

Cllr Simon Walsh – Parish Update

March 2013

1. ECC's **budget for 2013-2014 was agreed by Full Council** on 12 February, with vulnerable people, businesses, motorists, pedestrians and first time buyers among those who will benefit. The council has also agreed to freeze council tax for the third successive year.

The authority would be spending £180 million over the next four years on maintaining and enhancing its network of 8,500 miles of roads and footpaths. This would mean the council will be investing an additional £35 million over the next two years, on top of the amount it had already pledged to spend.

Under the budget agreement the council will also:

- Invest almost £18 million in providing nearly 1,000 additional school places.
- Invest £2 million in providing accommodation for vulnerable people.
- Ensure Essex is a place where businesses can grow and flourish by investing £7.7 million in improving broadband capacity and set aside £2 million to support the Essex Economic Growth Strategy.
- Review options for investing £1 million into a Community Resilience Fund to build capacity within communities to tackle local issues themselves.

The council will make £55 million savings and efficiencies, which will be delivered with the minimum possible impact on front line services.

2. In partnership with the district and borough authorities, ECC will also launch a **Local Authority Mortgage Scheme** to help first time buyers get onto the property ladder and get the property market moving.

Across the county there are up to 6,000 people who can't afford to take out a mortgage to fund the purchase of their first home. The support ECC will be offering, which will take the form of a financial guarantee for up to 20 per cent of the loan value, will help some of these residents.

Helping people to buy their first home is crucial in achieving a sustainable housing market and this move will contribute to the economic development of the local Essex economy.

3. Essex residents will continue to benefit from **improvements to Essex County Council's Customer Services** as part of a programme introduced in 2012 to make it easier for residents to find the information they need, whether it's through www.essex.gov.uk or the award winning Customer Service Centre.

Over the past year, improvements to the website have seen 1.4m visitors benefit from the ability to book, report and pay for more services online, fitting in with their busy lifestyles and enabling Essex County Council to deliver services more efficiently.

- www.essex.gov.uk/schools - providing greater online functionality such as the catchment area search for school admissions and the ability to apply online for free school meals and school transport
- www.essex.gov.uk/adultlearning - an improved way to search and book courses
- www.essex.gov.uk/highways - a quicker and more efficient way to report a highway defects
- www.essex.gov.uk/fis - the ability to search for childcare providers across Essex

- Plus an online appointment booking service for birth and death registrations enabling customers to book their appointment with a Registrar any time of the day.

In addition, the call centre has been upgraded and its capacity increase to ensure that as many calls as possible can be resolved at the first point of contact. During 2012, there were more than 650,000 calls to the Customer Service Centre. During 2013/14 the improvements will continue to a number of online services and residents will be able to apply for blue disabled parking badges online as well as refer themselves or a relative for a social care assessment.

4. Essex County Council is launching a **new website** to keep residents informed of plans to improve the **provision of superfast broadband** in the county.

The Superfast Essex website will feature information on how the project is progressing, case studies of those that have benefited from faster broadband speeds, and a link to a tool that checks current broadband speed. The website will also allow residents and businesses to register their need for better broadband where they are. It is important that as many residents and businesses sign up to www.superfastessex.org as possible. This information will then be used to decide which areas of Essex will receive an upgrade first.

The county council has been working with partners across Greater Essex as well as BDUK and now the procurement process can begin. At this stage, the project has commenced an Open Market Review to determine the exact area where to spend public money to bring better speeds to Greater Essex. This consultation is expected to be complete by early April and then by summer a preferred supplier will be contracted to begin works.

Currently there are approximately 180,000 households (30%) in the county that do not receive superfast broadband services of at least 24mbs. The aim of this project is to enable at least 90% of Essex premises to have access to superfast broadband and the remaining premises having access to at least 2mbs by 2015.

To register your interest in getting superfast broadband, or to find out more about the project, visit the new website www.superfastessex.org.

5. Essex County Council (ECC) has announced a new **policy on the use of A-boards (advertising boards) on the public highway**, which is designed to support local businesses while ensuring the safety of pedestrians.

Last year ECC carried out a review into the **use of A-boards**, in order to determine a universal policy that could be adopted across the county. All district, borough and city councils were invited to submit their views, as well as local businesses and ECC Trading Standards.

After reviewing the responses ECC has now taken the decision that it will allow the use of A-boards on the public highway. Some simple policy guidelines are being produced which set out ECC's expectations for the use of A-boards, to assist local businesses and ensure the safety of pedestrians and motorists. Once approved these guidelines will be available on the ECC website

As district, borough and city councils also have powers relating to A-boards under their planning responsibilities, they will be able to exercise flexibility locally where required.

6. At the Cabinet meeting on 19 February, ECC has approved the **public health priorities for the county** in preparation for taking over responsibility for Public Health on 1 April this year.

Currently public health services are commissioned by the five Primary Care Trusts. When the PCTs are abolished on 31 March the local authority will take over this responsibility. The vision for Essex is that residents should enjoy long, healthy, disease-free lives - wherever they live and whoever they are. The Department of Health has confirmed that ECC will receive ring-fenced grants of £48,874,000 for 2013/2014 and £50,242,000 in 2014/2015 to commission public health services.

The allocation covers both mandated services such as the National Health Checks programme, National Child Measurement Programme and Sexual Health Services and any further services that ECC wishes to commission locally to improve the health of Essex residents and tackle health inequalities. These will be based on the needs of local Essex communities, shaped by the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. Some of the local priorities are as follows:

- Smoking
- Alcohol and Drug Misuse
- Breast Feeding
- Obesity
- Physical Activity
- Mental Health

7. On 13 February Essex County Council Registration Service launched the **Tell Us Once** (TUU) programme, a government initiative aimed at easing the burden of notifying multiple local and central government departments of a birth or death. Tell Us Once is an optional service for residents or friend/relatives of residents to be able to report births and deaths only once to local and central government departments; who will, in turn, inform other agencies on the citizen's behalf. The programme will include remote offices in Billericay, Halstead, Witham Library, Harwich Hospital and Great Dunmow from 18 February.

The service is an addition to the statutory registration of births and deaths already being delivered by Registration Officers across Essex. Citizens reporting a birth or death will be able to take advantage of the Tell Us Once service either face-to-face at the time of registration, or at a later date by completing the [online form](#) or by telephone using a case reference number provided by the Registrar. In Essex the potential benefit for customers is extensive as 12,500 deaths and 17,000 births are registered across the county every year.

The information can be shared with a number of central and local government departments including:

- Housing Benefit Office
- Council Tax
- Council Tax Benefit Office
- Libraries
- Blue Badges
- Adult and Children's services
- Council housing
- Department for Work and Pensions
- HM Revenue and Customs
- Identity and passport service
- Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency
- Ministry of Defence, Service Personnel and Veteran's Agency
- Jobcentre Plus

For more information on the Tell Us Once service in Essex, please visit [Tell Us Once births](#) or [Tell Us Once deaths](#)