

Everyone's Essex – Our Plan for Levelling Up the County: 2021-2025

Section 1: Foreword: Kevin Bentley

I have lived and worked in Essex all my life and it's a privilege and an honour to lead this great County Council, but most of all it's a tremendous responsibility.

My aim is for Essex to be the best local authority in the country – not by the standards of others, but by the standards of the people, the businesses, and the communities it is our duty to support and serve.

We have come through the most extraordinary eighteen months. We have been tested to the limits, but time and again our public services, businesses, voluntary organisations and our communities have risen to the challenge - we have seen just what we are capable of achieving if collectively we work together to support one another. I am determined that in Essex we harness that spirit of collective endeavour to build an even better future. The task is huge – but we shouldn't be daunted by its scale. We are Essex, and we will build back better.

We will renew our economy, because prosperity is the best pathway to a good life. And we will support our businesses as they seek to recover the ground lost by the hard stop placed on them by the pandemic and create the jobs that underpin our well-being. We will seek equality so that opportunity is more fairly distributed across Essex – we want all our residents to be able to maximise their potential. We will be as ambitious for the people of Essex as the people of Essex are for themselves and their families. Because there is no excellence without ambition. There is no landing on the moon, without first reaching for the stars.

Alongside these themes - Renewal, Equality, Ambition - that run through everything we do, we are focused on four areas where outcomes really matter for the quality of life of our residents – they are: the economy; the environment; children and families; and promoting health, care and well-being for all the parts of our population who need our support. And in focusing on these areas, we are mindful that alongside addressing today's challenges, we also need to begin to tackle tomorrow's.

To do that we are setting out twenty commitments that we believe, taken together, will make Essex a stronger county, not just for ourselves but also for our children and their children. Today we make our first down payment on that future – a future we will build together, a future in which everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Our 20 Commitments

Strong, Inclusive and Sustainable Economy

1. Good jobs - we will work hard to address the impacts of the Covid pandemic on unemployment by supporting business recovery and building a stronger economy for the future, enabling people to build the skills they need to be part of it, and working alongside Essex businesses to help reduce barriers to employment for disadvantaged groups.
2. Infrastructure - we will deliver and maintain high quality infrastructure to improve opportunities for people living in Essex as well as supporting a growing economy and the delivery of new homes and communities by investing in the region of £1bn by the end of this Council.
3. Future growth and investment - we will help grow existing businesses and the economic sectors of the future in Essex, including the arts, and secure high levels of new investment by working with partners to promote the County, by creating the conditions for growth and by maximising the impact of public sector spend within the county.
4. Green growth - we will develop Essex as a centre for innovation, supporting new technologies and business models to enable our economy to transition to net zero and secure green jobs for the future by ensuring we have the right local skills and drawing in investment opportunities.
5. Levelling Up the Economy - we will work to level up the economy by addressing the drivers of socio-economic inequality (including income, education, employment, health and housing), based on the foundation of good jobs and a higher skilled and healthier workforce.

High Quality Environment

6. Net zero - we will work across the Council and the County to hit our net zero targets, by ensuring that the Council significantly reduces its carbon footprint whilst also supporting an acceleration in the progress towards sustainable housing and energy, and active and alternative forms of travel across the county.
7. Transport and built environment - we will deliver a step change in sustainable travel across the county, by growing passenger transport and active travel, and will ensure we support the move towards net zero, climate resilient developments, including our new garden communities, by delivering sustainable and healthy neighbourhoods for the future.
8. Minimise waste - we will minimise the impact on the environment by supporting residents and businesses to reduce waste and increase the amounts recycled, and by working with others to deliver a more circular economy whereby we better protect our natural resources through the efficient and ongoing reuse of materials.
9. Green communities - we will work with communities and businesses, providing advice and support to enable and empower local action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build climate resilience.
10. Levelling Up the Environment - we will help all our communities to enjoy a high-quality environment by making them more resilient against flooding, heat stress and water shortages, by enhancing our county's green infrastructure and by reducing air pollution.

Health, Well-being and Independence for all Ages

11. Healthy Lifestyles - we will aim to increase the proportion of people able to live healthy lifestyles by embedding a community-first approach, by helping people to overcome social isolation, mental ill health and substance misuse and by helping people to live fit and active lifestyles.
12. Promoting independence – we will work with key partners and the adult safeguarding board to help individuals to live free from abuse and neglect and will enable residents to live independently by assisting them to access to suitable accommodation, supporting access to employment and meaningful activities, enabling independence at home through reablement, care technology, market shaping to ensure strong domiciliary support, and investment in housing.
13. Place-based working - we will deliver better care that meets the needs of residents by joining up care and support with local partners in a place, including with district councils, health partners and the local voluntary and community sector.
14. Carers - we will help those carers of all ages whose caring duties are impacting most on their well-being by achieving a step change in the advice, guidance and support we provide to support well-being and independence and by targeting it at those who need it most.
15. Levelling Up Health – we will seek to reduce health inequalities by bringing together partners and communities to address the socio-economic drivers that underpin poor health outcomes, such as poor housing, poverty, economic insecurity and low skills.

A Good Place for Children and Families to Grow

16. Education outcomes - we will achieve educational excellence and high standards for all children and young people as we recover from the pandemic, by working in partnership with early years providers, schools, colleges and universities, by building greater coherence across the system and by engaging businesses, communities and the arts sector in supporting education outcomes.
17. Family Resilience and Stability - we will work to strengthen family resilience and stability, as part of thriving communities, by embedding an approach that tackles the drivers of family instability and provides support to low income, vulnerable and working families.
18. Safety – we will continue to improve the safety of Essex residents, including children and young people, by sustaining our nationally recognised approach to early intervention, safeguarding and neglect, addressing domestic abuse, child criminal and sexual exploitation and peer on peer violence and abuse. We will continue close working with our partners to help make our communities safer and address key issues such as violence and vulnerability, and safety for women and girls.
19. Outcomes for vulnerable children - we will work to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups including Children in Care, Care Leavers, Children with SEND and children from BAME communities by working with children, young people and partners across the system.
20. Levelling Up Outcomes for Families - we will work to address inequalities affecting children and families by focusing on recovery from the pandemic, tackling family poverty, mental health support, emotional wellbeing and healthy, active and productive lifestyles, making sure that we engage hard to reach groups.

Service Excellence

As a County Council, we commission or provide a wide range of services. Many of these are universal services which are provided to all members of the public. These include libraries, public health, local roads, public transport, broadband, education services, country parks, strategic planning and recycling centres. Other services are targeted at specific user groups, often our most vulnerable residents. These include children's social care, youth offending services, adult domiciliary and residential social care and drug and alcohol recovery services.

Excellent, value for money services therefore lie at the heart of our role as a council. The response of all public services and the voluntary sector to the pandemic has highlighted the central importance of effective service provision in helping people stay safe and well. As taxpayers, you need to know that we are keeping down the costs of running services; and as users of services, you want to know that services meet your needs and enhance your quality of life.

Essex County Council has a strong record for delivering excellent, value for money services. Our children's services and youth offending services are rated outstanding and are amongst the most efficient in the country. Other examples of great service delivery include the Connect programme, which connects people leaving hospital with independent living support; the Active Essex Sport England programme, which will help over 400,000 people in Essex to live healthier, more active lives; and our country parks, seven of which have been awarded Green Flag status for being well managed and meeting the needs of the communities they serve.

Overall, as a result of continuing to improve our services, we have been able to deliver substantial savings in recent years whilst still maintaining high levels of service delivery on both universal and targeted services. But the journey towards excellence in service delivery is never finished and in this Council period we will continue to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of our services by:

- Addressing the causes that drive demand – by focusing on levelling up outcomes and building healthier lives across Essex, we will over time reduce the demand that falls on higher cost, reactive services, whilst still maintaining these services for those who continue to need them.
- Investing in early intervention – we will continue to invest in early intervention services, where the evidence shows that these help people to achieve better outcomes and avoid more intensive service interventions down the line.
- Sustaining excellence – we will sustain and embed those core ingredients that have been shown to drive excellence in service delivery: quality of leadership and culture, an openness to learning and improvement, high levels of accountability, an engaged and motivated workforce, and the effective blending of operational expertise, data and user insight.
- Collaborating with partners – organisational boundaries can sometimes get in the way of providing seamless, cost-effective services. We will work with partners to join up services where it makes sense to do so and to share data, learning and expertise and will continue to support the resilience of the voluntary sector as it recovers from the pandemic and adapts to new and emerging local needs.

- Empowering communities – services are better if they are developed in partnership with communities to suit their own needs and strengths. We will seek to devolve power down to a local level where possible. We will partner with the voluntary sector and community groups and we will use social media to empower community action.

Equalities and Levelling Up

Essex has a proud track record of addressing inequality across the county but we know that there is always more to be done.

Consistent with the Government's focus on levelling up, we are making addressing inequalities and achieving levelling up a key pillar of our new strategy. There are financial and economic reasons why we should care about levelling up, but there is also a very strong moral argument that a person's potential should not be defined at birth by who their parents are or where they live. We believe that individuals should define their own destiny, and we think the Council should play a role in helping people do that.

Embedded in our strategy and reflected in our twenty commitments is a renewed commitment to addressing inequalities and levelling up life chances for our residents. And there are some defining features that will underpin our approach. These are:

- It is levelling up – we are not interested in making everyone equal if that is achieved at the expense of making some people or places worse off.
- It is both place based and cohort focused – this recognises that inequalities affect both people and places and we need to address both.
- It is long-term – we don't believe that there are quick fixes here and we believe the Council and its partners will have to demonstrate its commitment over the long term.
- It is a shared endeavour – as expressed in our Plan for Essex, we believe the actions to address levelling up will need to take place right across the Council and the wider system.
- It is cross-cutting – levelling up will not be achieved issue by issue, but by joining up our work at a place and/or people level.
- It is structural – we want to address root causes, not symptoms.
- It embraces our statutory equalities responsibilities – which remain the legal bedrock in tackling inequalities.
- It builds sustainable change – supporting aspiration, enterprise and opportunity among individuals, families and communities rather than creating dependency.
- It requires a diversity of approach – blending service delivery, strategic place shaping, local capacity building, devolution and using our convening power.
- It does not have a ceiling -nobody should be held back from opportunities to succeed in life.

Levelling Up has a strong economic component. You cannot level up society without levelling up the economy – by giving people the opportunity to access good jobs and a decent income. But Levelling Up is not only about the economy. It demands that we address all the issues that shape a person's life chances. That is why Levelling

Up is embedded in our strategy across all our new strategic priorities and why it will be taken forward by the Council in all its work.

Addressing inequalities and tackling levelling up are certainly not new agendas for the County Council, to some extent they are at the core of our work, but we are determined through this strategy and this approach to create a new dynamism and ambition in the Council's work in this area.

How we will Deliver

This is a high-level strategy. It sets out what we are focused on and the approaches we will take. It doesn't set out in detail how we will achieve these outcomes.

The task of delivery, in the main, requires whole organisation effort and co-ordination. We are strengthening our organisation-wide co-ordination mechanisms to enhance collaboration and delivery on our four strategic aims, including on levelling up and on climate action. But the principle of working in this way goes across all of the outcomes we are seeking.

And we also recognise that we need to think imaginatively about how to achieve our outcomes, that is why we are placing a heavier emphasis on the arts, not only because we believe that a thriving cultural sector is part of a strong economy, but also because we believe the arts can help us achieve outcomes in many areas, from employment to social care. And successful delivery is not just about what we do as an organisation, it is also about how we enable others to do things for themselves. We see working with communities to enable them to create the thriving places and networks that nurture well-being as a key part of our role.

So when we talk about delivery, it is not just about the practicalities of plans and processes, but also about how we work together as an organisation and as a system with our partners across Essex and with our communities. And we recognise that there are some tough decisions ahead, we will need to prioritise the things that give us the best chance of improving people's lives.

As we implement this new strategy, we will therefore be guided by a number of operating principles for how we will work internally, with partners and with communities:

- 1) We are exploratory not defensive – we have big ambitions which will require us to think differently about the way we work. To tackle these big issues in new ways, we must be agile, able to work at pace and have the flexibility to adapt to changes. This will be underpinned by strong accountability at all levels
- 2) We are open-minded and diverse– we don't have all the answers when it comes to tackling complex, open-ended, 'wicked' issues or we would have solved them already. To address them we need to be innovative and capable of finding creative solutions to achieving better outcomes within our budget. We must remain reflective and be open to continuous learning and development. And that means we must build time into our joint working to have the capacity to do the new thinking that is called for. We will reflect the diversity of the county with its mix of rural, urban and coastal locations, and recognise the needs of the different communities we represent.
- 3) We are insight and evidence led – we have access to rich insight from data, from research and from the expertise of our staff. Using this insight effectively will enable us to understand people's lives better, to target resources effectively and to choose approaches that are most likely to deliver successful outcomes.

- 4) We work in a whole organisation/whole system way with partners - tackling our wicked issues and delivering on our ambitions will only happen when we work collectively as a whole organisation and whole system to mobilise our collective skills, experience and resources, along with those of our partners. We must strive to ensure that every part of the organisation can contribute to the achievement of our outcomes and we must build effective relationships with our partners to energise the system.
- 5) We manage our resources and prioritise effectively – that means both financial resources and our people. We want to operate efficiently so that we have the headroom to invest in the priorities set out in this strategy and through our People Plan we are working hard with our employees to ensure that we have the capability to meet the demands ahead. And we are very mindful that we are only able to be ambitious in this strategy because of the strong financial foundations we have laid over many years.
- 6) We are influential. Some of the levers and the funds to achieve levelling up will lie at the national level or with our partners. This means that we need to be influencing government policies across the range of relevant issues and in ensuring that Essex gets its fair share of investment. It also means continuing to press the case for more devolved powers for Essex, so that we can control the levers we need, to effect change for our residents.
- 7) We empower communities, families and individuals. Improving life chances for communities, families and individuals cannot be done *to* them it needs to be done *with* them. It is about giving people the environment, support and opportunities in which they can flourish. This means we need to make the most of our assets in our approach to levelling up, supporting community infrastructure, and helping communities, families and individuals to take advantage of their strengths. We need to support high aspiration and expectation and challenge any part of our system that suggests ‘good enough’ is good enough. We will build on the community spirit and social capital developed during the pandemic and will explore new models of volunteering and social action for the future.

Our Plan sets out twenty commitments to improve the lives of the people of Essex. Our intention, working with partners, businesses and our communities, is to renew the parts of our county that have suffered through the pandemic to get them back on their feet; to ensure everyone has a chance to succeed by being rigorous in our commitment to equality; and to reach for the stars – no one will ever accuse us of a lack of ambition on behalf of this county.

Most of all, it is our intention to work tirelessly over the next four years in service of the people of Essex – they have put their trust in us and we will not let them down.