

County Councillor's Annual Report 2020-2021

As you will imagine, the past 12 months have been dominated by events associated with the COVID 19 pandemic.

This has placed your County Council at the heart of our collective response to the various lockdowns and recurrent surges and declines in infection rates.

The County Council has had to act swiftly and decisively as each new element of the pandemic presented itself, and this has tested our Officers to the limit and the senior political team, the County Council Cabinet.

Without recounting every twist and turn, I will summarise the key elements of the past year.

The first lockdown meant a number of outward facing services had to be closed in rapid order. Libraries, Country Parks and Recycling Centres were the most obvious, also Essex Outdoors which provides outdoor activities for schools, mirrored the School closures.

In parallel we had to mobilise welfare support for those who were shielding and ensure all those residents who were known to social services were supported. Care home residents and vulnerable children were prioritised with extra support drafted in.

Staff furloughed due to closures of other services willingly offered to step into the welfare space.

All the while, our Public Health Officers along side NHS colleagues closely monitored and reacted to changes in case rate trends across the County.

Recognising the risks associated with Care Homes, Essex CC was a pioneer in getting testing kits into those homes and continues to take the lead with testing with rapid testing sites across the County and now collection points available from several larger libraries, with more to follow.

Keeping track of the disease has been a main priority as it allows targeted interventions to occur.

We have led on providing extra school meals during holiday times for school children in need, have provided holiday activity days and continue to support young people through our deployment of laptop computers, either donated or purchased, with many 1000s already given out.

We were able to support Foodbanks across the County with funding for supplies or to help with storage and delivery costs.

The County Council was quick to assemble 3500 volunteers to do much of the support work needed, and this in addition to the many 100s of local volunteers who stepped forward to support their neighbours and friends with prescription collections, delivering shopping or getting meals out to those who needed them. The Essex Outdoors Centre at Mersea Island became a 'Meals on Wheels' kitchen getting lunches out across the island and to villages nearby on the mainland.

Using Government support and working with the Districts we have been able to ensure that various grants were made available and distributed to businesses and individuals adversely affected by the lockdowns and forced closures of their businesses.

As you are probably aware, I am on the Cabinet and in the early stages were meeting almost daily to assimilate what was going on and at times making those difficult decisions under emergency powers.

Throughout we were working in the best interests on our residents, and although some were controversial at the time, were done with due consideration and discussion.

Perhaps more difficult was the reopening of our facilities, as we then had more knowledge of the disease, and what was required to ensure public safety. For example, in my area of responsibility making sure recycling centres were safe to use. This caused problems as the onsite capacity had to be reduced, and this was compounded by weeks of lockdown, people with lots of time on their hands having major clear outs and added to that working from home increasing household waste by around 20%!

As we emerge from our present Lockdown, we are starting to slowly relax these measures, assessing as we go, and ever mindful that public health is our number one priority.

It would be easy to imagine that with COVID nothing else could go on. But business as usual continued, and despite the pandemic the County Council has notched up some considerable achievements.

Our budget process is now settled for this coming year with a static position on the County Council element of the tax. It takes 12 months of hard work by officers and Cabinet Members to design a budget that is fair and equitable for our citizens, manages to deliver key services across the County and at the same time demonstrates financial prudence and probity that is the hallmark of this Authority. Our budget is balanced, delivers a lot, and continues to provide good value for money.

The Essex Climate Commission has met over the past 12 months and through a series of working groups provided an interim report which carries a raft of recommendations which will help this Council achieve net zero carbon targets well ahead of the Government's own.

Aside from our very successful tree planting programme, we are already decarbonising our buildings by installing solar panels, replacing inefficient boilers, and better insulating them. We are also supporting less well-off households with grant schemes to better insulate their homes and encouraging householders to get solar panels and join our energy saving schemes.

There are plans to have more electric vehicles in our fleet and we have been a key partner in the UK's first forecourt electric car charging station near Braintree.

Our Country Parks have had a bumper year as people re-engage with their outside environment. Nearly 1.5 million visits have been recorded over the past 12 months. Unfortunately wear and tear is a consequence and some investment this coming year will be necessary. Our floods team is still regarded as one of the best in the country, and we have several 100 houses 'better protected from flooding'. Our programme continues this year with £2.6 million allocated for further works.

Highways always attracts criticism about road conditions, but it is one of the better performing services in the country. Very wet weather and freezing events can cause the roads to break down very quickly, but our pothole repairs number in the 1000s, and our annual resurfacing programme is all set for another season.

As mentioned earlier, our social services have had a busy time, and will continue to do so, there is still a legacy to deal with, particularly for young people, who have lost out on schooling, socialising with their peers and many other things besides. Education and Children's services are working closely together alongside our Youth services teams to ensure that this part of our community is fully supported.

Simon Walsh, County Councillor for the Thaxted Division.