

A thank you to the people of Essex

We have shared one of the most challenging and tragic years in our history. Some people have been hit harder by this pandemic than others, but all of us have made sacrifices.

I have never been prouder to Lead this Council. I have never been prouder of staff working for this Council, and I have never been more proud to call myself a resident of Essex. The everyday sacrifices and acts of kindness we have seen from the people of Essex make me humble and fill me with hope. When things were at their darkest during the first lockdown, when little was known of this virus and it was spreading through our communities, the people of Essex stood up to be counted.

Much of the burden fell on our frontline workers: our own workforce and the NHS, care workers, shop workers and many more. There were many of you who came together as one to offer help in any way you could. We set up the Essex Wellbeing Service and thousands of you volunteered; this has made a huge difference to so many lives.

Our partners in district, borough and city councils (with this council's and government's support) have done a remarkable job in housing rough sleepers over the summer, and are working hard to find each of them a permanent home for the long term. This is something we have always worked in partnership on, and I am pleased to say that we will increase our funding support for homelessness and rough sleeping by £500,000 a year for the next three years.

This additional money, on top of the £3.8m we already spend, will ensure every rough sleeper can receive support, if they want it, for as long as is needed. It will also help us to support families and individuals to keep their home if they face the threat of eviction or homelessness.

As things moved online it became clear that this could leave behind those who are much less likely to have the technology to work remotely. Hundreds of you have donated laptops that we reconditioned and are sending out to young people and their families who really need them. We will purchase an additional one thousand, and with more support from you and our local businesses we believe we will get this number up to three thousand.

These are a few examples of the energy, the positivity, and the community spirit that inspired so many of us over the summer and continues into the winter; and it is this energy and positive attitude which makes me so full of hope for our future.

There is an end in sight now. We are rolling out community testing on a vast scale in Essex and beyond. We are leading the country in our contact tracing system, and we are making it even better. And we are turning our attention to the future, preparing for the time when we can resume some sort of normal life with the vaccine now on the near horizon. In the interim, while the case numbers in Essex are not dropping as quickly as we would like, we will continue to do all we can to move Essex into Tier 1 as soon as possible.

We are nearly there. As we move into Christmas and the New Year, I ask all of you to keep that hope and that energy alive. Keep protecting yourself, your neighbours and your loved ones, and this will be over soon.

As well as residents helping friends, neighbours and even strangers, I have seen other positive changes this year which gives me even higher hopes for the future: car usage has fallen, even after the first lockdown it never returned to pre-covid levels; recycling levels have increased significantly; and more and more people are walking and exploring the nature around them close to home.

This is promising, and we hope it will lead to permanent behaviour change that will help us with our ambitions for taking meaningful climate action in Essex. We received the interim report of the climate commission last month. I am excited by this work - I think all of us, at individual level as well as organisation level, can take meaningful action and make a difference, and the recommendations included in this interim report give us something very tangible to work on. We will respond in the new year with a plan to take this important agenda forward. In the last few weeks we have started to plant 14,000 trees in Chelmer Valley, and we are on track to have 25,000 of the 375,000 trees planted as part of the Essex Forest Initiative by the end of the year.

Chairman, in closing, I wish all members and residents a safe and restful Christmas, I truly believe that if we can keep helping each other, keep acting responsibly, we can look ahead with a renewed optimism and sense of hope. I look forward to working with you all in 2021.

Mr Chairman, that is the statement I have prepared and circulated. Today however I need to make one point more strongly.

The people of Essex have done a brilliant job of saving lives and helping businesses survive, through the disciplines of Hands, Face, Space. Sadly however, in this run up to Christmas we are now seeing rises in infection rates across the county, with some particular hotspots. It is crucial, if we are to ensure the futures of our businesses, our economy, our wellbeing, and our ability to let everyone have better lives, that we suppress this rise immediately.

My plea to every Essex resident therefore is please: stick to the rules, and retain your discipline. To the businesses of Essex, for your own survival please ensure that your customers are sticking to the rules and maintaining their distances. And to every councillor in the chamber, and to every elected councillor across the county, and to all others in a position of influence: this is not a message of Essex County Council, this is a message which we all need to convey.

Let us create the conditions that enable us to stay in Tier 2, working for Tier 1 as soon as possible, and recognising that Tier 3 would be very difficult for us all. We do this with the assurance that the vaccine comes next year and we will soon be able to lead happier and more liberated lives.