Overview and Scrutiny

Annual Report 2020-21

Essex County Council

Contents

Introduction **3**

What is Scrutiny? **4**

Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee (CPSC) **5**

Health Overview Policy and Scrutiny Committee (HOPSC) **7**

People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee (PAFPSC) **9**

Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee (PSEG) **11**

Essex County Council's Strategic Aims **13**

Enable Inclusive Economic Growth 13

Help People Get the Best Start and Age Well 14

Help Create Great Places to Grow Up, Live and Work 17

Transform the Council to Achieve More with Less 18

How the Public can get Involved **20**

Introduction

By Scrutiny Board Chairman, Councillor Jill Reeves

I am pleased to present this report on scrutiny activity at Essex County Council over the past twelve months.

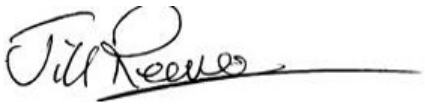
Much like every area of the council, scrutiny has faced significant challenges and pressures throughout the year. I'm so proud of how the scrutiny chairmen and committee members have risen to meet these challenges, adapted to new ways of working and produced some truly excellent work. This report highlights some of our key achievements and demonstrates the work we have done to support delivery of Essex County Council's strategic aims.

The issues and cost pressures facing Essex County Council are significant, and scrutiny has a frontline role in holding the executive to account on behalf of the residents we represent.

Perhaps more than ever over the last twelve months, it's been inspiring to see the value that scrutiny can add to the policy development process, providing a spotlight to ensure transparency whilst also helping to address corporate challenges through delivering policy change and encouraging further partnership working.

It is essential therefore that scrutiny continues to be involved early in the development of policy and has the opportunity to help shape it.

This past year has been testing for officers, strategic partners and members alike. I'm proud of the perseverance and dedication I've witnessed, and the support we've received from across the organisation to ensure that scrutiny could continue as normal.



Councillor Jill Reeves
Scrutiny Board Chairman

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What is Scrutiny?

The scrutiny function plays an important role in reviewing and shaping Essex County Council's services and policy framework.

Scrutiny members are non-executive councillors who act as a critical friend to decision makers (the Cabinet Members), ensuring that the council is delivering services efficiently and effectively. At Essex, there are four Policy and Scrutiny Committees, each looking at a particular area of the Council's responsibilities:

- **Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee**
- **Health Overview and Policy and Scrutiny Committee**
- **People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee**
- **Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee**

Scrutiny members have an important role in holding Cabinet Members to account – bringing experience, oversight and local knowledge to the policy development process. They can also retrospectively question decisions taken by Cabinet Members and make recommendations on how future decisions could be improved. To carry out their role they undertake reviews, and consider evidence from officers, experts or the general public on particular policy issues. These meetings are held in public and are streamed online.

Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee (CPSC)

This committee reviews the overall strategic direction, policies and priorities of the Cabinet and Council including the budget strategy, financial resources, equality and diversity issues, procurement and the Council's transformation programme.

Full details of the committee's work can be found on the Council's website.

This has been another demanding year for the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee. The central role of the committee will always be the effective safeguarding and oversight of ECCs financial health. With the challenges and pressures presented by the pandemic, this role has expanded and we've taken a front seat exploring the impact that the last year has had on our financial resilience and future planning.

"This report outlines a number of our key achievements since April 2020, but perhaps what I'm most proud of is how we've managed to achieve our remit throughout – working closely with the Cabinet Member to outline key pressures and provide constructive, critical friend challenge through persistently difficult times."

As members, we've had to make significant changes to the way we represent our communities over the last year. Our staff are also undergoing a real period of transformation, with an unexpected and fairly dramatic shift to entirely remote working for those people who were previously office based. The wellbeing of our staff is central to our role as a committee, and we've worked hard to establish an ongoing dialogue with officers and members to provide scrutiny throughout lockdown, overseeing the transformation to remote working and providing feedback to ensure that our staff are able to work from home, rather than 'live at the office'.

While the nature of our work programming as a committee is often fairly prescriptive, it has by necessity become almost entirely reactive over the last year – responding to emergency pandemic decisions and providing oversight to pandemic related internal transformations. Despite this, however, I'm pleased that we've

managed to branch out to more forward focused pieces of work. We've looked at how our overarching highways maintenance contract is managed and delivered and scrutinised the future of our corporate IT systems, and the steps ECC is taking to ensure that our internal and external online services are efficient, effective and accessible. We've even managed to check in with services we haven't spoken to in a long while, such as the Essex Records Office and review our commercial investments strategy.

I'm so incredibly proud of how the committee has adapted to 'the new normal'. By changing how we operated, and with the support of excellent and dedicated officers, we were able to ensure that our work carried on, providing oversight and support to the organisation throughout a difficult time.

Councillor Mike Mackrory
Chairman

Membership

- Councillor Michael Mackrory (Chairman)
- Councillor James Abbott
- Councillor Malcolm Buckley
- Councillor Graham Butland
- Councillor Mike Garnett
- Councillor Malcolm Maddocks
- Councillor Valerie Metcalfe (Vice-Chairman)
- Councillor John Moran
- Councillor Mark Platt
- Councillor Ron Pratt
- Councillor Sue Lissimore
- Councillor Derrick Louis
- Councillor Anne Turrell
- Councillor Julie Young (Vice-Chairman)

Health Overview Policy and Scrutiny Committee (HOPSC)

This committee reviews and scrutinises matters relating to the planning, provision and operation of health services in the County of Essex. This includes primary, secondary, tertiary care, and public health, and may involve reviewing the work of commissioners (such as local clinical commissioning groups), providers of health services (such as hospitals) and other organisations in the health sector.

Full details of the committee's work can be found on the Council's website.

Essex has one of the most complex health environments in the country. In recent years it has been split across three different strategic health footprints that do not align with our County Council borders. The footprints have been operating at different speeds meaning that the HOPSC has the ongoing challenge of continuing to have strategic oversight over these different paced programmes.

Much of the committee's work over the past year has understandably been in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the HOPSC scrutinised a number of key health services including mental health services, cancer services and A&E pressures, as well as receiving briefings from the Council's Director of Public Health on the impact the pandemic was having across the County.

"The pandemic has affected almost everyone, and members made sure to raise issues on behalf of residents from their local divisions to ensure the public's voice was heard. The HOPSC are incredibly thankful for the work all services, in particular those mentioned above, have done over the past year."

Moving onto non-pandemic related work, the committee worked collaboratively with the Princess Alexandra Hospital (PAH) Trust in May 2020 to act as a formal statutory consultee to consider PAH proposals for the relocation and rebuild of the hospital, as well as the proposed public engagement strategy. This work was delivered to a tight schedule and reflected the

commitment of members in engaging with new ways of working to ensure that scrutiny could continue to be delivered effectively.

As we moved into 2021, the committee's focus moved away from solely focussing on the pandemic and, following the East of England Ambulance Service Trust (EEAST) being placed into special measures by the Care Quality Commission, the HOPSC met in private to discuss evidence provided by the trust and written feedback was provided which included additional questions for the Trust to respond to.

I would like to thank all my HOPSC members for their commitment over the last year and those who participate in additional activities such as extra briefings to broaden their knowledge and expertise.

Councillor Jill Reeves
Chairman

Membership

- Councillor Jill Reeves (Chairman)
- Councillor Anne Brown
- Councillor Jenny Chandler
- Councillor Beverley Egan (Vice Chairman)
- Councillor Ricki Gadsby
- Councillor Dave Harris
- Councillor June Lumley
- Councillor Bob Massey
- Councillor Clive Souter
- Councillor Mark Stephenson
- Councillor Mike Steptoe
- Councillor Andy Wood (Vice Chairman)

District Councillors

- Councillor Tony Edwards
- Councillor Michael Helm
- Councillor Peter Tattersley

People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee (PAFPSC)

This committee exercises the scrutiny function on matters relating to children and young people, families, education, adult social care, special needs and safeguarding.

Full details of the committee's work can be found on the Council's website.

We have succeeded in continuing the work of the committee despite the extra challenges of the pandemic. I have been acutely aware that the PAFPSC's remit means that it has oversight of key service areas that were facing some of the most extreme pressures during the crisis – such as adult social care, children and families, and education services and that the scrutiny function needed to be cognisant of that. I believe that, through regular discussions with Cabinet Members and senior officers, the PAFPSC has been able to respond appropriately and proportionately to the crisis, taking care not to further burden already stretched services, whilst effectively continuing its work.

"Despite pandemic pressures there is still an important role for independent scrutiny of decision-makers and it remains a valid challenge for commissioners and providers to evidence how they are responding to the challenges of the pandemic and supporting those who are most vulnerable."

Part of that challenge is to identify learning from this crisis and the PAFPSC has been pleased to hear about changes to working practices and service delivery being made as a result.

The committee has discussed legacy issues arising from its most recent work programme that it is suggesting the new committee (post May 2021) pursues including support for young people and their emotional wellbeing, safeguarding the vulnerable in elective home education, adult social care provision after the pandemic and the impact of technology on the care sector.

One of our highest profile pieces of work has been the task and finish group scrutiny of the effectiveness of partnership working by local agencies in responding to the challenge of drug gangs, knife crime and County Lines. This review spanned across two reporting years and was completed and presented to Full Council last year. We are recommending that the newly constituted PAFPSC continues to challenge governance arrangements, actions to discourage school exclusions, how to raise awareness of support services and the outcomes achieved from partnership funding. I was pleased to facilitate representatives from the Young Essex Assembly also participating in a full-committee discussion on the issue.

This report highlights some of the other wide-ranging work undertaken by the committee. Three key pieces of work since the start of the pandemic have been detailed to highlight the PAFPSC's successes over the last year.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of my committee for their commitment to their work, particularly those serving on Task and Finish Groups, and their collaborative and non-partisan approach to scrutiny - they should be proud of the work undertaken by the committee over the last four years.

Councillor Jenny Chandler
Chairman

Membership

- Councillor Jenny Chandler (Chairman)
- Councillor John Baker (Vice Chairman)
- Councillor Jude Deakin
- Councillor Mark Durham
- Councillor Beverley Egan (Vice Chairman)
- Councillor Carlo Guglielmi
- Councillor Michael Hardware
- Councillor June Lumley
- Councillor Peter May
- Councillor Ron Pratt
- Councillor Patricia Reid
- Councillor Clive Souter
- Councillor Mike Steptoe
- Councillor Lesley Wagland

Education Representative

- Christine Martin

Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee (PSEG)

This committee exercises the scrutiny function on matters relating to environment, economic growth and infrastructure, sustainability, highways and transportation, libraries, planning, communities, waste and recycling and trading standards.

Full details of the committee's work over the period can be found on the Council's website.

It's been a challenging year for the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee (PSEG). As expected, much of our work as a committee has been focused on COVID related support and the work ECC is undertaking to ensure that Essex residents and businesses can bounce back once we're safely through the pandemic. This has seen the committee take on a much more reactive role, working constructively with Cabinet Members and officers to ensure that decisions taken around the provision of services, as well as the closure of community and green spaces, are taken for the right reasons and appropriate for the safety of our residents.

"Over the last year we've seen how our services have adapted to national restrictions, and I'm pleased with the positivity with which PSEG members have approached their work, providing insightful and effective critical friend challenge throughout a difficult time."

As always, the broad remit of this committee consistently presents challenges in establishing our priorities for scrutiny, and pandemic related pressures has taken a lot of autonomy out of the committee's hands when it comes to determining our own agenda. Despite this, however, we've still managed to ensure that our work programme was as varied as possible, opening up opportunities to explore a wide range of the interesting and vital services that we deliver for Essex residents.

We've looked at the work of the Essex Climate Action Commission and fed into developing strategies around sustainable travel and green infrastructure. We've spent a lot of time looking at changes to local and national planning regulations, and the impact these will have on housing and infrastructure provision across the county. The committee has also managed to check in with long running pieces of work around libraries redevelopment and highways maintenance.

This past year has required us, as local representatives, to work differently, and I'm proud of how members of the committee and the officers supporting us have adapted to the challenge. While this report details some of the specific areas of work that the committee has undertaken, perhaps the achievement I'm most proud is simply how effectively we've managed to keep going, providing effective, appropriate scrutiny throughout the crisis.

Councillor Ian Grundy
Chairman

Membership

- Councillor Ian Grundy (Chairman)
- Councillor Andrew Erskine
- Councillor Ivan Henderson
- Councillor Stephen Hillier (Vice-Chairman)
- Councillor Paul Honeywood
- Councillor David Kendall
- Councillor Sue Lissimore
- Councillor Bob Massey
- Councillor Richard Moore
- Councillor Chris Pond (Vice-Chairman)
- Councillor Ron Pratt
- Councillor Wendy Schmitt
- Councillor Carole Weston
- Councillor Andy Wood

Essex County Council's Strategic Aims

The organisational strategy 2017 to 2021 sets out ECC's four strategic aims:

- **Enable Inclusive Economic Growth**
- **Help People Get the Best Start and Age Well**
- **Help Create Great Places to Grow Up, Live and Work**
- **Transform the Council to Achieve More with Less**

Below are examples of the work that the Overview and Scrutiny function carries out to deliver these aims.

Enable Inclusive Economic Growth

Economic Development

Throughout the year, **PSEG** members have carried out constructive oversight to ensure that relief and support to local businesses and residents impacted by the pandemic was meaningful, targeted and transparent. This included scrutiny of business support services and grants and early sight of changes to how ECC manages investment opportunities to maximise growth and impact to local communities.

Members:

Maintained a close overview of economic growth activity, providing constructive, critical friend scrutiny throughout the pandemic. The committee obtained assurances around support to local businesses, engagement with further education and vocational training providers and investment in local communities.

Essex Skills Strategy

In February 2021, **PSEG** members received an update on proposals to develop an updated skills strategy for Essex. Members learnt how the Essex economy, and consequently the skills and employment landscape, had been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. This included updates on unemployment statistics, national schemes and grants introduced as a result of the pandemic and the future of affected industries and sectors across the county. Committee members questioned the Cabinet Member and officers around the future of adult learning and shifting nature of the employment market in Essex. Questions were also raised around work to promote STEM subjects in higher and further education institutions.

Members:

Provided constructive challenge around the future of the employment market in Essex, supporting officers and feeding into emerging strategies to promote resilience and recovery in the wake of the pandemic.

Help People Get the Best Start and Age Well

Domiciliary care

Against the backdrop of the second wave of the pandemic in the UK, a **PAFPSC** Task and Finish Group started a review of the structure, sustainability and service quality of the domiciliary care sector and the discharge processes from hospitals. The Group would have liked to have pursued some issues further but was unable to do so due to pandemic pressures and the need to close the review ahead of the County Council elections in May 2021. However, whilst acknowledging some limitations of the review, and that the report was effectively an interim report, a number of key conclusions were still agreed.

Members:

Recommended looking at the feasibility and constraints in having a more flexible approach on who can undertake some individual assessments and the development of a simple 'one-stop shop' contact sheet to be given to everyone being discharged from hospital. Identified further scrutiny work to take place after the County Council elections, and highlighted issues raised by contributors for ECC officers to investigate further even though many of them were not formalised into recommendations.

Emotional wellbeing and mental health services for children and young people

PAFPSC were consulted on the County Council's role and priorities as part of a collaborative partnership forum which would be re-commissioning emotional wellbeing and mental health services for children and young people. It was confirmed that there had been co-production with young ambassadors, the Essex Family Forum and parent carer engagement representative groups for Essex Southend and Thurrock.

Members:

Stressed the importance of strong links between the re-commissioned service and broader Children and Families and Education services within ECC, and the need for an increased role and profile in the new collaborative commissioning forum for ECC's Director of Education. Reviewed whether resources could meet increased demand and that enhanced support plans were in place, and suggested the development of a community engagement and communications plan.

Education - accessibility and opportunity

Throughout the last year the **PAFPSC** has spent considerable time challenging the local system on how it maintains fair educational accessibility and opportunity during and after the pandemic, particularly for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. This included review and scrutiny of the planned Early Years Strategy, initiatives related to emotional wellbeing and mental health (EWMH) support for disadvantaged children, an inspection by the Care Quality Commission and OFSTED into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities services.

Members:

Sought and obtained assurances that adequate resourcing was available in respect of the Early Years Strategy, that adequate evaluation methods were in place in respect of EWMH provision, and that the improvement actions taken following the OFSTED review were appropriate.

Covid-19 Pandemic

The **HOPSC** received updates in connection to a number of key areas impacted by the pandemic which included:

- Delays to cancer treatments
- Mental Health services
- A&E Pressures
- Personal behaviour arising from the pandemic

The committee would have liked to have pursued some matters further but were unable to do so due to the impact on health providers caused by the second wave of the pandemic. These issues included further updates from Mental Health services and how the backlog of treating patients with cancer was progressing.

Members:

Recommended that further work takes place at a less pressured time to look at how the services affected would deal with a future pandemic.

East of England Ambulance Services Trust

The **HOPSC** requested an update on how the East of England Ambulance Service was progressing with implementing the recommendations put forward by the Care Quality Commission in September 2020, along with a general update on other aspects of the service.

The HOPSC also received a wider update covering aspects of performance, the impact of Covid-19 and staffing progress.

Members:

Provided in writing thirteen questions and three recommendations for formal response.

Challenged the high number of people moving out of the area as a result of the high cost of housing and the effect this was having on recruitment.

Raised specific concern in relation to the recruitment of paramedics in urgent care in West Essex and the potential impact on the loss of experienced staff and rotation of qualified staff.

Help Create Great Places to Grow Up, Live and Work

Essex Housing Strategy

In January 2021, **PSEG** members received a post consultation update on the development of the Essex Housing Strategy and the establishment of Essex Housing Limited Liability Partnership. The strategy focused on three key areas: growing Essex while protecting the best of the county, enabling people to live independently throughout their life and supporting people to have a stable home. The committee provided feedback and recommendations, with assurances provided around partnership working with districts, provision of necessary infrastructure, influence of ECC over determining housing needs and the provision of adequate key worker housing.

Members:

Provided challenge to the emerging strategy, securing a number of changes to the policy and obtaining assurances around partnership working and provision of infrastructure to support future growth.

Sustainable Travel and the Essex Climate Action Commission

PSEG committee members heard from the sustainable travel team around work taking place to green transport infrastructure across the county and to create additional opportunities for more environmentally friendly travel. Committee members provided input into ECC walking/cycling strategies and steered future policy through feedback on successful local schemes. Members were also able to draw upon experiences working alongside the Essex Climate Action Commission (**ECAC**), providing recommendations to link the two strands of work together.

Members:

Provided insight and guidance in connection with the success of ECC's current sustainable transport policies, outlining areas for further future investment. Members also offered recommendations for the allocation of incoming central government grant funding for green travel infrastructure. By drawing upon the work of the ECAC, members were also able to feed into the future work programme of the commission and help drive the green travel agenda through both avenues of policy.

Transform the Council to Achieve More with Less

Staff Wellbeing and Remote Working

CPSC members worked hard to establish an ongoing dialogue with Organisation, Development and People (ODP) early on in lockdown, receiving regular updates around staff wellbeing and remote working arrangements. Committee members carried out extensive work looking at the results of internal surveys, focusing on the support offer to ECC staff and the measures put in place to ensure that remote working could be maintained successfully.

Members:

Praised officers for their work throughout lockdown, whilst obtaining assurances around the wellbeing of ECC staff and the scrutiny process for any potential future changes to ECC's overarching workforce strategy. The committee also established an effective ongoing relationship with ODP leadership to ensure constructive challenge over remote working arrangements throughout the pandemic.

Financial Oversight

Throughout the pandemic, **CPSC** members effectively carried out their role in providing financial oversight, receiving regular public and private briefings around ECC finances and spending. In a difficult year, with significant pandemic related pressures, members adopted a more reactive approach to scrutiny, adding value and providing oversight. Regular updates around the annual budget setting process allowed for a 'no-surprises' approach to scrutiny, with members well informed around the year end position, including up to date figures around grant funding and reserve spending.

Members:

Contributed effectively to ECCs system of checks and balances, obtaining assurances around ECC's financial position throughout the pandemic and providing oversight of emergency spending and grant funding allocation.

Local Government Reform

CPSC members received a position statement on ECC's response to the governments' white paper concerning local government reorganisation. This included an update on discussions with unitary and district partners, alongside an outline of high-level proposals for the scope and shape of any potential reforms across greater Essex. Members were advised that the intention was to prepare an early submission to central government to secure backing for reform in the first wave of local authority areas. Since Autumn 2020 however, the position of central government with regards to local government reorganisation appears to have shifted, with wide-ranging reforms no longer a priority. Members raised concerns over the lack of transparency throughout the preparation process for the submission and obtained assurances that, should reform appear on the national agenda again, local members and scrutiny would be more involved in developing proposals.

Members:

Provided scrutiny around high-level proposals for reform and the process by which potential submissions to central government had been developed. Assurances were obtained around the transparency and oversight process of future reforms proposals.

How the Public can get Involved

Attending a meeting

Members of the public are welcome to attend any public meeting of a scrutiny committee, which are listed on the online meeting calendar.

All scrutiny committees normally allow 15 minutes for public questions at the beginning of each meeting. If you wish to ask a question, let the Chairman or clerk know by 1pm the day before a meeting is scheduled. Public meetings are usually audio recorded and streamed live on both the council website and YouTube.

Scrutiny regularly asks organisations or individuals to give evidence at meetings for the purpose of their investigations. If you will be attending scrutiny to give information to a committee, you can find information and guidance about what to expect in the Scrutiny Handbook.

Get in touch

If you would like to feed into the scrutiny process, or suggest a topic for scrutiny's attention, you can get in touch with the Scrutiny Team at **democratic.services@essex.gov.uk**.

Alternatively, you can contact any of the Councillors who are on the relevant committee or task and finish group and ask them to consider representing you or calling you to give evidence. You can find out which local Councillors are on which committee by checking the website.

This document has been
produced by Essex County Council's
Democracy and Transparency service.

Contact us by email at
democratic.services@essex.gov.uk

Essex County Council