

Council Speech on Everyone's Essex : 12 October 2021

Intro

Mr Chairman, Members, this is the third time I have had the privilege of addressing this Council as its leader and the first time I have done so from this Council chamber. I am sure you will all join me in thanking the officers who worked so hard to support us when we weren't able to be here, but I am sure, like me, you are glad to be home – in the place we have held our meetings for more than eighty years.

And I think it is entirely appropriate that for our first meeting back in this chamber my administration is setting out its strategy for the future. And it is also right, given the challenges we have just been through and the challenges still to come, that our strategy – Everyone's Essex – should represent a bold new blueprint for the purpose and role of local government.

I said at our previous meeting that we are holding ourselves to a higher standard – not just spending taxpayers' money wisely, although that is very important; not just delivering the excellent services on which many of our residents rely – we will continue to do that; but also changing people's lives and opening opportunity up to those who would otherwise be denied it. That is our Mission. That is the blueprint we are creating.

We have set that standard out in our strategy and committed to working across the whole system with partners in an open and collaborative way. We have spent the last three months talking to colleagues across Essex about our plans, listening to them and responding to their feedback.

And, as a result, the strategy we are presenting today provides the foundations on which we will renew the parts of our county that have suffered through the pandemic, close the inequality gaps that frustrate opportunity, and above all ignite ambition for the people and places we are privileged to represent.

Challenges

Mr Chairman, I will set out the content of our strategy in a moment. But before I do that I want to be clear about the challenges we face.

In the last eighteen months we have seen our economy contract and unemployment increase, although we are starting to see a recovery in both areas, there is still more to be done. We have seen health inequalities widen and pressure on health and social care services deepen. We know from our

Climate Commission that time is running out to reverse the catastrophic impacts of an overheating planet. In this, one of the wealthiest parts of the United Kingdom, we have some of the highest levels of need in the country in some of the hardest pressed communities. And on top of all of those challenges this Council will need to make savings in the region of £150million before the next election.

It is important that all Members and the public know how we intend to invest during the next 4 years. For the first time ever and following this debate my colleague, Cllr Chris Whitbread, will deliver an Autumn Statement, setting out our financial work for Everyone's Essex and leading to what will be our Budget in February and how we will invest for our services both today and for the future.

Everyone's Essex: The Strategy

And we are not running away from our challenges, we are tackling them head on, because in this great county, Essex people have never been afraid to strike out and build new pathways to the future.

And that's why our strategy isn't just business as usual. It demands more of us than that. It requires co-ordinated, whole organisation, whole system effort to ensure we can fight on multiple fronts and support our residents to have access to the opportunities they deserve. That's why we need Everyone's Essex.

And in this, let me be clear, I am not just challenging others to step up to the plate, I am also challenging ourselves to think and act differently – more joined-up, more collaborative, more open-minded, more imaginative – building the relationships across the system and the new pathways that will be the foundation of our collective success.

Economy

Mr Chairman, Everyone's Essex sets out 20 commitments that underpin our contract with the people of Essex. Taken together they add up to the most ambitious programme of change that this Council has ever embarked on.

Let me start with the economy. Economic prosperity is so important because it is the bedrock on which wider well-being is built. At one time Essex had one of the fastest growing economies in Europe and we are still amongst the most entrepreneurial places in the country.

But like others our businesses have been hit by the effects of the pandemic and as a result our economy has shrunk over the last eighteen months.

Our strategy sets out five areas of focus – supporting recovery for our businesses, investing in our infrastructure, attracting the high value sectors of the future, accelerating green growth, and addressing the levelling-up challenge so that all parts of the county and our population have the opportunity to benefit from the rewards of an expanding economy.

Taken together we expect our approach to result in more than £1bn of investment into the fabric of the county and support the creation of thousands of new jobs.

And to show that we are serious about this, in our first 100 days and thanks to the great work of my colleagues Lesley Wagland and Tony Ball, we have been busy laying the foundations for this future success.

For our businesses, we have launched a new support service and provided adaptation grants to more than 2500 businesses. To revitalise our towns and high streets, and in collaboration with our partners, we have submitted £40m of levelling up fund bids. To strengthen the long-term resilience of our economy we have developed a growth strategy to ensure we are focused on the sectors of the economy that will drive our future prosperity. And to support people back into employment we have created over 600 new roles as part of the Kickstart programme and set up a new Opportunities portal to make it easier for residents to find work.

Environment

Mr Chairman, in a few weeks time, world leaders will be meeting in Glasgow to address the climate challenge. In Essex we set up the Climate Action Commission because we recognise that we need to seize the moment if we are going to reverse the impacts of climate change. Over the next ten years Essex needs to have halved its greenhouse gas emissions and as a county council we have committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030. This is the decade of delivery on climate action and the County Council intends to lead by example.

That is why the second theme of Everyone's Essex is the environment. As well as our focus on net zero, we are also setting out our commitment to a step change in sustainable travel and healthy neighbourhoods and prioritising engagement with businesses and communities to build climate resilience. As a

signal of our intentions, by the end of this Council period we will have replaced all 128,000 street lights in Essex with LEDs saving 6500 tonnes of carbon per year and resulting in a long-term saving to the Council of £39m.

Over the first 100 days of the administration we have made a start on getting to grips with these issues. With thanks to Lee Scott, Malcolm Buckley, and Peter Schweir we have not only replaced 5000 street lights but we have also re-opened all of our Essex Outdoors centres; launched a five hundred thousand pound fund to support community action on climate change; installed new solar panels at the Essex Records Office; started a two-year flood resilience scheme for Canvey Island and enabled nearly four hundred thousand e-scooter journeys as part of a Department for Transport funded pilot.

Addressing climate change is the biggest global challenge we face, and it is in the actions and commitments we make today in this Council chamber that part of the solution is to be found. We never preach, tell or demand; we lead by example and we said we would encourage and provide better alternatives for people to travel and live more sustainably and this we are starting to do.

Health and Well-being

Mr Chairman, I want now to turn to the third theme of Everyone's Essex, health and well-being. The thousands of deaths we have experienced in Essex over the last two years from Covid-19 should remind us of the important public health role we play - keeping people safe. And I want to pay tribute to John Spence, Mike Gogarty, Helen Lincoln, Nick Presmeg and their teams in particular for the fantastic work they have done throughout that period, working with a range of partners inside and outside the organisation.

But our responsibilities and our ambitions go beyond that. Good health is created in our communities not in our hospitals – it is the product of the air we breathe, the jobs we do, the houses we live in, the exercise we take, the schools we attend, the green spaces where we relax. In fact it is the product of all the things for which we have responsibility and that is why – as well as the duties we have towards our most vulnerable – we are placing these wider determinants of good health at the heart of our strategy.

Our Plan for Essex, therefore focuses on promoting healthy lifestyles and working with our colleagues across the county to ensure we are joining up care and support for the benefit of our residents. Our levelling up focus will address the causes of the poor and unequal outcomes between different parts of our

population. And whilst we do all of that we will continue to work to support our most vulnerable and the people who care for them.

And to demonstrate our commitment to this, in the first 100 Days we launched the new Essex Care Technology Service to support people to access the technology they need to live as independently as they can for as long as they can. And we have also collaborated with the NHS Digital Innovation Zone to support connecting 51 surgeries to ultrafast broadband to improve patients' access to digital services. To support people in our most deprived communities to take control of their well-being we have launched the Fit for the Future Strategy and in Clacton and Jaywick Sands we have introduced a multi-million pound bike scheme to support residents' desire to be more active.

Children and Families

Mr Chairman, the final theme of our strategy is children and families and the important role that education plays in enabling all children to fulfil their potential. There should be no limit on where talent and hard work can take you and we believe that supporting our young people to have the best start in life is crucial to achieving that.

Our strategy commits us to achieving excellent education outcomes, supporting the resilience and stability of our families, ensuring that our children and young people are safe and that we are closing the opportunity gap for our most disadvantaged.

With thanks to the great work of my Deputy Leader, Louise McKinlay, and Cabinet colleagues, Tony Ball and Beverley Egan, in our first 100 days we have been able to make a start on this by investing £1m into a newly created Essex Education Task Force with an immediate focus on reading – recognising the fact that by the age of three our most disadvantaged children are already a full year and a half behind their peers in language development – and language development is the foundation on which all other learning is based.

We reached 17,000 children this summer through our reading challenge; filled hundreds of thousands of summer camp sessions for our young people; and ran the hugely successful "It's My Life" festival for the children in our care. For families, we are trialling a new app, designed to provide digital signposting to the support that is available.

Very shortly you will hear from Cllr McKinley on our plans going forward on Levelling Up and the work she is leading. It is the ambition of this authority that no one will be left behind because none of us can flourish if some of us cannot.

Joining Up

Mr Chairman, Members, written through our strategy is a commitment to levelling up – we believe that everyone should have the chance to shape their own destiny.

We have placed climate action front and centre, because now is the time for action if we are to safeguard this planet for future generations.

And we have identified the need to be on the side of working families who right now are struggling to make ends meet as household costs rise.

These are big commitments that won't be achieved through single service solutions. They require us to think different, do different, and be different. But they do have one thing in common – they ask that we put boundaries to one side and work across organisations, in collaboration with our partners and with our communities, to jointly figure out what will work.

In putting these challenges at the heart of our work, we are quite deliberately straining at the limits of what government can do. We are asking officers and members to do things they have never done before, in ways they have never thought of. And if that is not enough, we will ask central government for the extra powers we need to guarantee the well-being of our communities and the long-term prosperity of our county. Because that is what the people of Essex expect of us. And that is what they deserve.

It is important to stress that while we are planning for the future, it is vital that we continue to deliver services that people need now. We shall redouble our efforts on Highways repairs and it is our ambition that we start to look at ways of devolving this work across Essex so that you, the Members, have a greater say in what is repaired and when. This work will be taken forward by Cllr Lee Scott and Cllr Graham Butland as we look to run Essex in a more efficient way that puts decision making much closer to our residents.

Mr Chairman, the strategy we are putting before the Council is unashamedly ambitious. A strategy to address our long-term challenges as well as our short-term needs. A strategy that supports our most vulnerable as well as those

working hard every day to make ends meet. A strategy that seeks to make Essex the best place in the country to live in, start a family, or grow a business.

In our first 100 Days we showed what is possible. Over the next 1000 we must work even harder if we are to create the opportunities for our residents that they deserve. And today I am inviting all Members of this Council to join me, Cllr. McKinlay, the Cabinet and all of the Administration on this journey. Serving the people of Essex. Setting a standard that others will aspire to. Re-imagining the role and reach of local government. Creating a vision of what the future can be.

For us all because this is Everyone's Essex.