

Council Exec Statement: 13th December 2022

Kevin

Introduction

- Dear Mr Chairman, I want to use this executive statement, alongside my colleagues Louise McKinlay the Deputy Leader and Chris Whitbread Essex's chancellor, to provide a high level update on the progress we have made over the last year on some of our major commitments.
- Before I start, I want to make two comments.
- First, I want to thank all the members of this chamber for the responsible and constructive way in which you engage with the work of the Council. We have seen examples over the last year of authorities across the country that have found themselves in very difficult circumstances. Councils that are open, transparent, and collaborative don't end up in that place.
- And secondly, the reason we need to continue to work collaboratively is because we are facing in to some pretty tough headwinds which are going to require us all to redouble our efforts for the good of our residents.
- I have been clear that I am interested in generational change. That is why we are focused on achieving net zero; levelling up; and devolution.
- But none of that can be at the expense of helping our residents today. Some Councils struggle to keep the lights on. Good Councils deliver good services and maintain the status quo. The best Councils build a pathway to a better future. And that is what we must aspire to do.

Devolution

- Let me turn briefly to devolution. We are at the early stages of our discussions on this but we are making good progress.

Why we are doing this

- Broadly there are five arguments for devolution. First there is the economic argument. Devolution is fundamentally about strengthening our local economy. Powers around skills, transport, business support, and housing that would be devolved, mean we are able to tailor our interventions to the needs of our local businesses.
- Because decentralised economies are stronger, a devolution deal for Greater Essex will boost economic growth. The proceeds of that growth don't all flow to the Treasury but are shared with local places in what is known as a gainshare deal. That will be worth in excess of £1bn over thirty years of new money coming into the County.

- The democratic case for devolution is that if we are responsible for the economic and social well-being of our communities then we should own the levers to address those issues.
- The efficiency case recognises that all Councils are stretched financially. We cannot impose bigger and bigger burdens on taxpayers. Therefore finding new ways to collaborate to share services and operate more efficiently is no less than our residents expect of us.
- Finally, there is a competition argument. More and more funding streams are being devolved directly to Mayors and Combined Authorities and we do not want to miss out.

What devolution is and is not

- And let me be clear, devolution is fundamentally about exercising local control over powers and funding which currently we don't influence. It is absolutely not about local government reorganisation. Existing council boundaries are unaffected by this work.

The Process we are Following

- I have said from the outset that I want this process to be as open and inclusive as possible.
- Although technically the decision to proceed with a devolution deal rests with Essex, Southend and Thurrock, I have sought to engage all authorities in Greater Essex as well as the PFCC.
- Although we are at a relatively early stage of shaping the thinking, we held a briefing session with all members here a week or so ago and we are in the process of arranging briefings for all Members across Greater Essex. I have written to MPs – who have an important role to play in this - and will be meeting with them to discuss shortly. We have set up a business breakfast for January. We have written to health colleagues.
- We are doing this in an open and inclusive way. And I want to make clear that if you require any information or briefing on this work at any time please do just contact my office and we will facilitate that.

Timeframe

- Finally, on timeframe and next steps. The leaders and chief execs are meeting again at the end of January. And those discussions will determine the pace at which we proceed.

We Said We Did

- Now I want to move on and just say a few words on some of the things we have done over the last year.
- Let me start with the fundamentals. The support we provide to our most vulnerable residents. Through the work of my colleagues Councillor Spence and Councillor Egan we have made sure that regardless of the financial pressures facing us – we continue to provide excellent social care services to those people most in need of our support.

- In the last year we have established three new integrated care partnerships with health partners. We have expanded our Nightingale Care Bursary scheme – looking to support 600 people from low-income backgrounds into social care. We have begun to implement a new supported housing model to enable people with mental health needs to live independently.
- We published our carers’ strategy and completed consultation on our new dementia strategy. We continued to grow our care technology programme – supporting nearly 5000 people to live more independently and saving the taxpayer millions of pounds. We are continuing to help people with learning disabilities to find meaningful employment.
- And for our young people we are continuing to work hard on making sure we have enough residential care placements. We have reset our ten year foster care strategy. We created a new co-parenting strategy. And we were praised by ofsted for the progress we have made on our SEND work.
- Through the work of Cllr Scott, we continue to take steps to improve the county’s infrastructure and this year we opened Junction 7A and are working to upgrade Junction 8 of the M11. And thanks to Lesley and a great team of officers, Essex Housing won Best Development Team of the year. And we invested an additional £700,000 in gigabit Broadband in rural Essex.
- Through the work of Cllr Buckley and Cllr Schweir we have maintained our focus on waste and the environment. We have launched free composting training to help people understand how they can reduce their waste. We launched climate advice packs for businesses and schools. We accelerated our approach to retrofit – not just our partnership with the Retrofit Academy but also upgrading our own estate and schools with improvements – our solar installations alone have generated more than 2 million kWh of electricity. And as a result of this activity – and lots more – the authority was recently recognised as one of only 122 councils in the whole world to secure an ‘A’ rating for our net zero credentials.
- We recognised at the start of the administration the important role that arts and culture can play as an economic driver in the county and this summer through Cllr Butland we celebrated together a Summer of Culture across Essex. And we have recently just completed the second round of awards from our £1m arts fund.
- The economy and skills are at the heart of our Everyone’s Essex priorities and led by Cllr Wagland and Cllr Ball we have done a tremendous amount in those areas over the last twelve months. We have published new digital connectivity, sector development, skills, and green infrastructure strategies. We have secured nearly £8m of Multiply funding which will eventually deliver numeracy support to more than 14,000 residents. We’ve safeguarded more than 650 jobs through our Backing Essex Business service. And we’ve delivered numerous school building projects to make sure we can respond to the needs of our growing population.

- I will now invite the Deputy Leader to talk about the progress we have made in some of the areas for which she has responsibility.

Louise

- Thank you Kevin. As Kevin mentioned at the outset, we have to be focused both on helping people today as well as improving the well-being of our residents for the long-term.
- That is why I am proud of the work we have done on cost of living. In September we launched our £50m Cost of Living Support for Households and Communities Plan which covers a range of activity including: an additional £9.4m into the Household Support Fund to provide support for essential and unavoidable costs; our new Community Winter Warmth and Welcome programme that enables community groups to put on additional activities in warm settings that residents can benefit from over the winter; and additional advice and signposting to make sure that residents have the information they need to help them make the right choices for themselves and their families.
- We are using our libraries as warm spaces throughout the winter. And having committed in the Spring to keeping all our libraries open, I am pleased that over the last year we have welcomed 50,000 new members to the service and were able to open the newly refurbished Harlow library in June.
- In January 2022, we published a new white paper, setting out our Countywide strategy for levelling up in Essex.
- We were one of the very first Councils in the UK to map out our levelling up ambitions, ahead of the government's own white paper. In our document, we presented a clear framework of the places and people we will target support to in order to increase opportunity.
- Described as "trail-blazing" and an "invaluable source of insight for Whitehall, as well as the wider local government community" by Justine Greening, former Education Secretary and Chair of the This is Purpose Coalition, our white paper focused on the creation of levelling up opportunities against the key commitments set out in our wider Everyone's Essex strategy.
- In our work on levelling up this year, we have moved from strategy development to delivery, with eight launch events held and twenty-three projects initiated that target the drivers of Levelling Up (skills, education, community and literacy)..
- Over the last year, the Council has made significant funding available, including an investment of £10m over the next four years to support economic growth and skills, as well as a separate £11m Levelling Up reserve.
- The 23 projects I just mentioned include:
 - The investment of 100k in a new electric vehicle training centre at Harlow College, which will will enable local people to develop professional qualifications in electric

vehicle repair and maintenance, which we know will be a major growth sector and key to supporting the transition to carbon net zero.

- Our focus on literacy - The creation of 74 literacy areas across the County (one in every single one of our libraries), expansion of Adult community learning hubs to areas without provision, such as Harwich and Canvey Island. The fantastic Essex Year of Reading, a wonderful programme of events and new education initiatives led by my colleague Cllr Ball, which, amongst a hive of activity, included providing every primary aged child in the county with their own library card through their school
 - We opened 2 new community supermarkets in some of the counties most deprived areas,
 - Created new physical activity hubs in targeted estates that provide both physical activity classes, but also volunteering opportunities for local people that create routes into employment
 - We are investing £2m into new business units in Jaywick, bringing jobs and investment to a part of the county that urgently needs it.
 - Entry level jobs created through our social value scheme in our own contracts has exceeded expectations, with over 250 created so far
 - ECC has now donated over 4,100 devices to schools across Essex, to support the student population with getting online and to continue to learn. This was in addition to 2,500 devices supplied to us by the DfE. We were also able to provide our Ukrainian guests fleeing war with a total of 335 devices
 - and finally, the expansion of our ActivATE holiday club, which over the last two years has provided over 500,000 free meals and supported over 30,000 young people, 30% of which are from low income working families or other vulnerable groups. We will once again be delivering more than 200 clubs over eight days during Christmas, as well as an additional 37 family celebration events. Please ensure you promote this widely through your own networks.
- So there is much we have already done, but there is still much more to do, which we will...and at pace.
 - I am now going to invite Chris to say a few words on the financial context.

Chris

- Members, I won't take up too much of your time, you will hear plenty from me at our next meeting when we discuss the budget.
- As both Kevin and Louise have acknowledged, we are facing into some stormy weather.
- The global energy and food supply shocks caused by Russia's invasion of the Ukraine have driven up interest rates to their highest level since the financial crisis. Caused inflation to hit a forty year peak. And squeezed living standards which means that more of our residents are struggling to make ends meet.
- Not only are the fundamentals challenging but there is also huge uncertainty which makes planning for the future very difficult.

- At the moment the tax system is shouldering most of this burden. But we know that at the end of this spending review period more of the heavy lifting will have to be done by spending choices. That is why when we set the budget – we are not just focused on next year but on the medium-term and making sure that the Council’s finances can withstand whatever is thrown at us.
- That is why having been through a very comprehensive budget process this year we are also strengthening our efforts towards setting out our transformation plan – so that we have a clear pathway for long-term sustainability.
- And finally, its worth bearing in mind, that other councils are having to make some very unpalatable choices. The reason we are able to do all the good work that Louise has described. The reason that we are able to continue to make progress on delivering Everyone’s Essex and not retreat back to minimum service levels is because we have a track record of sound finance in this county. And that is the platform – the only platform that enables us to achieve these objectives.

Kevin

- Thank you Louise and Chris. I hope members have found that useful. Part of being open, transparent and collaborative is reporting back on what we are doing. And I will continue to do that in whatever forums are most appropriate.
- And I hope from what you have heard that our approach is clear.
- First, we have a clear strategy - Everyone’s Essex - which guides what we do.
- Second, as Chris has mentioned we have a solid platform – both in relation to our finances and our services – on which to build.
- Third, we are mindful of the need to address the pressures and concerns that people are facing right now.
- Fourth, we are doing that alongside - not instead of - addressing our longer-term strategic challenges.
- Having started by a saying a big thank you to all our Members, can I end by saying a big thank you to all our staff. It is important to remember that throughout Christmas our staff will continue to provide support for those who need it most. I am sure I speak on behalf of all colleagues in this chamber in expressing my gratitude for the great work they do to provide the services on which so many of our residents depend.