

## **Executive Statement, Cllr Kevin Bentley, 25 May 2021**

### **Renewal, Equality and Ambition**

Chairman, may I congratulate you on taking on this crucial and important role. I know from your past record that you will do an excellent job in representing Essex County Council, both across the county and far beyond. I would also like to congratulate our new Vice-Chairman on her new position and the support she will give you during your term of office. You both have tremendous experience as County Councillors, and you will be shining examples to everyone as you travel Essex, representing us meeting the very best in our communities and society.

I'd also like to add my congratulations to Cllr Jowers, who I have known my entire political life and before that when I regularly interviewed him for BBC Look East. John has completed three years as Chairman, carrying on after his normal two-year term to guide us all through very difficult and serious times. John has been an exemplar to us all, he has chaired meetings with authority and humour.

I speak this morning with a huge sense of pride. Pride in being elected Leader of one of the great county councils in the country. Pride in what this authority has achieved. Pride in what this authority is going to achieve in the coming months and years.

I would also like to thank you all, our members, and in particular welcome our new members. I am pleased to see you all here, in person, for the first time. The fact that we are all here in this unusual venue, with every small detail accounted for, should not go without our recognition. Our great thanks should go to Paul Turner and Joanna Boaler and their team for this, and for their work welcoming new members after the election.

To my Group: thank you for your faith in me, for making me your Leader and now Leader of this Council. Thank you also to my Cabinet, who have already begun their work. I know they will provide great leadership for this Council, and I already owe them a great debt for their support over my first couple of weeks. They are already working hard, supported by their Deputy Cabinet Members to deliver on our new vision, anchored in the three guiding principles of Renewal, Equality and Ambition.

Particular thanks are due to Cllr McKinlay, who today becomes our new Deputy Leader. She is the first female Deputy Leader of Essex County Council in modern times – something I am immensely proud of. Louise has played a key role in developing this vision and has worked closely with me as we set out on this new journey together. In addition to her broader Deputy Leader role, Cllr McKinlay will continue to focus on strengthening our communities. Building on the work done over the last year, which has seen an unprecedented level of support for our most vulnerable families, she will lead an ambitious partnership programme across our great county.

Before I discuss the vision I must first thank David Finch and our outgoing Cabinet Members - Simon Walsh, Dick Madden, Ray Gooding and Susan Barker - for everything they have done for Essex. They have all worked extremely hard for the people of this county and their talents have delivered great successes. The reason we are able to be so bold, to dream so big in our vision for the future of Essex, is because of David's relentless pursuit of productivity. Through his Leadership we have continued to provide some of the most excellent services in the country. It is upon this, the solidest of foundation, that we have held steady through the pandemic. And it is upon this, the solidest of foundation, that we will build our future together.

We will build our future on those three guiding principles: Renewal, Equality and Ambition. This will be at the very heart of everything we do as a council, and everything we do with our partners.

What do I mean by Renewal? I mean renewal of our economy. Renewing our relationships with our district, borough and city partners to be more than the sum of our parts. Providing a combined approach to skills and opportunities for all in future industries while celebrating what is already great about Essex. Cllr Wagland has a great role to play here and work is already underway.

This must include a strong emphasis on our world-beating hospitality, tourism, arts and cultural sectors. We are among the best in the UK in these areas and the work that our arts sector plays in our social fabric and cohesion is exemplary. Cllr Butland, along with Cllr Durham will spearhead a new approach in our working partnerships and demonstrate that we are and will remain one of the leading players in these fields.

I will talk a lot about open doors, and to renew our economy our door must remain firmly open to our businesses and communities across all sectors – this is a crucial part of our approach and vision. We need to listen to their challenges, support them and fight their corners. As they succeed, we all succeed.

Equality. As we aim to improve opportunities for all, we want to give people the tools they need to succeed. No matter who you are, or where you come from, we will focus our levelling up agenda on improving the lives of residents across Essex.

That includes Equality in education. We will aim for no child left behind, no child should miss out on the opportunity to live a happy, healthy, productive life. Under Cllr Gooding's great work, Essex led the way and now with Cllr Ball's leadership we will go further.

It includes Equality for all and especially for women. Everyone deserves the right to feel safe wherever they are and Cllr McKinley and Roger Hirst - our Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner – will continue the work they have already started.

Equality for our hard-working families. Those just about managing who in many cases now face uncertainty as we emerge post pandemic. This is a county where they can thrive, and we will be relentless in our pursuit to level up for them and all our residents. Everyone is equal and everyone deserves respect.

And Equality in health. Mental and physical wellbeing should not be a barrier for success. In particular for all those who receive or give care: they have our respect and we can and will do more to support them. I can think of no better person than Cllr Spence to lead the way here. My friend, my mentor, a person who has shown great political leadership during this pandemic, is the person who will tackle some of the most complex issues, embrace the challenge and deliver solutions.

It is always important to reach for the stars, whether you touch them or not, the attempt is Ambition. We will strive to be ambitious across everything we do, especially those complex, cross-cutting issues: we will join together and begin to stretch what is possible.

We will be ambitious in how we support people. In the flexible, modern ways of working for our staff through Cllr Whitbread; for vulnerable children and adults via Cllrs Egan and Spence; for our communities; and for those hard working families who would otherwise be left behind. We will have a fresh approach to Libraries, which will not only see them remain a central part of our communities

but will become more of a community hub and the natural resource for people go to learn, read and relax.

We will be ambitious in how we use technology to improve and maintain our county's towns, roads and other infrastructure. Cllrs Scott and Buckley have a great role to play here. We have already and will continue to innovate and be a leader in the country over alternative sustainable transport. We won't dictate we will just provide a better way to travel to help ease congestion, improve air quality and the health of people.

Most crucially for our future we will set ambitious climate targets and go as far as we can, taking brave, sometimes unpopular decisions to make ambition a reality. Peter Schwier is our Climate Change Czar and he will have the power of the Climate Action Commission, the Council and our partners behind him to drive this on. Action on climate change is the central pillar of everything we do. Not to improve our environment is simply not an option. Peter will hold our feet to the fire to ensure we put into practice everything we will ask others to do, using sensible and achievable options.

Chairman, I am talking today about vision. Members will rightly ask me what that means, what action is to follow. Today marks the start of mine, my Deputy Leader and my Cabinet's first 100 days in office: we will signal our intent over those first 100 days with immediate actions that set the path for renewal, equality and ambition.

For jobs and the economy: already we are part of the Kickstart programme to get young people into work, we have been supporting our businesses during the dark days of lockdown by working closely with our District Council partners to get the Government's grants out to them so they could literally survive. To ensure businesses and people maintain and thrive we will go further. We will establish a new centre of excellence for the Green Economy and Care, working with our FE colleges and Universities.

I have already mentioned our intentions for the future of libraries, sustainable transport, those who need the greatest care and clearly signalled our intentions on Climate Change. All these will be part of our first 100 days and policies that will emerge and develop over the coming months and years.

We cannot do this alone. We must all work together to achieve this vision of renewal, equality and ambition. That is equally true within this council as it is across our partners. I am therefore opening our doors and knocking down our walls. Silo working is not an option. I am encouraging everyone to work together.

The emergence of our county from the pandemic already feels like a new dawn. We deeply mourn and remember those who have died from COVID and those who have passed away from other illnesses during this awful year. We praise our doctors, nurses, care workers and all key workers who kept us all going during that time and continue to do so. Through their work they give us hope. Together we will take that hope and turn it into a renewal: renewing our economy with equality for all and ambition for everyone.

To all residents of Essex our message is simple. This Administration, this Council is by your side, at your side both now and in the future.

