

Essex County Council Leader's Executive Statement – Introduction to COVID-19 Report

Full Council, July 2020

Chairman, Members, good morning.

Today we meet for the first time since the world has fallen into a devastating health crisis. This crisis is most keenly felt by the many thousands of families who are mourning lost loved ones.

Very early in the pandemic we lost a member of our Council: Cllr Terry Cutmore. He was a great servant to Essex and he has already been remembered fondly by colleagues today.

We have also lost a member of staff, who has been remembered by my Cabinet and our Chief Executive's Leadership Team. They have also been remembered by the Chairman and Cllr Spence this morning. My thoughts are with them, their colleagues, and their family and friends.

Three weeks ago we also learned of the tragic loss of Dave Hill, our former Executive Director at ECC who moved to Surrey a few years ago – though we understand this was not related to COVID-19. His legacy is still felt at ECC in our Outstanding Childrens Services. Our thoughts are also with his family.

This is an extremely difficult time.

We are grateful to each and every one of our Members for the way you have come together during this crisis, as Councillors but most importantly as community leaders. Our communities are stronger now than they have been for a long time, and you have played an important role in that.

I would like to personally thank Cllr Mackrory – as Leader of the Opposition he has been supportive and understanding when we have had to use urgency powers to make quick decisions. I have been meeting with the Leaders of the three opposition groups regularly, and each time we have met the conversations have been valuable. We have a singular vision to do everything we can to help our residents. Chris, Ivan and Mike - we are all very grateful to the three of you.

I would particularly like to thank our staff today. Across the Council people's lives and jobs have been turned upside down. Most of our staff have found themselves at home, working on new systems, isolated from their teams. Our transformation and capital projects have been put on hold and hundreds of staff were redeployed to work with our partners on the response.

Our libraries, country parks, adult community learning, recycling centres, registrars and many other services have temporarily closed, and are gradually reopening, transformed. Even our services that didn't stop, like highways and passenger transport, have changed dramatically.

Whole new services have been created, supporting vulnerable residents to shield and self-isolate and tracking and tracing the virus within our county. We are closer to our partners than ever before, many boundaries have been broken down there. I am especially proud of our work creating local hubs with the district, borough and city councils, to deliver food to local residents who are shielding; and of our partnerships through the Strategic Co-ordinating Group (the SGC), led by Essex Police and Essex Fire, and our Chief Executive Gavin Jones.

And of course, our social work, public health and education services have been at the forefront of this county's response to COVID-19. Teachers, youth and social workers have often been among the unsung heroes of society – but not at the moment.

I cannot stress enough how important our public health and care workers have been. From Nick Presmeg our Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Mike Gogarty our Director of Public Health to our teams based in your local area. They have been working around the clock, seven days a week, doing everything they can to save lives. Today we salute them, and all others who have worked tirelessly to support the people of Essex.

Thank you all, for everything you have done.

Chairman, we are recovering slowly, but we are mindful too of the possibility of future peaks. We have an economy that has been dented and people to help back to employment. We have a great county, full of remarkable people, whose prosperity we must protect. There is a lot of work ahead of us, you will hear more from my Cabinet Members on what they are doing in a moment.

But first: this year is Essex 2020 – a celebration of science and creativity across the county. 2020 is the anniversary of some great moments in our history: from the centenary of the first Marconi broadcast, to the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower landing in the New World.

It is also the 200th birthday of Florence Nightingale, and I cannot think of a more fitting person to celebrate at this moment. To honour her legacy, and the fantastic work of our care workers in Essex through this crisis, I am setting up the Nightingale Social Care Bursary and Nursing Apprenticeship Scheme that aims to support over 200 people from across Essex.

The Social Care Bursary is a £300,000 pot, enabling people from our most deprived communities to achieve social care qualifications, or to support existing care workers to achieve further qualifications. The Nursing Apprenticeship Scheme will use £810,000 of ECC funding and apprenticeship levy to support 30 adult social care workers to become registered nurses working in the social care sector.

I cannot thank our health and social care workers enough, but I hope that this more than £1m commitment goes some way towards helping our most dedicated workers to progress even further in this valuable field, while attracting ever more of our residents to take up this fantastic profession.

Chairman, the COVID-19 report I am introducing to you with this statement goes into much more detail and I hope all our members have read it fully. I commend it to you with these words from the report's introduction:

"We present this report to Council with deep humility and gratitude for the commitment of public servants across the county who have worked tirelessly to save lives; to our communities who have supported one another through the toughest of times; and to our businesses who have stepped up to the plate and made their resources available for the greater public good."