

Leaders Statement

Council Speech: 13th July 2021

Mr Chairman, Members, it has been 49 days since we formed this new administration at the last Council meeting. I set out then my plan for the first 100 Days of this Council – based on the themes of Renewal, Equality and Ambition and today I want to update you on the progress that we have made and, beyond these first 49 days, I also want to share with you our plans for the next four years - Everyone's Essex – our medium-term strategy for the Council.

I said at our last meeting that this administration would be open and consultative, embracing our partners across this wonderful county and that is why we are not just publishing this strategy today as a final document, but inviting views and comments in a spirit of dialogue and transparency before adopting the final version at the Council meeting in October. Mr Chairman, when we promise to operate differently we mean what we say – engaging with partners in pursuit of better outcomes for all our residents.

Before I get into detail, can I start by once again saying a big thank you to Paul Turner, Joanna Boaler and the whole of the democratic services team for making this meeting possible. They have done a tremendous job as usual but I am optimistic that we may be nearing an end to the need for special arrangements for our meetings.

The Prime Minister has now announced that most of the restrictions that have been placed on us during the last eighteen months will be lifted from next Monday so that we can accelerate our progress on building back better.

- Building on the hard work that businesses have done to adapt to the changing safety regulations.
- Building on the work that communities and volunteers have done across the county to look after one another.
- And building on the effort that our hard working councillors and public servants have done to keep people safe and services running in these most testing of times.

We will and we must start to focus on the future, but in doing that we will never forget that four and a half thousand of our fellow Essex citizens have lost their lives during the course of this pandemic. We would be doing a disservice to them, their families, and this Council if we did not continue to put safety first and take seriously the need to remain on high alert.

To ensure that we learn the lessons from this pandemic and its impacts on our communities as thoroughly as possible I am announcing today that - alongside the Education Commission that we have already established to focus on recovery - we are setting up a joint Commission with the University of Essex to look at the long-term implications of the pandemic on Essex – the first place in the country to set up such a body.

Mr Chairman, I want to turn now to the Plan for Essex, our four year strategy to build a stronger future for this county and its people. In my 100 Day Plan, I set out our key themes of

- Renewing our economy - because prosperity is the best pathway to a good life.
- Equality because we believe that everyone should have the chance to fulfil their potential and pursue their dreams.
- And ambition because we know how ambitious the people of Essex are for themselves and their families, and we believe their county council should match that ambition.

Building on those themes, we have set out 20 commitments in our draft Plan which, taken together, will deliver us renewal, equality and ambition.

Nowhere in the country has escaped the economic consequences of the pandemic. In Essex, last year, our economic output fell by around 12% or £4bn and we saw the largest spike in unemployment in 30 years. That is why it is right that this strategy should focus on jobs and levelling up the economy – recognising that not all people and places will benefit equally from economic revival without help.

We said in the 100 Day Plan that we must focus on our infrastructure, and this strategy does that, setting out our plan to invest £1bn into the fabric of Essex over the next four years. While we do all that, we must also continue to pursue investment and green growth. We are refusing the false and unsustainable choice between economic growth and action on climate change. We choose both.

In fact we placed action on climate change at the heart of our 100 Day Plan. That is why it is at the heart of our strategy, and that is why I have appointed Cllr Schweir to lead our work in this area. We are committed to hitting our net zero targets as an organisation and working with communities and businesses to enable them to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Later this month we will receive the final report of the Climate Action Commission, we will consider its recommendations carefully before responding – we want to be an exemplar for other councils across the country and other businesses in Essex on the basis of the seriousness with which we address this challenge.

We said in our 100 Day Plan that we wanted our older residents and people in care to be able to live their lives in comfort and with dignity. That is why our strategy commits us to promoting independence and supporting carers. Now more than ever we need to support those who support others. And at the same time, Covid has exposed the inequalities that exist across the county in terms of health outcomes - we are committed to addressing not just the symptoms of those inequalities but also the causes.

Finally, our Plan for Essex sets out our commitments to children and families. We believe that everyone should have the chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will take them. But the odds are stacked against some people. We are here to reset those odds. That's why, under Councillor Egan's and Cllr Ball's leadership, our 100 Day Plan and our strategy focus on education excellence, family resilience and stability, levelling up outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people, and improving the safety of our residents.

Let me reiterate – our strategy is not just about what we do – it is also about how we do it. Listening, not telling. Enabling, not instructing. Collaborating, not dictating. Mr Chairman, I make no apologies for finishing this statement with where I started my previous one: on the administration's 100 Day Plan. Renewal. Equality. Ambition.

I said we would deliver against these themes and today I have set out how we are embedding those commitments in our Plan for Essex. I was challenged at the last Council meeting to not just talk the talk but also to walk the walk. It's a challenge I welcome. I want us to be held to account for what we said we would deliver.

So let me be clear. We said we would renew the economy, and on day 15 of our first hundred days we announced a £5m boost to the business adaptations grant scheme – trebling the amount that businesses can apply for as they start to open up. On day 22, in partnership with our district councils, we submitted £46m of funding bids to the Community Renewal and Levelling Up Funds –

demonstrating the seriousness with which we take this issue. To support our young people, we have already facilitated 100 jobs through Kickstart and are aiming to bring 500 placements to market by the end of July. Before this 100 days is out we will publish our Bounce Back Plan improving skills provision, strengthening digital connectivity, attracting the growth sectors of the future. In doing all this we will engage directly with our businesses – including through a High Street summit - placing our town centres at the heart of our renewal agenda. Can I say a big thank you to Councillor Ball and Councillor Wagland and their teams for their work on these and many other initiatives we are pursuing.

We said we would deliver education excellence, and on day 37 we announced £1m of investment in an Essex Year of Reading to ensure that every child in the county leaves school able to read at their age level or better. Building the solid foundations on which all future success is based.

We said we would address climate change, and on day 9 we illuminated this promise further by announcing a three year programme to install 82,000 LED lights across the county – not only saving the environment but saving the tax payer of Essex £39m. We are currently working on three net zero school expansions and under Councillor Buckley's leadership we are launching the Essex Library of Things – reducing waste by enabling residents to borrow what they need.

We said we would explore the role of technology in supporting our most vulnerable. And through Cllr Spence's tireless efforts, on day 37 of our first 100 days, we went live with a new care technology service, which over the next four years will improve the quality of life of 20,000 care users who need our support the most.

We said we would support people to live healthy and active lives, and on day 37 Cllr McKinlay launched a new Active Essex strategy and Find Your Active physical activity campaign, to support people to enjoy a wide range of activities to improve their physical and mental well-being.

We said we would strengthen our engagement with the arts and culture sector, and we are currently delivering the Summer of Culture, focusing on the importance of our connection with green spaces for mental and physical well-being and Cllr Butland is now taking forward the dialogue with arts organisations that will play a key role in the delivery of our strategy.

We said we would address the defects on our roads including through the use of new technologies, and with thanks to Cllr Scott, I can tell you that we are well on the way to resurfacing more than 1 million square metres of road by the end of this 100 days, and filling nearly 2000 potholes, and beyond that we are in the process of piloting the use of robotics, drones and AI to bring our approach to inspection into the twenty-first century.

Through Cllr Whitbread's leadership and our Social Value programme, we are driving the achievement of our outcomes into how we do business with our partners and suppliers, influencing £1bn of spend to support our climate agenda and encourage young people into employment.

Our Plan for Essex and our actions in these first 100 Days show our determination to improve the lives of the people of this great county. 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.

Mr Chairman, 60 years ago Hilda Grieve, an Essex County Council employee, wrote in her great book about the Essex Flood of 1953, that in the face of ‘the ungovernable rage of nature’ courage and love are not enough. She said we need to match the vigilance of responsible authorities with the resolution of the public. It was true then and its true today. Standing shoulder to shoulder, looking out for one another, that’s the way we turn this tide.

Mr Chairman it is the intention of this Council to work tirelessly over the next four years in service of the people of Essex – they have put their trust in us – and together we will build the future our people and communities deserve.