second largest county in England in terms of population, home to urban, coastal and rural communities. The population of Essex generally tends to be older than other counties and the proportion of older people is predicted to increase significantly over the next ten years. The majority of the population are of white British ethnicity although a number of diverse communities exist within the County. Gypsies and travellers have historically featured in Essex, particularly in the districts of Basildon and Epping Forest. The County is relatively affluent and parts of it are amongst the wealthiest in the country. However, pockets of high deprivation do exist in the districts of Basildon, Harlow and Tendring. Unemployment is comparatively low although the proportion of people claiming Jobseekers' Allowance and Housing and

Council Tax benefits has increased at a higher rate over the last six months than for England as a whole. The working population of Essex tends to earn more than other areas, although skills and qualification levels are low in some parts of the County. The health of people in Essex is generally good and compares very well with the rest of the country but there are inequalities within the County for example in life expectancy and mortality rates.

The Council has a clear vision to 'Deliver the best quality of life in Britain, providing excellent services and securing the future of our county'. This vision is underpinned by ten priorities grouped into three thematic groups; 'Our People'; 'Our Economy' and 'Our World' with an overarching theme to put the customer first. These priorities have been developed by working with partners and residents and have been shown to be agile, enabling a proactive response to the recession.

## Organisational assessment

### Corporate theme: 'Putting the customer first'

Access to services is continuing to improve. Community information points provide access to, and information about, local services. This has been of particular benefit to the over-65 population and those that do not have access to the internet. The contact centre, Contact Essex, has shown further improvements. Over 60% of calls are resolved at the first point of contact. An independent survey of over 6,000 callers showed that 95% rated the service as 'good'. A particularly successful development was the dedicated handling of schools admissions enquiries, taking 10,640 calls in three weeks during September 2008. This allowed the contact centre to continue to deliver the high level of response to other enquiries. The Council has also worked with partners to establish joint customer reception points. The first has opened in Colchester and a second opened in Chelmsford in September 2009. Such initiatives allow residents easy access including to services provided by partners.

The approach to diversity and equality has improved. The Council has improved to reach the equality standard for local government level 3. Key to this improvement has been increasing the quality and value of Equality Impact Assessments, and developing a clear approach to achieving workforce diversity. Members have played a vital role championing improvements.

### Corporate theme: 'Our People'

The theme for 'Our People' is underpinned with a number of priorities. These are to increase educational achievements and skills; promote health and leisure and support vulnerable people. Whilst the Council is delivering in many key areas to support this priority, including its work in tackling health inequalities and supporting vulnerable adults, services for safeguarding children in Essex are not performing adequately.

Services for the well being and safeguarding of children are not performing adequately. The Joint Area Review, published in 2009, judged the contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people at risk or

requiring safeguarding, as inadequate. It found that the Council and other partners are not giving sufficient importance to the lessons arising from reviewing their most serious cases, or complaints about the safety and care of children and young people, to improving their practice. Some recommendations arising from serious case reviews remain outstanding since 2007. The criteria for referring children and young people to social services are not understood by different services and partners nor are they acted on consistently. Social workers have unacceptably high workloads, which leads to child protection cases not being closed in a timely or safe manner. There are shortfalls in the system to identify and respond to incidences of domestic abuse affecting children. Systems for recruiting and vetting staff working with children were insufficiently thorough, which resulted in a number of staff working directly with children not having the appropriate checks carried out on them.

The new senior management team for Schools, Children and Families at the Council have taken action to address weaknesses. However, progress in bringing about necessary improvements has been slow. A significant amount of resources and focus has been put into improving children's services. This includes additional resources, capacity and revising the structure of the service. Current indicators show the proportion of referrals to social care going onto the first stage of assessment remain well below average. The proportion of children who are the subject of a child protection plan that lasts for two or more years is unchanged and remains above average. During 2008/09 more children than in similar areas to Essex, or in England as a whole, became the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time.

A review of the Children's Trust and its relationship to the Safeguarding Board is underway, although the structure has not yet been agreed. The Children and Young People's Plan has safeguarding as a priority and partners were engaged in its development. However, all partners need to recognise the importance of addressing safeguarding issues as an urgent priority. The Council is making progress to address the capacity issues and is tackling the high number of qualified social worker vacancies through overseas recruitment. By the autumn a number of new social worker posts will be filled. Additional capacity is also being created through reorganising support services for social workers; however, this is still not sufficient to address the capacity required and therefore this remains a risk for the Council.

The quality of data and management information to support safeguarding and children's services more widely are weak but show signs of improvement. IT systems have not provided frontline staff or management with good quality information. This has adversely affected the speed at which cases are allocated to child protection teams potentially leaving some children at risk of harm.

Test and examination results for children and young people aged 11, 16 and 19 are in line with the national and regional averages. While children and young people in Essex are achieving better results the speed at which these are improving is slower than average for 11 and 19 year olds and matches the national average for 16 year olds. Standards in approximately one in ten primary and secondary schools are below the minimum expected by the government. This represents a big improvement for secondary schools as before 2008 standards were very low in approximately one in four of

them. Children and young people from lower income families achieve relatively well compared to those in similar areas, but not as well as in the rest of England. The achievement of children in the care of the Council varies from year to year. While their attendance at school is improving, it is not high enough. Pupils who have been identified as having special educational needs do not achieve well enough especially when they are age 11.

The quality of good educational provision is broadly in line with that in similar areas and the national average. The quality of education is improving with the number of poorly performing schools falling. Between 2006/07 and 2008/09 the Council has reduced the number of schools in special measures from eight to two. Three academies have been established responding to the need to improve educational attainment. Five secondary schools and three special schools have had £130 million of improvement work.

Actions to reduce the number of children and young people who are persistently absent from school have been successful and resulted in a big improvement in this area in the academic year 2007/08. This included the launch of 'Attendance Matters' training for frontline staff and school governors and the roll out of Behaviour Partnerships in all schools. Fewer children are also being permanently excluded from schools. Information provided by the Council indicates almost all of these children are now receiving full-time alternative education.

A high proportion of young people continue their learning when they are 16, but too many have discontinued by the time they are 17. The Council is responding positively to the increase of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEETS), which have risen from 5.6% in 2007/08 to 6.7% in 2008/09, a larger than average rise. The Essex Partnership Forum has committed an additional £4m to developing skills for young people. This includes the development of vocational centres. Resources have been targeted to the 22 schools where children were at most risk of not continuing into education, employment or training. The Council has led on the apprenticeships scheme to provide opportunities for young people.

The Council is tackling the significant health inequalities with a range of innovative approaches being developed. The Health Inequalities Strategy is focusing activity in the most deprived 20% of wards such as in Jaywick and Vange. For example, there have been a range of initiatives and work in the Jaywick Ward in Tendring, which is the most deprived area in the County and has the lowest life expectancy. A multi agency approach to increase MMR vaccination has also been effective. Partners have responded to community concerns to make services more accessible. This includes vaccinations offered at supermarkets and the University. As a result immunisation rates in an area with a low take up have increased from 72% to 85% in three months. This scheme is being rolled out to other areas. Effective partnership working has also led to achieving the targets to reduce smoking. Focusing on those areas with a higher incidence of smoking, education and enforcement, such as targeting the sale of cigarettes to minors and a proactive information campaign has resulted in higher numbers of those quitting smoking than any other area in the East of England.

Effective partnership work is starting to tackle obesity in children. Obesity among primary school children aged 5 and 11 is lower than average. School Meal Managers have helped schools comply with national standards regarding

ingredients and nutrition. This was achieved by developing a catering operation manual and a County recipe book and encouraging whole-school approaches to food, including consulting on menus. Young people's participation in activities such as sports, arts or a youth group is high. School Sport Partnerships have ensured that 92% of school pupils in 2008 had a minimum of two hours of physical education and sport. However, the percentage of schools achieving the Healthy School's award is below the average for similar councils. In addition, 45 schools have taken up the 'Fitbods' programme, a whole-school approach to the promotion of physical activity amongst primary and special school children.

The County Council has been awarded Beacon status for the legacy arrangements put in place for when the Olympics in 2012 have finished. This includes a dedicated facility for mountain biking in Hadleigh which is the Olympic mountain biking venue.

In 2008 an inspection found Child and Adolescent Mental Health services to be satisfactory. Staff providing mental health services and those who work for Essex County Council, district councils and voluntary organisations work together well. However, they have been slow in deciding what services need to be delivered in different areas and how best to do this. Consequently children and young people in different parts of the County do not receive the same quality of services. While the assessment of the needs of children and young people is carried out in good time there are delays in follow up appointments and treatment. This is because there is not enough staff to provide the different types of treatment children and young people may need. Access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health services and some therapies is variable for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and there is a lack of clear transition arrangements to adult mental health services for some young people.

The Council is responding proactively to the challenge of an increasing older population. Many services are being provided through Essex Cares, one of the first local authority trading companies for social care services. Support for older people to remain independent has been successful through the reablement service. This supports around 300 people at any one time, delivering up to 3,000 care and support hours on a weekly basis. Of the 1,988 people using the service in 2008/09 55% have regained or improved their independence and 40% no longer require support. The Council is also making £4 million investment in Telecare to support those over the age of 85 who prefer to remain in their own home with take-up of this service increasing by 37%. The Be Smart Be Safe guide has been well received. It contains information on issues such as health care, benefits advice, and home safety and has been distributed to 187,000 over-65s in the County. It was also translated into other languages so that older people in different communities have access to this information. The Council has exceeded its pledge to increase tenfold the number of adult social care users who, through personal budgets, were offered greater choice and control over their support. This is enabling individuals and their carers to have greater control over the bespoke support they need.

With partners the Council is doing more to engage and support vulnerable people living in rural communities. For example a recently adopted initiative called Village Agents is training local people to visit housebound rural residents and ensure that they are receiving the right information and support. Such

initiatives are ensuring those most likely to be excluded by their circumstances are supported.

## Corporate theme: 'Our Economy'

Overall the Council is making good progress to deliver against the theme for the economy which is underpinned by priorities to promote sustainable economic growth, to improve transport, and deliver value for money.

There are a wide range of initiatives to alleviate and address the recession. 'Banking on Essex', a partnership with Santander, is the biggest single initiative. It is supporting small businesses by providing financial assistance. In the first month £220,000 of loans were made. To preserve services for local communities the Council has led on tackling the closure of rural post offices. It has supported the reopening of four post offices, with a further four due to be opened in 2009/10. Direct financial assistance has also been provided to 10,000 of the most economically vulnerable households. Young families and residents who are over-80 and eligible for council tax benefit have received £100 to support council tax payment. This responsive and assertive approach is supporting people and businesses in Essex.

Longer term economic support is being achieved through a range of initiatives. This includes successfully increasing the number of apprenticeships in the public and private sector, with a focus on manufacturing. The Essex Partnership has a target of 1,000 apprentice posts to be provided across the County by small and large businesses as well as the public sector. Between 2003/04 and 2007/08 the number of apprentices had already increased by 128% to 2380.

Congestion is reducing through both road maintenance and improved public transport. The condition of roads has been improved through maintenance and resurfacing. Improved bus services have resulted in the increased usage over the last five years. In 2008/09 45.7 million journeys were made on buses, up from 43.3 million in 2007/08. A proactive approach is taken to address longer term transport solutions. The Council led a high profile and wide ranging enquiry into congestion and improvement of the major A12 trunk road. This resulted in an additional £120 million being secured for further improvement.

The casualty reduction partnership has delivered innovative initiatives resulting in significant reductions in the number of people killed and seriously injured on Essex roads. The number has fallen by 23% in 2008/09 compared to the previous year.

The Council is pursuing a significant transformation project so that services are more joined-up and efficient. To support this, the budget and corporate plan are being integrated making it easier to align resources to corporate objectives. Significantly the Council has decided to terminate its contract for strategic ICT provision. A new partner to deliver a range of services is being considered which may include IT.

The Council is good at managing finances. It is pro-active at taking action in response to financial issues and has an ambitious cost saving programme which has made significant savings. Services have generally improved whilst



the council tax increase has been kept to 1.9% for 2009/10. The continued approach to invest in front line services and stream line back office functions has contributed to £59 million of efficiencies and savings. The Council is generally effective at governing its business. Procurement has become more streamlined but improvements are required such as ensuring that a contracts register is in place. Service design generally supports value for money and the Council is addressing the need to improve its IT arrangements. The framework for data quality in the Council is generally sound, although data quality for partnerships needs to improve. Data security and business continuity arrangements have improved. Risk management arrangements are in place but member involvement needs to improve. Internal Audit and counter fraud arrangements are strong but there are system control weaknesses. The Council is strong at managing other resources including reducing the impact of its activities on the environment. Assets are managed pro actively to achieve value for money and the Council is working effectively with partners to use buildings jointly.

There are cultural issues which the Council is now addressing such as ensuring papers are available for publication following input from relevant departments such as legal and finance. A new template for decision making and guidance for officers is being rolled out across the authority. The Council also recognises that additional training is required such as better induction for officers and improved member training. A revised approach to member induction has been well received.

The Council has been slow to publish member expenses information for 2006/07 and 2007/08. However, the Council is now looking to publish regular information during the year.

## Corporate theme; 'Our World'

Good progress is being made in the priorities to protect the environment, reducing and recycling waste and making communities safer.

The Council is reducing the environmental impact of its activities. There is clear focus to reduce environmental impact as evidenced through the CO2 environmental management system. The corporate focus on reducing impact is cascaded to all services through directorate and unit plans, supported through local environment champions. Targets are in place such as to reduce business miles. There is quarterly performance monitoring of CO2 production through energy and transport related sources. To date this has resulted in a saving of 700 tonnes of CO2 and a financial saving of £900,000. Through the Essex Sustainable Schools Programme, the County Council is ensuring that new schools are constructed in sustainable ways. Sandon Park and Ride and Flitch Green Primary School provide examples of sustainable construction in Essex. They include grey water recycling to reduce environmental impact. More than 80% of schools have travel plans to deliver safer, more sustainable travel patterns. Effective environmental management has included the planting of around 420,000 trees in 2008/09. This balanced and strategic approach is both reducing impact and improving the natural environment.

Waste reduction and increased recycling are progressing well. In 2008/09 644kg of residual household waste was produced per household, falling from 701kg in 2007/08. The amount of waste recycled has increased by 5% to

43.5%. This exceeds the target for the year and places the Council well to deliver the target of recycling 50% within the next three years. Effective support to the districts has included financial assistance to introduce additional recycling schemes that has, in one district council, Rochford, resulted in an increase in recycling from 25% to 60%.

The Council and partners continue to make Essex a safer place in which to live and work. Although the rate of crime in the County is low it remains a high priority for residents and hence the Council. Crime per 1000 head of population reduced from 71 in 2007/08 to 67 in 2008/09 representing a comparatively low rate nationally. The British Crime Survey shows that Essex has risen from 32nd to 12th nationally for the percentage of respondents agreeing that 'the police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in this area'.

Key risk areas have seen significant investment. This includes £105,000 of Performance Reward Grant to reduce assaults related to the 'night time economy'. Initiatives have included 'taxi marshalling' aimed at reducing tensions and disorder at taxi ranks at night. There has been a 14% drop in assaults in Chelmsford from April to June 2008 to April to June 2009. The Council and partners are therefore tackling those hotspots of crime affecting local people and businesses.

There are a range of initiatives to reduce alcohol and substance misuse. These include the Colchester SOS bus established to provide a safe haven for those enjoying a night out in Colchester and also to provide a daytime education resource for schools to highlight the dangers of alcohol use. Trading standards and the police have undertaken successful campaigns which have seen a fall in the number of shops selling alcohol to underage young people from 21% in 2007/08 to 15% in 2008/09.

Reducing the high rate of repeat incidents of domestic abuse is a key priority. The Council and its partners are demonstrating commitment through the allocation of £315,000 of Performance Reward Grant to support specialist domestic abuse posts. Although too early to assess the impact, this work has placed partners in a much stronger position to identify and support high risk victims of domestic abuse.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>



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