

County Councillor's Report – March 2015

1. At Full Council on February 10, Essex County Council passed the budget for 2015/16. The budget was froze council tax for the fifth year in a row, meaning that the average resident will have saved £335 during this time, compared to if the council had have increased its tax rate. Residents continue to pay the lowest council tax charge in the whole of the Eastern Region.
2. Outlined in the budget was a record level of investment in our capital programme. In 2015/16, the council is investing over £270 million pounds into key infrastructure such as schools, roads, flood defences and superfast broadband. The budget also sets out plans to invest £1 billion over the next five years in a capital programme to deliver the infrastructure that will that will see the county remains strong and prosperous well into the future.
3. This includes over £200 million into schools, to increase the number of schools places we have and drive up standards. 20,000 school places over five years. 3,000 primary school places in 2015/16.

27th February was national offer day for children starting secondary school from September 2015. Some 15,000 Essex parents have been informed about the offer, and 19 in 20 parents – 95 per cent – were allocated a place for their child in one of their first three preferred schools. Of these, more than 17 out of 20 (over 85 per cent) were offered their first preference, and well over nine out of 10 were allocated one of their two top preferences (92 per cent).

Essex County Council recently received confirmation from the Department of Education of a grant of £41.4m in respect of increasing school places, bringing the total amount of funding to support the creation of new school places over a four year period up to 2017/18 to £137.7m. The funding reflects the growing pressures on school places in the county. The grant is to support the expansion of existing maintained schools, free schools or academies and to establish new schools. Over the last four years we have been allocated the highest amount of funding of all local authorities. This really highlights the significant growth we have in Essex and the pressure on school places and how dedicated we are to improving education provision in the county and ensuring all children have access to a school place at a good or outstanding school

4. The budget also saw significant investment in the county's roads, footpaths, bridges and public rights of ways – with £130 million into our highways network to help drive economic growth, reduce traffic congestion and improve the conditions of our roads further.
5. A major initiative aimed at making country lanes safer and calmer by turning them into 'Quiet Lanes' is being adopted by Essex County Council. 'Quiet Lanes' would continue to receive a basic level of maintenance but the route's status change would help calm the traffic, HGVs would be banned and a 20mph limit would be implemented as standard practice. ECC will initially ask each of the county's 12 Local Highways Panels to identify two roads to be considered as Quiet Lanes. Let me know if you have any candidates for consideration by the LHP.
6. We have chosen to invest £23 million into an ambitious flood defence programme – from large coastal defences to local schemes – to keep Essex residents and their homes safe from flooding. This includes £4 million of investment into the Clacton Holland Sea Defence scheme in Tendring to protect our coastal communities as well as money for small local schemes

and improvements that will help keep homes and communities safe from flooding. Significant progress has been made over the first few months on the scheme to improve the coastal defences between Holland on Sea and Clacton. Phase 1 from Holland Haven to Cliff Road is completed and the beaches there are now open for all to enjoy. Phase 2 is programmed to start at the beginning of March 2015 from just below Fernwood Avenue all the way to Clacton Pier.

7. The Superfast Essex programme has already enabled over 20,000 new Superfast connections across Essex and during 2015 and early 2016 we plan to enable a further 45,000 across the county, reaching 87% of premises across Essex and we aim to expand superfast connectivity to 95% of Essex premises by 2017/18. As part of the programme, Essex County Council is holding a Parish engagement event on Wednesday 18th March (10:00-12:00) at Essex Records Office. The aim is to offer Parish councils the opportunity to join our team of local broadband champions to help us share information, spread word of events, and reach your local community the way you know best. Date and details...
8. Devolution. Discussions with Leaders and Chief Executives from all 15 local authorities in Essex have been taking place to develop a proposal for a devolution deal for Greater Essex.
9. The Courtauld Road waste facility is now open and this is the key pillar on the council's long-term waste strategy that will lead to a more efficient system, reducing our landfill, our impact on the environment, and the cost to taxpayers, saving some £20 million in Landfill tax per year.
10. Social Care Numbers continue to be a pressure. However, Children in Care numbers, now below 1,100 having fallen by 28% in the last two years. New figures show the number of young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) is at an all-time low in the county. The current percentage of young people in Essex who are NEET stands at 4.4% meaning that out of the 50,000 young people Essex County Council has responsibility for supporting, 2146 are NEET, demonstrating Essex County Council's commitment to jobs and careers for young people and economic growth across the county. Essex County Council has a team of dedicated Employability and Skills Advisers who work with 16 – 19 year olds to support them into education, employment, volunteering and training.

The team has a responsibility to maintain contact and ensure relevant opportunities are available for all young people aged 16 – 19 years old, with the main aim being to encourage and help these young people into education, employment (including volunteering) and training. This has become more important as young people in year 11 and above are now required to remain in learning i.e. school, college, apprenticeships, volunteering or a job with training, until their 18th birthday.

Young people in Essex can choose from a range of exciting options including courses, apprenticeships and traineeships.

If you are unemployed and between the ages of 16 – 19 and want to find out more about the opportunities available contact the Employability and Skills Intervention Team on 0800 707 6384 or email

participation.trackingteam@essex.gov.uk. For more information about remaining in learning until your 18th birthday go to

www.essex.gov.uk/futurelearning

11. We announced the continuing support for the Essential Living Fund and the new Essex Innovation Challenge Prize as part of the budget speech at Full Council. The Council is now setting up a £1 million Essex Innovation Challenge Prize to encourage communities and council employees help develop solutions to some of the most difficult challenges facing councils, health services and other public sector organisations across the county. Full details of the Essex Innovation Challenge Prize will be announced in the near future.
12. A new Park and Ride facility is to be launched in Colchester in April 2015. The new P&R will increase the number of people able to access Colchester town centre from the north and help ease congestion on the surrounding roads. The Park and Ride will operate Monday to Saturday between the hours of 07.00 – 1900. With services coming every fifteen minutes; ten minutes during the morning peak times (07:30 – 09:00) and every twelve minutes during the afternoon peak (16:30-19:00).
13. In total, nearly 9,000 Essex households have signed up to the Essex Energy Switch over the past 12 months following two separate events, with registrants saving on average £262* in the latest auction. Following the second successful phase of the Essex Energy Switch, letters and emails with market leading** energy rates were sent to 4,500 Essex residents, more than all other community switch programmes in the country.
14. The bus consultation, 'Getting around in Essex' is underway; the deadline is March 31st 2015. It can be found at www.essex.gov/busreview
15. The Place Services Scrutiny Committee recently visited Stansted Airport and were given a tour and briefing on the development proposals for the Airport. The growth is forecast for one runway only, perhaps up to 43 million passengers per annum. They acknowledged local concern regarding the NATS proposals for new air corridors across Essex.

Simon Walsh
County Councillor for Thaxted.