

Executive Statement: May Council

Introduction

Chairman

As we begin the second year of this administration it is an opportunity to reflect on where we have come from and think about some of the issues ahead.

Last May, I said that we should not shirk from debating the issues that matter but that we should always work together to overcome the challenges we face.

The past year

Over the past year we have continued to face challenges.

Like thousands of people across Essex, our finances remain under pressure.

Demands on services continue to grow and our income from central government has continued to fall.

Last May, the gap was forecast to be £215 million by 2016/17. Now, the forecast gap is £237 million – and most likely this will grow as we know that the next government (of whichever party) will have to make significant further cuts in public spending during the life of the next parliament up to 2020.

We cannot wave a magic wand and say difficult decisions will not be required in the future. But we will not shirk our responsibilities in taking those decisions in a fair and open manner.

Our decisions are informed by our transformation programme to make us leaner and work more smartly. The last year has seen considerable change in the council's structures. I recognise the uncertainty this brings, particularly to our staff and I would like to applaud the high standards and professionalism that our employees have upheld throughout.

I want to take some time to celebrate all that we achieved in these difficult times.

We have seen sustained improvements in Children's Services

Our children's social care services have continued to improve and I am absolutely delighted that the latest Ofsted inspection has recognised our progress by judging the authority as 'good'.

Dave Hill and Helen Lincoln have been instrumental in achieving this through their leadership, as has Cllr Madden as a committed Cabinet Member who is passionate about ensuring we keep our most vulnerable children safe.

Colleagues in Education and within Essex schools have made great strides in establishing good foundations for Lifelong learning and helping our young people realise their potential.

Progress at the early years stage is a key to good educational attainment later in life. I am so pleased to say that, due to much hard work and effort, that Essex now exceeds the Eastern region and England averages for the first time.

And I'm also really pleased that over 93% of parents in Essex were offered their first or second choice of school

The last year has also seen a reduction in the proportion of Essex young people who are not in education, employment or training.

In 2012/13 the percentage of NEET young people was around 5.7%. However, through persistent work, this has steadily decreased. I am happy to say the figure was 4.5% at the end of March 2014.

The second phase of our Apprenticeship scheme has seen over 1000 young people recruited already.

The majority of the Apprenticeship opportunities are focused on those Essex industries which are key to the economic growth of the county – including manufacturing, engineering, digital technologies, health and social care.

We are proud to say that our Apprenticeship scheme has seen a much higher success rate than the national average.

In other areas:

- 4,262 people in Essex registered to join the Essex Energy Switch Scheme
- Trading Standards and Essex Police conducted a major door step case in Tendring identifying 140 victims
- 97.66% of all emergency defects on our roads are responded to within 2 hours

And in the storms of the winter, we were at the forefront, working with other public services to ensure our residents were safe

And I could go on – celebrating the success and commitment of our employees in delivering public services across the board

So we have continued to make good progress in spite of a difficult financial climate.

And through excellent financial management we are in a healthier financial situation that many other local authorities find themselves in.

Importantly, we have been able to freeze council tax for Essex residents for the fourth year running, ensuring that Essex residents continue to pay the lowest council tax in the Eastern region.

The next year

The next year will see the council continue its transformation agenda.

Last June, Members will recall that Council approved a Vision for Essex for 2013-17. This has formed the basis for developing the Council's new outcomes framework, which will guide the decisions that we take.

Our corporate outcomes framework sets out our seven aspirations for Essex.

Seven aspirations – or outcomes – that will guide us in what we want to achieve over the next 4 years.

And seven aspirations that will help us deliver a healthier, safer and more prosperous Essex.

Over the next few months we will be bringing forward – to scrutiny and then to Cabinet – our commissioning strategies for each outcome.

We have prioritised economic growth

In March, we set out our plans and aspirations to invest £115 million and attract a further £350 million into infrastructure and economic growth, through the South East Local Enterprise Partnership.

We have signed off an Economic Plan for Essex at Cabinet – this plan consolidates our partnership priorities and plan of action to achieve sustainable growth in the county. It will be used to support Essex partner's engagement in SELEP's negotiations with HM Government on the Growth Deal. We hope to negotiate the best possible share of the Single Local Growth Fund through these discussions.

And we have worked tirelessly and successfully with Tendring District Council to secure Assisted Area Status for Harwich, Brightlingsea and parts of Clacton, meaning local businesses will be able to bid for additional funding and tax breaks to create jobs and support growth.

We are committed to Health and Social Care integration

We have worked with the five clinical commissioning groups to develop integrated plans, and to submit our proposals for the Better Care Fund. This will lead the way for improved health and care outcomes through working together and pooling budgets.

We are working to encourage and support community health services to reduce demand on acute care and to shift more resources to prevention.

Building on this we are currently developing a 5 year strategic health plan for Essex with the CCGs, which will be submitted to Government in September.

We are working hard to prepare for the Care Bill.

The Care Bill is the biggest reform of adult social care since the 1940s.

We welcome the principles of the Bill and its focus on prevention.

We welcome the introduction of legal rights for carers – those who provide unpaid care and support to their family or friends.

The Bill will also introduce a new national minimum threshold for access to care and support.

And from April 2016 it will introduce a cap on eligible care costs.

We are now working hard to ensure we can implement these positive policies effectively within Essex.

But we have also not been afraid to tell Government that the reform could add significant cost pressures on local government.

In Essex that cost could be around £30m in 2015/16 and over £40m in 2016/17. We continue to make the case to Government that we need to be assured this will be fully-funded.

Conclusion

The next 12 months will therefore see further great change.

Radical change to the law governing adult social care.

Greater co-operation and integration between health and social care, with increasing moves to pool our budgets.

New commissioning strategies for the council's seven corporate outcomes.

We know that challenges remain. We know that there is more to do and we will rise to the challenges

But we can be confident that the rigorous work we have been doing to put in place ambitious and yet achievable plans will ensure we are well-placed for the challenges ahead.