

Since our last Council meeting in July much has happened. As lockdown lifted we gradually reopened our Council services in a secure way. Over the summer and last month, we supported schools in their incredible efforts to welcome children back in a COVID-safe way.

We have been working with partners in developing an effective local test and trace system; increasing testing capacity, with four new facilities opening this month: one each at the universities in Colchester and Chelmsford, and the others in Harlow and Basildon; and we have been monitoring outbreaks across Essex and taking targeted actions to halt the spread.

We have seen high levels of compliance from Essex businesses and residents to the government's COVID measures. Although cases in Essex have stayed well below the national average - and we have avoided interventions like those seen elsewhere - the numbers are rising once more.

We must now face the challenge of the second wave of the virus, which is very much with us. In Essex, we are now seeing exponential growth, with cases now roughly doubling every week across the County.

Based on a detailed analysis of the increase in case numbers, we believe it will only be a matter of weeks before Essex enters Tier 2 of the Government's new 'traffic light' restrictions, announced yesterday. It is also our conclusion, based on the data, that moving earlier to Tier 2 restrictions would limit the impacts on case numbers, the NHS, and the local economy, by flattening the curve of cases, and enabling them to reduce more quickly as we move toward the end of the year.

Today we announced that we have approached the Secretary of State, Matt Hancock MP, to seek permission to introduce Tier 2 restrictions at a point before Essex reaches the national threshold for this action. This would mean Essex would become a pioneer for proactive prevention, and we are already viewed as one of the most capable authorities in the country in dealing with this pandemic. Our careful preparations and effective response to outbreaks mean we know the Government has considerable confidence in us, reflected in communications at a national level.

This will mean there will be further restrictions on day to day life. It will mean that different households, outside of existing support bubbles, will not be able to meet indoors. It will mean that all but essential journeys are discouraged.

We have not made this request lightly and we hope that the Secretary of State and his advisors agree with our analysis of the situation here. We have no wish to impact lives or livelihoods any more than we need to. But our conclusion is, if we take this action now, we can prevent more serious impacts in the weeks to come.

It is important, in the meantime, that everyone across our County continues to observe the rules of social distancing - I must remind everyone to please, wear face coverings, wash your hands regularly and keep 2 metres apart from others. If you have symptoms you must self-isolate and book a test as soon as possible. If you can work from home, it is sensible to do so.

If you heed this advice you are making it much less likely that a vulnerable person is infected. You are making it much less likely that people end up in hospital or even die, and you will be minimising the impact of the virus on local businesses and local jobs

We have worked hard and we are prepared; we are ready to go again to support the vulnerable. We are ready with PPE and support for care homes, we are ready to support the NHS to deal with an increase in cases. I am confident that with your help we will get through this,

While we are focused on today, and supporting you through this crisis, we cannot afford to ignore what comes after. In spite of unprecedented support from the government, we know that many businesses have closed or have had to make staff redundant.

We have a duty to support Essex businesses through these tough times. We also have a duty to ensure that our recovery is as swift as possible, bringing prosperity and meaningful employment for the people of Essex. We are focused on making sure that our action prioritises sustainability and the environment.

You will hear about the great work being done around active transport in the motions, but tackling climate change is much wider than that. Housing and business are also two of the major contributors to carbon emissions in our county. We will encourage green, sustainable business, and green, sustainable jobs. We will do that through our construction projects; through our planning levers; and through our procurement influence.

Two thirds of this Council's £1bn purchasing budget is spent with Essex businesses. This is one of the highest levels of local spend in the country and we can use this to create great outcomes. We are already including social value weighting in our procurement criteria that will drive more job opportunities for the people of Essex, and we will go even further.

We are also working with Partners – police, health and councils - to deliver our Anchor institutions programme, ensuring that as much public sector money as possible is reinvested into the Essex economy.

This year we expanded three schools in Essex, constructing buildings that are carbon neutral, and we will commit to building many more in this way. Delivering on both our own carbon reduction objectives while creating a pipeline of projects for local businesses and their supply chains.

We are making a clear statement of intent that Essex is the place to be for environmental innovation and we will encourage developers to think environmentally wherever they can, as we are with Essex Housing and through the four Garden Community programmes we are partners in delivering.

We have spoken to the Chair of the Essex Developers' Group to outline our ambitions for zero carbon homes, and we recognise Garden Communities provide a great opportunity to

make progress on our aspirations. We are ready to work with developers in Essex to demonstrate what is possible in Essex.

With partners we have brought in millions of pounds of funding for environmental innovation:

- £1.2m from DfE to install rooftop solar and energy efficiency schemes in our schools
- £5m from Innovate UK for the UK's first electric vehicle charging forecourt in Braintree
- Millions of EU funding for low carbon initiatives including grants for community groups and businesses to reduce carbon, develop net zero housing schemes, community energy generation and promote local low carbon supply chains
- In the last few weeks we have also received £800k for energy efficiency improvements in low income homes across Essex. This initiative excites me in particular as it will both help the environment and the people hardest hit by the economic downturn by reducing their energy bills

We will continue to look to do this wherever we can, and I am looking forward to receiving the interim report of the Climate Commission later this year, which I expect will have more recommendations that will push us to the forefront of local authorities tackling climate change and encouraging green growth across Essex.

On employment: data shows us that 16-25 year olds have been disproportionately impacted by job losses and furlough this year. You will hear more about some of our plans for this age group within the motions as well. But how else can we help our county's businesses to thrive?

We have already seen £35m awarded for construction projects across Essex through the Get Building Fund, a big boost for the construction sector. However, things are still uncertain for so many of our key sectors in Essex, and will be for some time. We do not yet know exactly what challenges and opportunities await these sectors, but we have to be ready to help face them.

To support a greener, more productive economy I am announcing today a flexible £5m fund in response to the challenging economic conditions we face which will support our communities and businesses as part of our immediate response. But we must not lose sight of the future, there will be a restructuring of the economy as consumer behaviour and business models change. Through this funding we will put in place the foundations that allow the businesses of Essex to prosper in the years to come.

We will use the £5m fund to:

- Improve digital connectivity in homes and businesses across Essex
- Help our residents achieve the skills they need to secure jobs in key growth sectors while supporting those made unemployed to regain work with speed

- Make a more productive county, with more jobs in well paid, high-skilled, future-proof professions and a workforce ready to fill them
- Invest in business recovery from COVID-19, and supporting established businesses to diversify into high-growth sectors, helping them to thrive
- Safeguard the crucial retail, culture, leisure and tourism sectors so that they are still there when life goes back to normal

We will increase our pipeline of economic growth projects and develop the green growth sector within Essex – a key element of this must be a focus on the built environment and environmentally sustainable public sector buildings and housing.

We will also continue our work with our partners to secure up to £100m investment through the Future High Street Fund and Town Deal allocations, breathing new life into our town centres while securing funding for infrastructure to support housing growth.

But we will not rely on Government intervention alone. Today I can announce we will develop a new commercial investment fund that will focus on economic growth in Essex, whilst also ensuring we make money to re-invest in Essex services. This approach will enable up to £100m investment in commercial opportunities in Essex, helping us:

- Deliver further regeneration in Essex towns
- Create more opportunities for building business space
- Create further acceleration of housing development

Chairman, we want Essex residents to be safe from the virus. We also want them to be able to get back to normal and prosper as quickly as they can. We are working hard, and thinking big, to make this happen.