

Leader's Executive Statement – 'Empowering Communities'

As Conservatives, we firmly believe in ensuring every resident has a greater say on the things that affect their local communities. How their local areas are developed, shaped for the future, and to give them authority in decision making about where they live.

This administration has a strong and exemplary track record in this area already and is actively devolving critical services as close to the public as possible. We have established Local Highways Panels where residents' locally elected representatives have the authority to decide on schemes that are important to them.

We have just launched a trial scheme to devolve highways prioritisation to Parish Councils and this will soon be followed with Districts Councils. This means that smaller but vital issues that affect people in local areas can be fixed quicker by those who live there. This will greatly improve the delivery of local services and is a ground-breaking scheme in the UK.

As one former Prime Minister said: 'Where Essex leads, others follow!'

A proud accolade we are determined to continue by putting our residents first. Something we have always done despite going through a long period of austerity.

As Leader, I am incredibly proud that Essex is in the top 10 of all councils when it comes to effectiveness and efficiency.

Now, we turn our attention to Libraries. We have concluded a consultation to find out what people thought about their local library service. A service which faces annual and rapid decline.

I am very pleased to say that the people of Essex have responded well, and this consultation has absolutely reinvigorated their desire and love of our libraries. This is superb and just what we were looking for.

So – as a result **NONE OF OUR LIBRARIES WILL CLOSE.**

However, I was disappointed with the political rhetoric by Opposition Parties who offered no vision, no thought of the future. Nothing to enhance the life of our residents, their children and their grandchildren. Just being against something is not good politics and certainly not good for the future of Essex.

All you offered were slogans – not strategy.

By contrast, the people of Essex who are renowned throughout the country for their entrepreneurship and taking on a challenge have reacted far better.

As a result, we have a number of communities that have come forward and want to run their own local library service and to run the buildings as community hubs.

They have real vision and want to take control of this service and adapt them for the local people in that area.

Where this is the case we shall work with them, invest in their libraries and help them to continue to thrive as vibrant local hubs that truly serve the public. This is not being forced on them – they have come forward and want to serve their community.

This is true empowerment of people and communities.

What is the opposition mantra? We'll run everything, tell you what we are going to do, and you'll have to accept it and – by the way – we'll probably hike up your taxes to do so!

That is not the conservative way!

We shall now invest in all our libraries over the next 5 years in a new Strategy. We will ensure we are at the forefront of technology and keep pace with a fast-moving world, where e-books, apps, and websites are rapidly replacing traditional book lending. But we will maintain book lending for people who want that service.

We shall also ensure our library buildings become more adaptable for community use, working with other organisations to co-locate and make it much easier for people to access a broad spectrum of services.

There will be more of a modern feel, where you can continue to access the internet at superfast speeds and where you can meet up with friends, socialise, and learn new things.

Being fair and equitable is at the heart of everything this Conservative Administration does.

So, the consultation has worked and galvanised people's love of libraries. It must continue, and we will now work to ensure that it does. Essex is a great county and offers great chances in education, skills, jobs, and homes. Our libraries service plays a vital part in that and we will invest in it's future and that of the people of Essex.