
ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING

10 May 2016

Answers to Written Questions (standing order 16.12.1)

Agenda Item 23(a)

1. **By Councillor Blackwell of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport Delivery**

‘Why was there no emergency cover for the storm at Easter and do you think it right that residents should have to cut up a large oak tree which came down and blocked the main road on Canvey Island because no one from highways could help.’

Reply

‘The highways service provides emergency cover for every day of the year, Easter Bank Holiday weekend was no exception. On the day in question, Storm Katie caused an unprecedented increase in calls for the service to respond to – over twenty times the volume of the day before.

Amongst these calls, one was received alerting officers to a tree which had been felled on Canvey Island. The emergency teams were mobilised to make the tree safe. When the team arrived at 16.15 hours on Easter Monday, it was apparent that efforts had already been undertaken to remove the branches of the tree. Officers then continued to ensure that the highways area was made safe.

I completely understand that any residents affected would want to take action immediately to remedy any situation that is causing them disruption. However, I would always want to put safety first - anyone operating on the highway should do so in a manner that is safe not only to themselves but also to the travelling public. As the team were mobilised and on site within two and a half hours, I am confident that our emergency team attended this site as fast as they could on what was an exceptional day.’

2. By Councillor Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport Delivery

‘Would the Cabinet Member please confirm what other options, apart from VAS (Vehicle Activated Signs), are now realistically open to Members to try and reduce the speeds of vehicles in their divisions?’

In the past we have been able to use speed cameras, speed humps and speed cushions to try and reduce speeds, but the criteria for introducing these measures now make it almost impossible to get them installed. The 20mph zones have had some success, but they are reliant on police enforcement to make them effective.’

Reply

‘We have moved away from providing hard engineering measures, like road humps as they are largely unpopular and expensive to maintain.

Our Speed Management Strategy, which can be found on the website, details the measures that are available such as changes to the white lining, gateways, build outs, central refuges and changes to signage. The suitability of these measures will be dependent on the type of road and location; all of which can be proposed and assessed through the Local Highways Panel.

I would also recommend that the Member visits the Safer Essex Roads Partnership website which details work from a range of partners dedicated to keeping our road safe. It also includes ways in which local communities can volunteer to assist with identifying where we have poor levels of compliance.’

3. By Councillor Kendall of the Cabinet Member for Corporate, Communities and Customers

‘Brentwood Library is only open five and a half days a week, which is unacceptable for a town the size of Brentwood, and for one where many of the working population commute to London and only have access to the library at weekends. Brentwood residents have just been hit with a hefty Council Tax increase, but do not believe they are getting the quality of services they are paying for. Would it be possible to pilot a six-day opening of Brentwood Library to measure the demand for the extended service with a view to extending the opening times if the pilot proves successful?’

Reply

'I am happy to look at the current usage and offer at Brentwood Library as part of the Community Hubs Programme to see if there is a requirement for more hours. Libraries have developed into vibrant, flexible and community focused places that now offer help, information and support across a wide range of services and in many different ways, alongside the more traditional access to books. The Community Hubs Programme aims to build on this and will also change how we use these spaces in our communities going forward, encouraging more partners and sharing costs and resources.'

4. By Councillor Higgins of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport Delivery

'Why does the Emergency Number for Highways go through to the Essex Call Centre?'

I had cause to ring the Emergency Number during working hours; the call diverted to the Essex Call Centre. I was put on hold and then told to ring back later, as the number was busy. This is meant to be an Emergency Number.'

Reply

'To simplify the Council's services to members of the public, Essex County Council has standardised the ways that reports and enquiries are received for all services, including highways. The call centre will divert emergency calls to the relevant service to ensure that genuine emergencies are acted on swiftly.'

I am not able to comment on the specifics of the example that has been raised and I understand that it would be very unusual that the call centre would be unable to take calls.'

5. By Councillor Robinson of the Leader of the Council

'The former St.Peter's/Rainsford High school site in north Chelmsford was entered by travellers just before the Bank Holiday weekend. Please can I have an update? Is the security on the site appropriate to prevent a recurrence? Given that the school closed nearly five years ago, could this have been avoided if the Council had resolved the future of the site more quickly?'

Reply

'I am pleased to inform Councillor Robinson that we have successfully worked with the Police to evict the trespassers from the site on Thursday afternoon.

We regularly review the security on all of our vacant properties, with our specialist provider MITIE, to ensure that properties are secure. Following the successful eviction, we immediately put in place 24-hour guarding and we have been working with MITIE to re-secure the site.

However, may I remind Councillor Robinson that this is fundamentally a question of law and order, and our strong relationship with Essex Police has allowed us to work together to take effective action.

In developing the proposals for the former school site, we have had to balance a number of issues, including the provision of educational and community facilities. We appreciate that the delays are frustrating for residents in the area, but I am confident they will benefit the community in the long term.'

6. By Councillor Danvers of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

'Could I congratulate the Portfolio Holder for his statements about government policy to extend academy status to all Essex schools in the next six years? Could he elaborate on these views?'

Reply

'I would like to thank Councillor Danvers for his congratulations and would reiterate that whilst I am in support of much of the intention contained within the Government White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* I do have some concerns in relation to the detail and implementation. My comments and concerns together with constructive criticism are set out in the letter that I have sent to the Secretary of State, which is in the public domain, and I would refer Councillor Danvers to that letter for information. I am confident that my comments have been noted by the Secretary of State for Education in more recent decisions.'

7. By Councillor Danvers of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport Delivery

‘Is the Portfolio Holder aware of the derision members have expressed on social media about the recent press release issued about potholes in Essex? Would he explain how he intends to answer such bad publicity on behalf of the Authority which is bringing Essex County Council into such contempt by members of the public?’

Reply

‘As the member will be aware, social media is a forum where anyone is welcome to express whatever opinions they have and it is a fruitful area for debate. Opinions though, are not the same as hard facts.

The figures I released in the recent press release represent the actual numbers of recorded defects that meet the investigatory levels on our county and local roads. These represent the lowest defect figures that have ever been achieved on the network. Essex is unique in publishing highways data quarterly – and not just defects, but road condition and street lighting. This is the most effective and transparent way of communicating our performance with members of the public.

Members may also remember that I shared details about the highways maintenance strategy and its application on our roads at a widely publicised event last year. I will be hosting another event later this year, on 16 June, which I would like to invite all councillors to attend. Part of this session will be to explain our highways maintenance strategy, which ensures that we assess defects objectively - safeguarding an equitable service standard across Essex.’

8. By Councillor Clempner of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

‘In order to claim a legitimate mandate for transformation, the children’s centre consultation process must have proved that it has effectively engaged with those most vulnerable and in need of services. Can the Cabinet Member provide a geographic breakdown of responses, outlining areas of low response, with details on how this is being combatted?’

Reply

'The Children's Centre Consultation responses are currently being analysed and will include a summary of responses for each geographical area.

A final Equality Impact Assessment will also be prepared, and will cover the points you have raised in your question.'

9. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

'Research carried out by the Council reveals that Essex parents, already suffering the brunt of austerity, are feeling more vulnerable and isolated than ever before. Our own early years review indicated that they overwhelmingly agreed that children's centres are in the right place and appreciated the opportunity to be listened to. Why are we now ignoring them?

We should be strengthening communities of support, not stripping them back. The removal of physical centres will only further exclude struggling families from services at a time when reliance is on the rise. Can the Cabinet Member explain how a reduced, integrated service can adequately meet the needs of families across the County when the complexity of privation is on the rise?'

Reply

'This Council fully supports strengthening communities, and the proposed approach in the consultation was designed to do this. The overall aim is to ensure that families continue to have easy, local access to services.

This is not about buildings, but about services supporting the needs of families.

Currently, children's centre workers are tied to buildings during times when families do not visit centres. Proposed changes to the number of buildings will free workers to deliver services more flexibly in the community, or family home, tailoring these to meet individual, family or community needs.

We also know through our research and conversations with families that many of those in greatest need are not best served or supported

by 'buildings based' delivery. These proposals provide the flexibility for us to reach those families who really need our help and support the most.'

10. By Councillor Harris of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

'If the preferred model for future children's centre plans is the one currently being operated in mid-Essex, why hasn't this been specifically consulted upon?'

Reply

'Children's centre services have resulted in improvements in the ability for staff to reach more families by freeing up staff from being based in the buildings when families are not visiting.

We now need to further enhance this way of working to enable the staff to reach the 28% of priority group families that are not currently being reached and this is the model that has been consulted on.'

11. By Councillor Henderson of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

'Many deeply impoverished areas will suffer disproportionately as a result of changes to the children's centre programme. Jaywick for example, where fuel and child poverty are already among the highest in the County, will see a significant reduction in services. How can we aim to meet the needs of the poorest communities whilst simultaneously reducing funding to vital services?'

Reply

'The proposals are not about reducing funding to services, they are about improving accessibility to services for those families that most need support. We know that there are 28% of this priority group that are not currently engaged with our services, and it is these families we want to reach.

As a part of the consultation process, ECC has had discussions with our People and Families Scrutiny Panel, and officers have met with Councillor Honeywood and Jaywick residents to explore how the Jaywick Children's Centre could be more effectively used for offering local community-led family support.'

12. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

'Current plans to further privatise ECC's meals on wheels service will have a significant impact on thousands of struggling elderly residents across the County. On top of providing care in the form of a hot, prepared meal one of the most vital lifelines the service offers is a daily 'safe and well check'. What measures, if any, are being put into place to maintain this service, and to ensure that the safety of residents is not compromised in the interest of making savings?'

Reply

'We will continue to support all our vulnerable residents to ensure a hot meal is available.

Following a successful pilot last year which saw 143 people move to an alternate meals service, we have decided to expand this to all current Meals on Wheels (community meals service) recipients which means about 700 people.

The Council is not further privatising the Meals on Wheels service. The current service is delivered by a single private company and going forward ECC is working with local voluntary and health groups, and a range of local community providers to identify alternative meals arrangements for people. By involving local groups with residents, both at home and in their neighbourhoods, we will make sure people remained socially connected, as well as looking after their nutritional needs. We have proven this approach works, as we have done this last year for 143 people.

The Council is not stopping the service. What we are doing is offering greater choice for people receiving meals, either in their home or within the local community. We will work with every person currently receiving a meal to make sure that they find an alternative which suits their needs, including looking at how we can reduce social isolation.

We will ensure that our older residents across the County currently receiving Meals on Wheels have access to an affordable and nutritious hot meal.'

13. By Councillor Durcan of the Leader of the Council

‘Could the Leader provide any update on his view of the ongoing debate between Norfolk/Suffolk/Cambridgeshire around the devolution decision and where does this leave Essex?’

What is the future plan to ensure Essex is viewed as a powerhouse in the Eastern Region?’

Reply

‘I thank the Councillor for his question on this important matter for Essex. There is clearly a detailed negotiation going on between councils in Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Peterborough and between those authorities and government. I’m not privy to those conversations so it would be unwise of me to comment until the negotiations are concluded.

As he and indeed all councillors will know, I think the right devolution deal for Essex can provide significant benefits and opportunities for our residents and businesses. It will mean more jobs, faster growth, and better services. I want us to become an Essex powerhouse and the right deal will help us do this by supporting our ambitions for economic growth, improved skills capability, sustainable housing growth, infrastructure and financial stability.

However, whether we or the wider East Anglia local authorities secure a deal or not, I am committed to working closely with partners in Essex and beyond to get the best economic outcomes for Essex. It is essential that we use this as an opportunity to collaborate more across our boundaries. Transport and infrastructure are, for instance, great examples of where we need to work with authorities south, west and north of us.’

14. By Councillor Henderson of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

‘I’d like to request a full breakdown of the ‘essential living fund’ budget, with details on how much money there is allocated, annual expenditure, the number of applications made each year, the number accepted and a detailed outline of the criteria for application, including any changes made in recent years.’

Reply

‘Funding for a localised social fund scheme was transferred to Essex County Council in December 2012. This covered the initial set up costs along with administration, which was additional to the programme funding for 2013/14. The table below illustrates the funding for both 2013/14 and 2014/15

Financial year	Set up/Administrative funding	Programme funding
2012/13 Set up	£ 24 613	
2013/14	£520 096	£2 461 324
2014/15	£476 724	£2 461 324

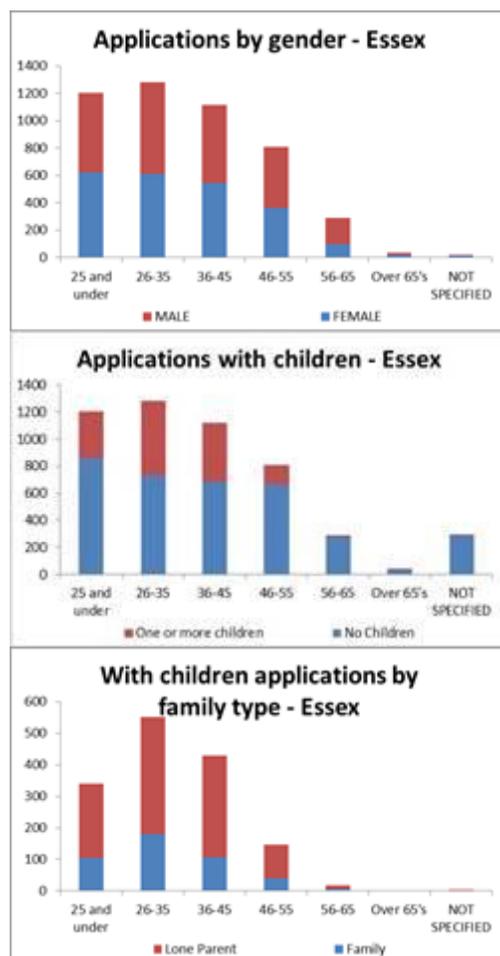
For 2013/14 the total expenditure for the Essential Living Fund was £1,325,482. This figure was based on previous spend for Essex by the DWP on relevant parts of the Social Fund. The figure for Essex was comparable to Kent, but larger than our other neighbouring counties in recognition of the demand and needs of the County. The reason for underspend was due to a more efficient service, the provision of goods (clothing, furniture, food) as opposed to cash, and a much more robust application process that ensured that successful applicants received the support needed but that there was no other recourse to public funds.

The ELF is an award-winning scheme, having achieved the Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation (IRRV) National Gold Award for Community Partnership. The National Audit Office has also recognised the scheme as good practice.

For 2015/16, a budget of £1,500,000 was set and this was forecast to be underspent by approximately £165,000. As a result of this, ECC will continue the scheme into 2016/17 using remaining funds.

Below is a breakdown of applications for 2015/16. In the last year there have been approximately 7,000 applications, with around 4,000 having been awarded. Non-successful applicants are signposted to alternative support.

Over 1,000 of these awards have been to families with children and 681 of these families had at least 1 child under 5 years old. Of the awards for families with children under 5 years old 300 included a food element.



Eligibility for an award is not dependent on being on a qualifying benefit or unemployed. However, people must reside in Essex and have no recourse to any other funds, be it public or otherwise. ECC has contracted Southend Borough Council to carry out the assessment and award function and this has been in place since April 2013.

The full policy can be found at:

http://www.southend.gov.uk/downloads/file/2212/elf_policy_southend_for_public_publishing_final_revised_2014

15. By Councillor Clempner of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘Can I request a detailed breakdown of current demand and supply of early-years childcare spaces, broken down by geographic area?’

Reply

‘This data is collected at an individual ward level and is challenging to present in one reply due to the volume of data. However, officers within the Early Years and Childcare team would be very happy to meet with anyone who would like to review this level of detailed information.’

16. By Councillor Bobbin of the Cabinet Member for Health

‘This week we learnt that, for the first time since the 19th century, the gap in life expectancy between the rich and poor is widening. What measures has the Council taken in recent years to combat health inequality?’

Reply

(The response was provided by the Leader of the Council as the Cabinet Member had presented his apologies for this meeting)

‘The Local Government Association recently deemed Essex County Council’s work around equalities to be “excellent”.

Essex County Council recognises the unacceptable gap in life expectancies across Essex and understands that widening health inequalities are a key challenge. We are addressing this on three fronts, through:

1. Working to tackle the broad underlying social and economic causes of health inequality;
2. Identifying opportunities to address lifestyle choices; and
3. Tackling clinical factors in those most at risk.

For example, we have:

- Invested £2 million additional resources in new alcohol and obesity services to tackle historically poor and unequal provision across Essex;
- Specified that payments for stop-smoking services are dependent

-
- on a high proportion of people being from deprived populations;
- Ensured that funding for health checks is weighted so that practitioners are paid more for checks on people from deprived populations; and
 - Worked with Job Centre Plus to offer health checks and mental health support to high risk groups who historically have not accessed services.

In addition to the work aimed directly at addressing health inequalities, we are also looking to address broader inequalities in society, including the educational attainment of children from deprived backgrounds, via our Early Years services.

Notwithstanding these successes, we are far from complacent and will continue to prioritise tacking this unacceptable and growing gap, which I know Councillor Bobbin will agree is a major challenge for us all.'

17. By Councillor Harris of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport Delivery

'What contract management procedures are in place to ensure that highways maintenance contractors are held to an acceptable standard of quality when dealing with potholes and road repairs?'

Reply

'Our strategic highways contract has a range of performance indicators that are assessed and monitored on a monthly basis. These indicators cover the whole range of services provided including quality of road repairs. These have recently been shared in discussions with the Place Services and Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee.

One specific performance measure looks at the quality of repairs for defects and includes an independent audit of the repair carried out.

Our primary objective is safety and whilst the highways teams always strive to deliver a permanent repair first time, this is not always possible due to the traffic management needed on faster roads. In these cases often we need to carry out an interim repair until such time that we can schedule a permanent repair as soon as possible afterwards.'

18. By Councillor Ellis of the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

‘Will the Cabinet Member please provide an update and any progress undertaken thus far regarding the Parking around Schools Motion passed at Full Council on the 13/10/2015’

Reply

‘I would respectfully remind Councillor Ellis that no Motion on Parking around Schools was passed at the Full Council meeting on 13 October 2015. However, I did issue a statement in relation to this matter.

Regarding the substance of Councillor Ellis’s question, I would however confirm that the issues surrounding this are being investigated by officers and to that end I have looked at several areas where there are particular problems and this includes Sawyers Hall Lane in Brentwood.

It is evident that it will not be possible to determine a general policy that could be applied to these matters but rather that individual and local solutions will need to be sought in each location.

Having said that, I will be arranging a meeting of members who express an interest in this in the near future, when officers have indicated some consensus.’

19. By Councillor Abbott of the Leader of the Council

‘An advert has appeared offering Silver End Library for rent. As the local Member I have not been consulted about this and myself and the local community are not aware of a stated alternative provision. Can the Leader please explain the situation?’

Reply

‘I can assure the Member that the library will not close. Rather it will be relocated to more suitable premises and I believe we are in negotiations with the custodians of the Community Hall. Essex County Council has decided not to renew the lease and at the end of the lease it will be returned to the owner.

I can only apologise that the appropriate consultation with yourself and the Silver End Parish Council did not take place. Unfortunately the landlord advertised the site, without informing us and before we had an opportunity to consult with you or the Parish Council.'

20. By Councillor Abbott of the Cabinet Member for Adults and Children

'Why is Witham being treated disproportionately harshly when it comes to the review of Children's Centres?

Both of the Witham Children's Centres are proposed to be closed in the recent consultation; with re-provision in Witham library at a lower level of service that for other smaller towns in the area.'

Reply

'I strongly refute that Witham is being treated disproportionately harshly in the review of Children's Centres. The recent consultation process was a dialogue with families around the County regarding the future use of the centres. The consultation process included a number of events where ECC officers talked to families and residents about the proposals. Based upon these conversations and our findings, the final proposals consider the suggestions shared in the consultation documents.

We have heard all of the feedback and comments that have been made in regard to the proposals for Children's Centres, including for the Witham centres, and will be taking these into account as part of the analysis and final recommendations.'

21. By Councillor Maddocks of the Leader of the Council

'In November 2015, this Council approved a motion calling on the Government to fully fund the support to refugees for the full five-year period.

Could the Leader update Council on what activity is taking place with local partners to resettle Syrian refugees to Essex and update on the latest funding position?'

Reply

'I thank Councillor Maddocks for his question. I know he feels as strongly as I do about Essex playing its part to help Syrian refugees fleeing violence and persecution.

In December 2015, the 1,000th Syrian refugee arrived in the UK as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement scheme. As part of these arrivals, Colchester welcomed four Syrian families. One further family arrived in March and has also been resettled in Colchester.

Essex County Council has been singled out for praise by the Secretary of State for our role in coordinating the countywide response to the crisis with a range of public and voluntary agencies.

We have been notified by the Government's Refugee Resettlement Programme team that dates for further arrivals to the region are being considered, provisionally in early summer and then early autumn.

The Government has already pledged that it will fully fund the cost of helping refugees for whole five year period and we are currently in discussions with the Government to understand what the full cost will be.'