

## County Councillor's Report March 2021

### County Council Budget: "We have done it before and we will do it again."

A message of hope was shared by Essex County Council's (ECC) Leader today as he outlined plans for the county's recovery from the pandemic and unveiled the Council's Organisation Plan and 2021/22 budget.

Significant investment in the county's young people, highways, local communities and businesses make up ECC's plans for the coming year, with Cllr David Finch announcing key initiatives across three priority areas - environment, family and economy. These include:

- An additional £2million investment in economic development to ensure a successful reopening of the Essex economy.
- £1.5million to support a new Educational Recovery Task Force which will lead and oversee the educational recovery of all Essex children.
- A further £1million investment in mental health support for children and our health and care workforce.
- A further £1million community action fund for environmental initiatives to help communities create less waste, travel sustainably, use renewable energy and produce less carbon.
- A further £500,000 to break the cycle of violence and protect young people from gangs.
- A further £7.2million of capital funding for Local Highways Panels (LHP) - £200K more for each panel, each year, for the next three years.
- An additional £180,000 added to LHP revenue budgets for smaller highways projects.
- A further £10,000 for every county councillor to invest in local community initiatives - enabling local members to tackle the local issues that matter most to their communities.

In total, ECC will be investing an additional £33m across its portfolios over the next year, with the majority of this being invested in adult social care services to support some of the county's most vulnerable individuals and those that care for them.

ECC's ambitious capital programme, which was announced in the papers for its January Cabinet meeting, also includes a £1.34 billion spend over the next four years on major infrastructure projects, such as new schools and major road improvements. The spend in 2021 is set to be £290m - 50% more than the last two years' capital budget.

Cllr David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council, said: "While this year's budget has been produced under the most testing circumstances the council and our communities have ever faced, I want people to take away a message of hope today.

"We are committed to building on the work we have done to date – not just through the pandemic, but over the past decade since the last recession – to help Essex to emerge healthier and with a brighter future.

“I am extremely proud that we have been able to set out robust plans today for how we will do this, while at the same time achieving a 0% county council tax increase for residents and just a 1.5% increase from the Government’s Adult Social Care precept.

“As an organisation, we have taken great strides over the last ten years, investing in Essex to benefit the communities and businesses that call the county home. We have a strong record of sound financial management and I am confident we will recover – we have done it before, and we will do it again.”

### **Essex County Council announces new measures to rebuild economy**

Essex County Council has pledged its commitment to restart the county’s economy and help people recover from the pandemic, with dedicated measures to boost businesses, upskill people and create new employment opportunities in growth sectors including health and social care, construction and the green economy.

500 apprenticeships and 500 new Kickstart Essex placements will be created to provide employment opportunities to young people across Essex.

The Council’s 2021/22 Budget and 12-month [Organisation Plan](#), produced under the most testing circumstances the Council has ever faced, was approved by Full Council on 23 February and sets out the measures for securing inclusive economic growth from which everyone can benefit.

Each year Essex County Council spends around £900 million of its budget on Essex businesses and in October 2020 announced a £100m economic growth investment strategy and £5m economic recovery fund which will be rolled out in 2021/22.

Unemployment is at a 30-year high in Essex, with young people under 25 feeling the greatest impact. The number of well-qualified adults (with skills at Levels 3 and above) is increasing but remains below the national average.

New measures will tackle increased unemployment and help people develop the skills they need to thrive post Covid-19. The Kickstart Essex scheme, launched in the county in 2020, will continue to support the creation of new jobs for 16-24 year-olds. It enables small and medium sized enterprises to access Government funding to pay a young person’s salary for six months, and so far 124 local businesses have registered, enabling 200 young unemployed people to get into work. Another 500 Kickstart Essex placements will be created in 2021/22.

The Essex Accelerator programme, which has been piloted since November 2020 with Colbea, will continue to support those at risk of unemployment, or recently unemployed, to set up their own businesses. The pilot eight-week intensive online course gave 25 people advice on starting out and enabled six new business start-ups, creating 12 new jobs. Four more courses will run in 2021.

Essex County Council’s Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Councillor Tony Ball, said: “We are dedicated to building back the Essex economy as our highest priority in the coming year and in a way that everyone benefits. We’ll get people back into work, give businesses the support they need to survive and grow, and enable people to grow their skills so they can thrive as Essex recovers. We will do all we can to get Essex back in business.”

On 23 February 2021 the Council allocated a further £7.2 million for Covid-19 business recovery grants, in addition to the £2.2 million for business adaptation grants announced in October 2020. A

new Additional Business Support Grant was announced which is being made available to Essex self-employed people and small and medium-sized businesses who do not have rateable premises and have been excluded from accessing other Covid-19 financial support schemes. Grants of up to £5,000 are available.

An additional £1m of Coronavirus Business Interruption Loans has been made available, working with Let's Do Business Finance, and an additional £2 million of investment to ensure a successful reopening of the Essex economy.

The extension of the Essex Business Adaptation Grant scheme until July 2021, meanwhile, will give many more businesses the opportunity to access grants of up to £1,500 to help them be safer for customers and employees. The grants can also be used to help diversify the way businesses operate, fund new technology and support home working.

- Essex County Council's 2021 Organisation Plan was approved by Cabinet on 23 February 2021. It responds to the challenges faced by the Covid-19 pandemic and sets out a path to recovery that will allow it to fulfil its strategic aims. See <https://www.essex.gov.uk/plans-and-strategies>
- Kickstart offers funding to create new jobs for 16 to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit at risk of being long-term unemployed. It provides financial support for six months covering 100% of the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage (depending on age) plus other necessary employment contributions. Using the service is free to small and medium sized businesses and public sector organisations. email [kickstartessex@essex.gov.uk](mailto:kickstartessex@essex.gov.uk)
- Essex County Council has partnered with Colbea to deliver the Essex Accelerator Programme. Find out more via social media at Twitter: [colbeabizadvice](#) Facebook: [colchesterbusinesscentre](#) or Linked in: [colbea](#)
- The [BEST Growth Hub](#) helps businesses understand the support available, telephone 0300 303 4864.
- Grant advice and support for Essex business is available on the County Council website at the following weblink: [Support for businesses: Financial support for your business - Essex County Council](#)

### **£100,000 fund announced for new emotional wellbeing initiatives to support people affected by the pandemic**

This April will see the opening of a new fund to support initiatives focused on helping people whose emotional wellbeing has been affected by Covid-19.

The £100,000 "Emotional Wellbeing: New Opportunities Fund" will open on 1 April for applications from individuals or groups who need help in kickstarting their ideas.

Small grants of £100 to £5,000 will be available.

Suitable projects could target support for vulnerable children, young people or adults. They must meet one or more of these outcomes:

- Managing and coping with change

- Separation and loss
- Managing and coping with anxiety
- Maintaining healthy relationships
- Staying active
- Education and learning.

Successful applicants could use the grant in a range of ways:

- To develop their thinking about how to respond to pandemic impacts
- To build new knowledge
- To develop or try new ways of working post-pandemic
- To enable accessibility and help people reconnect with self, family and communities as we emerge from lockdown.

Examples could be, but not exclusively:

- To develop a new idea or try a new delivery concept
- To access or develop specific/unique training to meet a niche and unmet need
- To buy new resources to enable a different way of supporting delivery of work
- To develop new resources to support delivery of work.

Cllr Louise McKinlay, Cabinet Member for Children and Families at Essex County Council, said: "The pandemic has affected us all in so many ways. For some, they are experiencing emotional issues for the first time whilst for others, the situation has deepened the struggle.

"Although it is good that we can see light at the end of the tunnel, the months ahead are going to be bumpy and uncertain. We know many are struggling with their mental wellbeing and will need extra or different support to get back on track with the social, physical and emotional impacts of the pandemic.

"Our local communities have been fantastic in reaching out to people and a number of ideas have come forward seeking funding support. I hope that by making this money available, we will see the rollout of many initiatives that will help even further.

"If you've been involved in providing support, in receiving it or you've just seen how the pandemic has impacted people around you, you might have some great ideas for new or better ways to help people to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. If so, start developing your ideas now for when the fund opens in April."

People can register their interest from 15 March by email to [CandFCommissioning@essex.gov.uk](mailto:CandFCommissioning@essex.gov.uk)

## **Essex residents reminded to stay vigilant as latest Covid-19 data is published**

The [latest Covid-19 data available for Essex](#) (excluding Southend and Thurrock) has been published.

In the seven days up to 18 February, there were 1,366 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Essex. This is the latest date for which complete data is available.

Up to 18 February, the weekly case rate for Essex is 91.7 per 100,000. This is the latest date for which complete data is available.

Up to 18 February, the highest weekly case rates were in Brentwood and Tendring, with rates of 118.2 and 145.3, respectively.

Up to 18 February, the area with the lowest case rate was Maldon with a rate of 57.

Cllr John Spence, Essex County Council Cabinet Member for Adults and Health, said: “Case rates continue to decline at a reasonable rate, albeit less rapidly than in previous weeks, but we have seen significant reductions in a number of areas which had seen higher rates recently, including Tendring, Harlow and Braintree.

“However, there is some variation within Essex, with Brentwood, which had shown a low rate recently, now seeing an increase in recent days. We do expect this to fall again, but is a stark reminder to us all that we simply cannot drop our guard now.

“We were given a very clear timeline out of the pandemic this week and I know this has been the welcome news we have all been waiting for, but we need to remember it will take a collective effort to get us there.

“I would urge every single resident in Essex to please keep following the guidance – socially distance, wash your hands regularly and wear a face covering if you are able to. It is vital that anyone that has to go out to work also [gets tested frequently](#) and if you test positive, you must self-isolate.”

You can view the full data for Essex in our coronavirus hub:

- [cases in Essex, per 100,000 per week](#)
- [cases in Essex by age band](#)
- [cases in Essex by district, per 100,000 per week](#)
- [hospital beds occupied by Covid patients in Essex](#)

## **97% of children offered one of their preferred secondary schools**

Today, Monday 1 March, families of almost 16,400 pupils will discover the outcome of their secondary school applications.

97% (more than 19 out of every 20 children) are being offered one of their named preferences of secondary school, with 91.15% of parents being offered their 1st or 2nd preference.

This year, 99% of families applied online and will receive their offer by email or by logging onto the Essex County Council website.

Cllr Ray Gooding, Essex County Council’s Cabinet Member for Education, said: “I am delighted that, once again, we have been able to offer so many pupils their preferred secondary school place.

“It has been a challenging year for young people across the county and I hope those embarking on this exciting next step enjoy their last few months at Primary and Junior School before they set out on their next academic adventure.”

You can find out more about what to do after your offer [here](#).

### **Essex prepares for return to schools and colleges**

With a phased return to the classroom for secondary school and college pupils set to start from Monday 8 March, settings are currently putting arrangements in place for pupils to take part in asymptomatic Covid-19 testing as per the latest Government guidance.

The Government has stated that secondary schools and colleges should offer three rapid Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) to pupils as they return to on-site education and that the return of secondary-age pupils can be flexible to allow for this to take place.

This is aimed at identifying positive cases more quickly and breaking the chain of transmission within the school community.

It is down to each individual secondary schools or colleges to decide how they fulfil this guidance and there are two options for schools and colleges to use.

Schools and colleges have the option of offering all three tests on site and flexibility in terms of how they organise pupil’s phased return from 8 March.

Alternatively, Essex County Council (ECC) has put in place increased community testing capacity so that pupils could take the first of these three LFTs in advance of their return to school or college. If schools decide to use this option, the second and third tests would then need to be taken on the school site three to five days apart.

Community testing would be carried out at one of the existing rapid testing centres across Essex. Additional capacity to support pupil testing only is also being put in place for the next couple of weeks in the form of three temporary rapid testing sites in Clacton, Dunmow and Braintree.

Parents and carers will be sent specific instructions from their child’s school or college about what they need to do and are encouraged to speak to their setting if they have any questions or concerns.

Testing is voluntary and will not be done unless consent has been given. It is also not a determining factor for whether pupils are able to return.

However, it is something that is being strongly encourage so that potential transmission of the virus within the school community is reduced.

If they are taking part in testing, pupils can return to face-to-face education following their first negative test result. Once these three initial tests have been carried out, pupils will be provided with rapid tests to be carried out twice a week at home.

If they test positive, they will need to self-isolate immediately in line with current Covid-19 guidance and not return to school until this is complete.

The results of these home tests must be reported to NHS Test and Trace as per the instructions in the test kit as soon as the test is completed (results will be given in around 30 minutes). The results should also be shared with your child’s school or college, whether positive or negative, to support them with contact tracing.

The DfE is now also recommending that face coverings are worn by secondary-age pupils in classrooms, only where social distancing cannot be maintained and unless a young person is medically exempt from wearing one. Secondary and college pupils are already required to wear a face covering when moving around school buildings in corridors and communal areas, as well as when travelling to and from school on public transport.

Primary school pupils

For primary school-age children, on-site attendance at school on and from 8 March will be mandatory.

The advice from Public Health England is that there is no requirement for primary age pupils to be tested for Covid-19 before returning. This is because there are limited public health benefits attached to testing primary pupils in terms of stopping the spread of Covid-19 and younger children are less likely to catch the virus.

Primary school pupils are also not required to wear a face covering at school, however adults may be asked to wear a face covering when entering the school site.

Cllr Ray Gooding, Essex County Council's Cabinet Member for Education, said: "We know how eager schools and colleges are to see children and young people back in the classroom. By increasing our community rapid testing capacity, schools will have greater flexibility in terms of how they are able to fulfil the Government guidance.

"If schools take up the offer to encourage their pupils to have a rapid test in advance of 8 March, this will help prevent pupils with symptoms spread the virus within schools when they return and make arrangements for subsequent testing in schools less onerous."

Dr Mike Gogarty, Essex County Council's Director of Public Health, said: "We strongly advise parents of secondary-age children to get their children tested. By using our network of rapid testing centres, they can do so before children return to the classroom safe in the knowledge that they are free of the virus."

### **Households with school-age children offered free Covid-19 tests**

The government has this week confirmed that twice-weekly testing using rapid Lateral Flow Tests (LFT) will be available to adults in all households with primary, secondary school and college aged children and young people, including childcare and support bubbles.

Essex families with school-age children are being encouraged to access the free home tests and take part in regular testing to help identify more asymptomatic Covid-19 cases and quickly break chains of transmission before they enter schools and colleges.

Twice-weekly testing will also be offered to adults working in the wider school community, including bus drivers and after school club leaders.

Individuals will only be able to take part if they, their household or bubble do not have coronavirus symptoms or have not been told to self-isolate.

If anyone is showing Covid-19 symptoms, they will need to [access a PCR test via the national system](#).

Where an individual has tested positive for Covid-19 in the past 90 days and they have not had any new symptoms since completing their self-isolation period, they do not need to be tested as part of this approach, but must continue to follow Covid-19 guidance.

This latest announcement comes in addition to the [testing requirements announced by the government for secondary school pupils](#) who will start to return to the classroom from Monday 8 March. Primary school children do not need to take part in regular asymptomatic testing.

Cabinet Member for Education, Cllr Ray Gooding said: “We welcome the latest announcement from the Government around increased and regular testing of families with school-aged children. This will go a long way in allowing pupils to stay in school and reduce the need for whole bubbles to self-isolate.

“We have always been very clear that testing is a vital part of our Covid-19 response in Essex and our priority has always been the education and wellbeing of all children and young people. I would strongly encourage all adults in families with school-aged children to do their bit and help to ensure that once pupils return to the classroom, they can stay there.”

[LFTs are available to families in different ways](#), including through employers if they offer testing to employees, at a local test site, by collecting a home test kit from a test site, or by ordering a home test kit online.

A secondary PCR test will be required for positive LFTs which are taken at home, either through at home PCR testing or at a local PCR testing site. As with student testing, this testing of households is encouraged but not mandatory.

Dr Mike Gogarty, Director for Public Health at Essex County Council, said: “As many as 1 in 3 people testing positive for Covid-19 don’t show symptoms and so this latest announcement is extremely welcome news.

“Regular asymptomatic testing will be vital to the easing of restrictions over the coming months. We need everyone to do their bit and remember, if you test positive, you must self-isolate immediately.”

Regular rapid testing does not replace current Covid-19 guidance and everyone must continue to follow the rules around hands, face, space.

## **Highways**

At last some dry weather after a fairly challenging winter. Damage to roads and pavements due to rain and freezing conditions is beginning to become apparent, in particular, potholes and tarmac lifting around manholes and drains. Please keep reporting them using the on-line reporting tool and also any blocked drains or other defects you know about. It will take a while to catch up, but the highways teams are working flat out to get to them as soon as they can. Hopefully we are through the worst of the winter weather, and things will improve as spring progresses.

Simon Walsh

County Councillor, Thaxted Division