

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Leader of the Council

Speech at Annual Full Council 16th May 2023

Madam Chairman, may I offer my congratulations to you on becoming Chairman of Essex County Council - an important role which is far more than just chairing meetings of the County Council.

You will be splendid at representing ECC - not just within our great County but also across the country. I know you and your husband Richard will both enjoy and excel in the role.

I cannot let this moment pass without also thanking Cllr Eddie Johnson and his wife Carol for their exemplary work in serving our County Council and indeed Essex.
from all of us – a huge thank you!

I also wish to pay huge tribute to our staff - and also the many volunteers, charities and the excellent British Red Cross – as well as colleagues from our district councils who worked so incredibly hard - welcoming home the hundreds of people who fled Sudan to return to Britain.

Stansted Airport was designated to receive the vast majority of flights from Cyprus - and while many had onward journeys to family and home - many more did not - and their welfare was taken care of by our people.

On this Council's behalf I have written to the outside agencies who worked so incredibly hard - and at all times of the day and over a weekend

But to our staff, may I thank you all - you are a great credit to ECC, our country, and humanity as a whole.

The greatest thing one human being can do for another is to offer help in times of trouble. All of those involved in this exercise are shining examples of this and we are all immensely grateful.

It is the same people who have assisted and helped with Syrian refugees, Afghanistan resettlers, our Ukrainian guests - the same people who will be working with government on asylum seekers who may come to Essex. and all this on top of what is a difficult and trying day job.

When called upon Essex always rises to the occasions, no complaining just helping. Many politicians should take note and learn!

Madam Chairman, it is now precisely two years since I became Leader – when I set out this Administration's plans: which is Everyone's Essex.

We have achieved much in that time within the sphere of local government - to assist with the growing issues of the Cost of Living and Inflation.

Very shortly the Deputy Leader, Cllr Louise McKinlay, will outline precisely what has - and is currently - being done to help alleviate the issues facing some of the poorest in our society.

Everyone's Essex isn't a slogan, nor is it a short-term fix. - I hope whoever succeeds me will carry on this policy and develop and improve it.

It is an aspirational policy where everyone, whoever they are and whatever background has the opportunity to reach for the stars!

It is always about opportunity, but for many still, that opportunity is denied to them.

So, we launched our Levelling Up programme to a wide variety of key communities within Essex taking direct action to ensure those most disadvantaged have the ability to improve their lives and find employment.

We are tackling Climate Change like no other authority - accepting all of the recommendations of the Essex Commission and putting them into action – let by the unstoppable Peter Schwier

As a result we have gained international recognition - being one of only 120 organisations worldwide to gain an A rating from the Carbon Disclosure Platform.

We are just concluding a magnificent Year of Reading under the watchful eye of my friend and colleague, Cllr Tony Ball - where we have many more young people reading books and thus improving their life chances.

His and his Officers work has been given the royal seal of approval – Tony had the opportunity to personally explain to their Majesties what we have achieved in Essex on their recent visit to Colchester.

And tomorrow Cllr Ball will launch the Year of Numbers – another great ECC initiative to help improve opportunities for all

We have invested into the world of arts and culture - in the full knowledge that what this great sector in Essex achieves is far beyond what any of us can see, hear, or feel.

The arts world contributes hugely to the economy, and also to the skills agenda - training young people in the world of theatre and art - but also for the wellbeing and health of every resident

But we are also aware of the day-to-day concerns of residents - and we know that highways is a major issue for many.

Like any other council, we have significant financial challenges, including the rising costs of not only materials to repair our roads but also the vital services to protect the elderly and vulnerable.

Nevertheless we have managed to put extra money into the highways service - and today I can confirm that, because of the financial prudence of this Conservative administration - and the firm grip of the Chancellor of Essex - we are able to put an extra £3m into this service. - This is on top of the £9m we invested as part of our recent budget announcement.

Proving once again that Conservatives don't just talk about action, we practice it. Indeed – conscious of the growing financial burden on our residents – we introduced one of the lowest council tax rises of upper tier authorities in the country

Madam Chairman, before I hand over to the Deputy Leader, I'd like to mention our great progress on Devolution. We have worked incredibly well with partners across the whole of Greater Essex – going way beyond the partnerships of previous years

We have had incredibly productive talks with unitaries, districts, boroughs and city councils - but also with our Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, our parish and town councils, and the support of our key businesses and other partners.

We turned those discussions into an incredibly exciting proposal, and are now in discussions with government. Putting politics to one side, together we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to transform the future of our county for the better

Madam Chairman, this Conservative Administration have always put people first and this we will do and continue to do. We constantly plan for the future but also address the needs of people now - and with that I pass to the Deputy Leader to explain more of what we are doing to help those in the greatest need.

Cllr Louise McKinlay, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnerships and Performance

Cost of Living Support

- Thank you and good morning everyone.
- When the rising cost of living became apparent last year, this Council knew it had to act quickly and decisively.
- In September 2022, we announced our 'Cost of Living Support for Households and Communities plan', which provided a £50m package of support in order to help those Essex residents most in need.
- As part of this package, £9.4m was made available from the DWP Household Support Fund to provide essential living support to residents on low-incomes. Through this fund alone, we have supported over 38,000 households, with day to day living expenses, such as toiletries and fuel.
- We provided £400,000 to assist food banks, food pantries and community organisations. So far, 81 organisations have received grants, supporting over 11,000 households.
- We launched our Community Winter Warmth and Welcome Programme, which supported community groups and partners to provide additional activity in local places, so that people could keep warm whilst engaging in a social experience. This £100,000 grant scheme allowed groups to bid for up to £1000 to open longer as warm spaces and run engaging activities. Through this scheme we funded 92 warm spaces across Essex and provided a further 74 warm spaces through our extensive library network, with one in every library.
- I visited a number of these warm spaces and witnessed the great work first hand, from fun craft activities, to relaxed coffee mornings. It soon became apparent that people were not just attending to keep warm, but were also attending to feel the warmth of their local community. By bringing residents together this helped to support those feeling socially isolated. We are now putting plans in place

to continue outreach in this area via the Strengthening Communities Team.

- In terms of supporting our partners - we invested £185,000 in Citizens Advice to help boost their capacity to meet the increased cost of living demand, specifically supporting their out of hours telephone advice service.
- We also invested £42,000 in Age Well East to support older people struggling with the Cost of Living.
- I have spoken several times before about the success and reach of our Essex ActivAte Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) Programme. Over the winter period alone, the programme delivered 236 clubs across Essex to over 18,000 children. They provided 5,000 food hampers and 8,000 activity packs.
- We are continuing to run this fantastically successful programme, which provides free childcare, food and activities to lower income families, enabling parents to more easily work during school holiday periods.
- I am delighted this week to be visiting Cressing Temple Barns on Thursday to attend a thank you event, hosted by Active Essex, that will bring together over 100 of our valued Holiday Activity and Food providers to showcase the fantastic work the clubs are delivering across our County.
- I am also pleased to say that one of these clubs, Achieve, Thrive, Flourish (known as ATF) have been selected as a regional champion for the East of England at the inaugural national Holiday Activity Fund Awards, organised by the Department of Education. At the next Full Council, I will update on the final overall UK winners once the judging has taken place.
- In terms of helping tackle rising energy bills specifically, alongside the support announced by central government, the Warm Homes Essex project has been supporting residents to maximise energy efficiency, manage debt and support income maximisation – towards the end of last year, we secured over £17m of government funding,

administered through the South East Energy hub, to help households make improvements to secure energy efficiency.

- (TRANSITION TO FUTURE) Whilst summer appears to finally be on its way and temperatures begin to rise, there is still a need for cost-of-living support to assist the most vulnerable. Inflation is still high and we know that there are people in Essex who are continuing to feel the strain financially, due to the rising cost of living.
- Today, I can announce a further almost £19m of support, which has been allocated from the Department for Work and Pensions' Household Support Fund. The funding, which runs to 31 March 2024, will be used to support households who may otherwise struggle with the cost of energy, groceries, household bills or other essential living costs.
- This funding will be available through a number of access points, including the Essential Living Fund and local voluntary and community sector organisations, who are working every day in their local communities.
- Support for families in receipt of free school meals will continue, as will targeted support for care leavers and young carers.
- We are particularly keen to ensure that people with disabilities, pensioners, and those not in receipt of direct government support, such as cost of living payments, access support, and they, like all residents can take a look at our website to see what funding is available and how to access help.
- As part of this new package, Essex County Council is focusing on several key areas, which include:
 - £8.4m for the provision of food vouchers for May, July and December 2023 for eligible children
 - £7.7m towards the Essential Living Fund which enables vulnerable people to pay for essential items

- £700,000 to support voluntary and community organisations to provide support to those who need it most
 - £400,000 to our Food Support and Winter Warmth Essentials Fund to assist food banks, food pantries and community orgs until 31 March 2024
 - And £50,000 to support our Community Supermarket programme. Through our Levelling Up work, we have already committed to open one in every District. The first two are already open and up and running in Basildon and Jaywick.
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- Whilst today I have focussed on our Cost of Living support, our multimillion pound Levelling Up programme continues to gather pace and see results. The detail of which can be viewed on our website in our “Levelling Up One Year On Impact Report.” This administration is dedicated to placing Essex residents first. Supporting those in need to not just survive, but to thrive, by increasing equality of opportunity and raising aspiration.