

Striding forward

Chairman, as I usually do with the budget Statement, I will recap the last year while looking forward to the year ahead. I do ask for your patience however, because I also intend to look back over the last ten years, and further into our future.

I think it is important to do this, at this crucial juncture for Essex, to help us to see things in their proper context, and to demonstrate why I am confident we are going to recover well. Of course, crystal ball gazing has surprises for us all. This became very clear to me when I reviewed my Statement at last February's Council meeting.

At that point in time there were only nine known cases of coronavirus in the UK and, unknown to us, we were more than six weeks away from the first lockdown. The virus then was a blip on our radar rather than the centre of our world. And we hope that this will be the case again soon.

I called last year's budget "a budget for all" and "a budget of hope". It was hope for a greener, healthier future for Essex, looking forward to the first year of the Essex Climate Action Commission, and the great work we were going to continue to do to take meaningful action towards net zero carbon emissions. This was a hugely ambitious and invigorating commitment by any council and in spite of the pandemic, it is also one that we are on track to keep. The Climate Commission has met regularly and we have continued to invest in and commit to environmental action and innovation.

The commission has produced its interim report, with the final report coming soon. We are in an incredibly strong position to begin to take the steps outlined by the commission to push our ambitions even further. That being said, there are things we can and must do now to progress our work on climate change. We are already building net zero school buildings, already converting our streetlights to LED and we are already using innovative low carbon techniques, such as Leaky Dams and Natural Flood Management.

On top of this the Essex Forest Initiative – 375,000 new trees for our county – is ahead of schedule, and in the last few weeks we announced how we will spend the first £2.5m of the £5m Climate Reserve. We are using that money on a hugely ambitious programme delivering green growth, net zero buildings, renewable energy and electric transport solutions, while making our county more resilient to the impacts of climate change, supporting our natural environment and bringing in millions of pounds of national funding

Today I can announce a further £1m for community action for the Essex Environment. Half a million will be spent on community initiatives to encourage people to create less waste, use less tap water, produce less carbon, travel sustainably, and use safe, renewable energy. The second £500,000 will be invested in a competition to help four communities in Essex go further and become national pioneers in becoming net zero carbon communities.

After the year we've just had, other authorities may well understandably be taking a step back on tackling climate change. We are striding forward. We are in the position to act with this kind of confidence thanks to the painstaking work by Essex County Council over the last ten years. While other councils have struggled to deal with financial challenges and

increasing demand, we have risen to become one of the top ten most effective local authorities in the country.

Over the last decade we have invested heavily in transformation for long-term sustainability and as a result we have been able to improve the quality of the services we provide, putting the resident, not institutions, at the heart of our services. 89% of our children now attend a school that is rated as Good or Outstanding – an exceptional achievement. We have improved our Adult Community Learning offer to nearly 11,000 students. We have an award-winning broadband team, enabling over 150,000 Essex homes and businesses to access superfast broadband. We engage 32,000 young people through our nationally recognised youth service. The condition of our roads is now among the best in the country. We have invested billions in improving and maintaining our infrastructure.

We now have one of the best children and families service in the country, rated by Ofsted as outstanding. Ten years ago we were ranked inadequate, ten years later we now set the standard. We did this by investing heavily in the right leadership, early intervention, and innovation in practice. We believe we can use these same principles to transform adult social care as well to ensure it remains fit for purpose for the increasing demands our system is facing. Our vision for adult social care is for every adult to be able to live as independently as possible and to enjoy a good and meaningful life.

Of course, in order to continue to deliver the excellent services our residents have come to expect, we must manage our finances extremely carefully. We do recognise that it is not just the council that is under financial pressure: it is our residents as well. We are therefore proposing no increase in council tax, and only a 1.5% increase in our social care precept this year.

Very few authorities across the country are in a position to act with this level of confidence. Most are increasing their rates by two or three times the amount that we are proposing today. In fact, since 2010, while inflation has increased by around 35%, the cumulative impact on council tax has been much less, at around 22%. Let me repeat this again: thanks to how effectively this council is run, in the last decade Essex County Council has increased council tax at a rate that is almost 40% less than inflation.

We are under no illusion that the task ahead of us is easy. I know that our workforce is weary after a year of heroic effort, and we will do everything we can to support them. We also know that our work is not done

- our communities and businesses have struggled
- there is a brewing mental health crisis
- unemployment is at a 30-year high
- inequality will have risen
- and the educational shortfall for children cannot be underestimated

We know this. We also know that, thanks to the last decade of hard work from Essex County Council, and thanks to this budget I am commending to you today, we are incredibly well placed to deal with these challenges and continue striding forward. Our ambitious Capital

programme is a clear example of how we are moving forward with confidence. It is the biggest for a generation and will help us to make great strides in kickstarting the economy and supporting our communities and residents to thrive.

The strength and resilience of our communities is going to be even more important in future. During the pandemic our work with communities increased significantly. Through the establishment of the Essex Wellbeing Service we recruited over 7,000 volunteers, they are still working hard supporting members of their community who are shielding or self-isolating. This approach has been recognised across the country, including by the Cabinet Office who hailed us as an exemplar, and by 40 councils across the UK who have approached us to help replicate this model.

Indeed, Chairman, our very own councillors have been crucial in supporting our communities online, in person, and also through the Locality Fund. The fund has been a great success, more than £700,000 has been invested by our members into more than 350 worthy local community initiatives I am pleased to announce that, thanks to members' success in using this fund for good, it will continue for the next year with each member again receiving £10,000 to spend in their divisions.

This demonstrates our commitment to local action, putting more power and control in the hands of our residents' elected representatives. Another demonstration of this: we are today committing a further £7.2m capital funding to our Local Highways Panels. That is £200,000 more for each panel, each year, for the next three years. On top of this we will add another £180,000 to the revenue budget for LHPs. This will help you to deliver many more of the small highways projects that have a big impact for your residents

We absolutely must not forget the difficulties faced by our county's children this year. We worked hard to support children during the last year. We supported them with meals and spent £900,000 on 5,000 laptops to those who needed them for remote learning. An unprecedented amount of education time has been disrupted or lost by every single child. This will leave a lasting legacy. This will not just be lost learning – though this will clearly be an important part. It will also be missed opportunities to develop sporting, social, interpersonal and cultural skills; with potentially long term mental and physical health challenges.

The sooner we begin to address this issue, the easier it will be to solve. We need to work fast and act decisively. It is our intention to establish an Education Recovery Task Force to lead and oversee the recovery of our children. The Task Force will work alongside the county's committed education leaders to re-establish young people's hope and aspiration for a successful future. It will have an independent chair who can work with the newly appointed National Education Commissioner Sir Kevan Collins.

We want to start this work immediately. In the short term the focus will be on supporting our children and young people in their exam years, supporting our most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and supporting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of all of our young people. I will set aside £1.5m in a reserve to support this task force's work.

We will begin by supporting our children through the summer, setting them up for the school year ahead. We are already offering our most comprehensive summer activity programme ever. I am committing up to £500,000 of that £1.5m to expand the summer holiday scheme to a wider group than just those in receipt of free school meals and to support formal learning catch up.

We will allocate another half a million to support children's emotional wellbeing and mental health. We will ask the Education Recovery Task Force to assess the impact of the pandemic on children's emotional wellbeing and mental health and from that assessment determine where best to allocate this funding.

It is not only our county's children who will require support for their mental and emotional wellbeing. We saw a large increase in mental health assessments completed during the first lockdown, and nationally the number of people reporting signs of depression has doubled. The increase in unemployment across Essex will also see people experiencing more stress.

We commission, along with the NHS, a comprehensive emotional wellbeing and mental health service. Coupled with this the Essex Wellbeing Service has been supporting mental wellbeing and befriending support for residents since the first lockdown last year, and we have launched an ambitious programme of support for our own staff.

Our Health and Social Care workforce in particular will be hard hit. As I speak today they are still at the forefront, supporting those in most need through this crisis, much as they have done for nearly a year with little respite. Essex Partnership University Trust has a scheme called 'Here For You' – a vital confidential counselling service for key workers. We will work with EPUT, offering them additional funding of up to £500,000 to expand the offer and further promote it to even more of our county's key workers.

We must make sure that the children of Essex do not feel left behind by the education system and support them through the summer. We must also continue to protect our children from being targeted by gangs who bring violence into our communities. We are determined to continue disrupting gang activity and breaking the cycle of violence for our young people before it is too late.

I am pleased to announce that we will continue to fund half a million pounds to this work on violence and vulnerability. I am very grateful to our Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Roger Hirst for committing continued funding from the Commissioner's Office as well. This is a well-established programme now, with real roots into the most vulnerable people and the most dangerous gangs. We are making a real difference in disrupting gang activity, educating our children before they are targeted by gangs, and working with children to leave the clutches of these gangs before it is too late.

There is no doubt that many of our businesses are struggling. Over the last few months I have been meeting with representatives from our key sectors, and have heard first hand just how difficult things are. We've begun to address this, supporting businesses any way we can to protect jobs and resume profitable trading as quickly as possible. We are creating thousands of jobs for young people in Essex through the government kickstart scheme, within the

council, our supply chain and across Essex businesses. Each year we spend around £900m of our budget with Essex businesses, and on top of that last October we announced the £100m economic growth investment strategy and a £5m economic recovery fund last October which will help our businesses in the short, medium and long term. Earlier in February we allocated a further £7.2m for business support grants, in addition to the £2.2m for business adaptation announced in October. Working with Let's Do Business Finance we have also created an additional £1m of Coronavirus Business Interruption Loans.

Cllr Ball and I have also worked with the Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses and other groups to listen to what they need now and in the longer term to survive and thrive. They are telling us that they still need more help. We are therefore today committing an additional £2m to economic development to ensure a successful reopening of the economy. It will support Essex businesses to diversify and innovate, taking advantage of new opportunities, achieving their ambitions and creating jobs. We will develop a strategic approach to net zero, finding ways for local businesses to take on early opportunities in the green economy. We will showcase our world class universities and businesses and encourage innovation and increased trade. And Cllr Ball and I have challenged officers to develop additional packages to help businesses to take on new roles in key sectors and support the development of start-ups in growth sectors.

How it is that I am so confident we will recover. As I said

- our communities and businesses have struggled – but this budget will help them back to their best
- there is a brewing mental health crisis – but we will provide support to every resident that needs it
- unemployment is at a 30 year high – but we are investing hundreds of millions in our local economy
- inequality will have risen – but we are showing you today how we will support our poorest through the tough times ahead
- and our children are facing an educational shortfall – but we will act swiftly and decisively to make sure they do not lose out in the long run

I have demonstrated today how this council continued striding forward through difficult times over the last decade. Not only did we balance the books. Not only did we help Essex recover from the last recession. Not only did we keep council tax increases well below inflation. We have managed to do all of that and come out of the other side better than we were ten years ago: healthier and with greater hope.

So if you ask me why I am confident we will recover: I will tell you this - we have done it before, and we will do it again.