

Executive Statement 14 October 2014

Mr Chairman, members.

I would like to begin by welcoming Cllr Goggin, who was elected in the Brightlingsea by-election last week, to this Chamber. Representing the people of Essex is a great honour and responsibility. We strive daily to do justice to the trust placed in us by residents. You will have the support of officers and fellow members from all parties as you begin your role and we wish you luck.

As we come together as a full council for the first time since before the summer, I wanted to take the opportunity to reflect on how we're doing and the challenges that lie ahead.

Mr Chairman, the Essex economy is growing. The government's long-term plan is working.

There are more people in work in Essex. According to Government statistics, in April 2010 – one month before the last general election – more than 28,000 people were claiming Job Seekers Allowance in the county.

By August that number had halved. The claimant count has reduced in 19 of the last 20 months.

Last week we celebrated our 3,000th Essex Apprentice, helping young people into careers and getting new talent to employers.

We have more business start-ups. We set up an Essex Skills Board to make sure that we argue for more local powers on skills funding and policy.

And at the start of this month colleagues went round the county celebrating our economy in Essex Means Business week.

Mr Chairman, our schools too are getting better and better.

GCSE and A Level results are up. A near-10% increase in pupils achieving a good level of development at early years foundation stage.

We are helping residents with the cost of living. The four and a half thousand Essex households who signed up for our energy switching campaign are saving an average of £209 on their energy bills.

And I can announce today that we will be running the campaign again this winter, saving more money on heating bills across the county.

All that in addition to the freeze in council tax bills from County Hall, the fourth year in a row we have been able to shield residents' tax bills from the big reductions in funding we're coping with.

And if bills are frozen, our roads are better-prepared than ever before to cope with what the winter weather will throw at us.

A summer blitz on our roads, supported by an additional £17m of investment, saw over 4,000 potholes on our main roads fixed. That is a magnificent achievement and will let us prepare for winter and focus on more rural roads.

Members, Mr Chairman, I cannot pretend that funding cuts will stop any time soon. Austerity will remain. Further public expenditure cuts will hit local government across the next parliament, no matter who is in Government.

Under a Conservative-led coalition, those difficult decisions have been taken.

And under a Conservative-run County Hall, we are making every penny go further. We are working to secure the outcomes that matter to residents. But we will not shirk from the difficult decisions that we must take.

This summer we set out the biggest challenge facing us: how to tackle the looming crisis in health and social care.

In a decade, spending on social care could take up almost our whole budget.

We must act now. We must have a sensible, national conversation about health.

And we must work with CCGs and the NHS to take more decisions together with a multi-year settlement from Government.

But we must also look beyond big structures and the State. We must look to each other.

Mr Chairman, public services are a partnership between government and people.

We each have to exercise responsibility both in the provision and consumption of those services.

Some people put much more back into their communities than others.

We want to recognise those people who are putting in. We want to help the helpers. And we want to challenge those who don't.

It should be unacceptable in this age, in this place, not to check on a vulnerable neighbour, not to clear the snow from in front of your path, not to recycle as much as you can.

No council can pretend that we will be there to cater for everything communities demand. But I can promise you that Essex County Council will support communities to do more.

And it's not just communities. The voluntary sector in Essex is a vital part of public service reform. They are working with us, health, districts, the police and many other agencies to cut duplication, improve outcomes and work together to use less money but deliver more impact.

Mr Chairman, I want in closing to address a motion before us today. You and I know how much time and energy members spend at County Hall. In the past we have provided meals for members to reflect that commitment.

However, I think the time has come to review those arrangements and decide if they are appropriate for the future.

I have asked the independent remuneration committee to begin a full review of members' benefits and to come back in the early part of next year with a clear set of recommendations to take forward.

Thank you.