

MALDON DIVISION ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2025 – COUNCILLOR JANE FLEMING

I'm delighted to present my fourth annual report for the Parish Council's Annual General Meeting. Firstly, I want to begin by thanking the Parish Council and community groups in the Parish for all their hard work and time given.

In normal circumstances, this would have been my final report produced at the end of my term as County Councillor for the Maldon Division, however, Greater Essex (Essex County Council, Southend and Thurrock Unitary Council geographies) was selected to join the Devolution Priority Programme and invited along with the 12 District Councils to develop a proposal for local government reorganisation. This meant that the County Council elections due to take place this coming May were cancelled and a consultation launched by Central Government on their Devolution proposals which include the introduction of a directly elected Mayor from May 2026. The rationale for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation can be briefly summarised as 'a vision for simpler, more sustainable, local government structures, alongside a transfer of power out of Westminster through devolution that will increase value for money for council taxpayers'.

Essex County Council is ranked as the third most productive council in the country, achieving the most value for residents per pound spent, with a low tax base and commitment to strong financial management and effective service delivery, but the 2024/25 financial year was a very challenging year.

The Council continues to operate in a climate of uncertainty and volatility - inflation remains a concern, as it is still above the Bank of England target rate, interest rates remain high and the Council continues to face a significant level of uncertainty in the medium term. Like many councils up and down the country, Essex County Council experienced pressure on both Adult's and Children's Services and Home to School Transport. The care market continues to struggle with capacity, and there is still uncertainty around the impacts of increased Employers National Insurance Contributions and Minimum Wage responsibilities on providers.

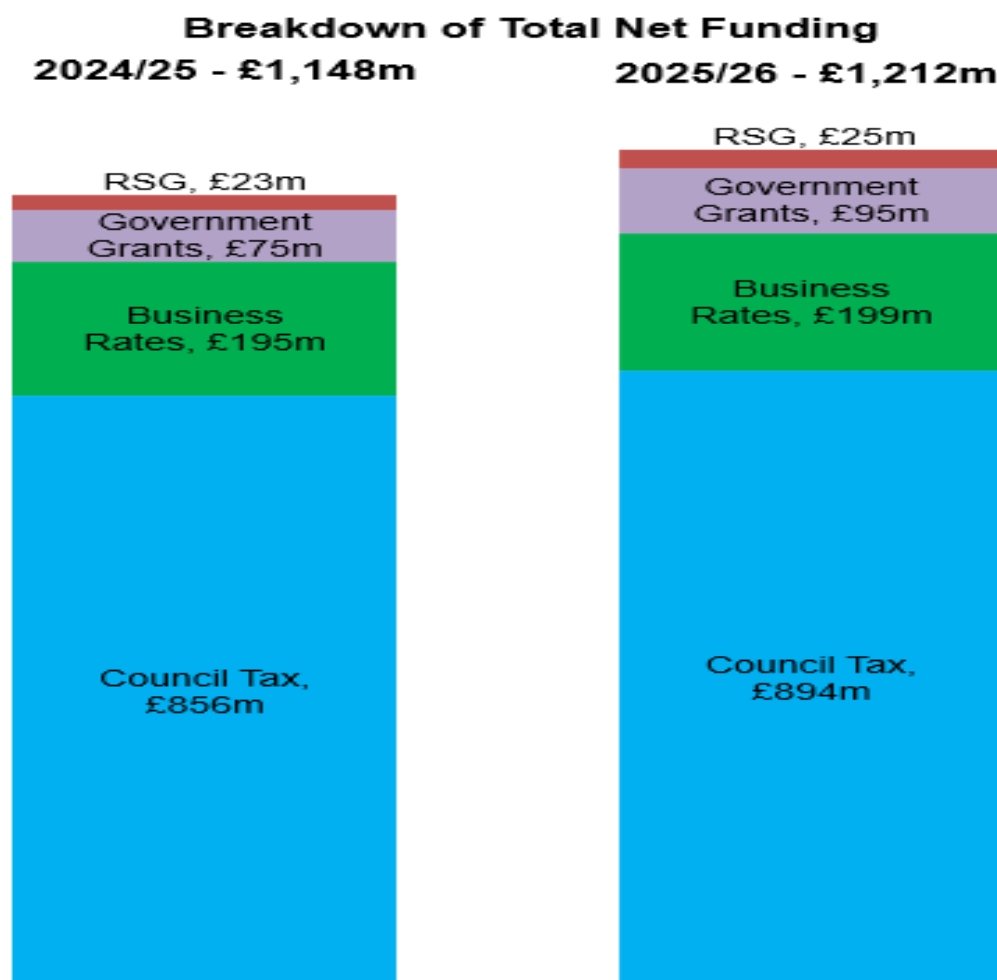
Essex County Council has a legal responsibility to operate within a balanced budget. With the changes and reductions in Government grant funding over recent years, coupled with increasing and more complex demand for core services such as caring for the elderly, protecting vulnerable children and supporting those families who need it, the financial situation continues to be very challenging.

In February, Essex County Council agreed its new Budget for 2025/26. The Council again had a stark choice in balancing its budget - of increasing taxes or facing unacceptable cuts in services. The budget was balanced against a backdrop of some of the most challenging times that local government has ever faced. New financial pressures caused by measures introduced in the October Budget and continuing cost of living crisis, high energy costs and inflation levels, and the war in Ukraine have all landed on top of existing challenges to reform and reshape our services and respond to huge increases in demand from those who need our help most.

The Everyone's Essex Annual Plan and budget was approved at Full Council in February and due to the financial challenges facing local government, the budget for 2025/26 is increasing. Gross expenditure to be incurred in the delivery of Council services in 2025/26 is **£2,718m**. After taking income and specific grants into account, the net cost of services amounts to **£1,212m**, which is an increase of **£64m** or 6% over 2024/25. The net cost of services was set at **£1,212.0 million** and the net revenue budget requirement was set at **£1,117.3m** (net cost of services less general government grants) for 2025/6.

The total council tax funding requirement was set **at £891.6m** for 2025/26 – Essex County Council's element of the council tax was increased by **3.75%** comprising of a 1.75% increase in general council tax and 2.0% adult social care precept. This spending supports the most vulnerable in our communities including older people, people with learning difficulties, mental health difficulties and physical and sensory impairments. The precept is being used to insulate Adult Social Care from having to make higher savings, and support growth in need caused by changes in the demographics of our population and inflation, including the national living wage rise.

This resulted in the Essex County Council element of the council tax being **£1,579.59** for a Band D property in 2025/26 - this is an increase of **£1.09** per household per week.



Net expenditure of £1,212m is funded by council tax, business rates, Revenue Support Grant and General Government Grants. Income from Council Tax is the largest funding stream and will make up 75% of our funding in 2025/26.

A public consultation on the proposed budget was undertaken during November and December 2024. Through this exercise, the Council gathered the views of residents and those who run businesses within the county. There were 2,105 responses to the consultation and the key messages from respondents to the consultation are that pressures on healthcare and the NHS are viewed by participants as the most important issue facing Essex today. Participants also see pressures on social care provision and crime/community safety as key issues to be addressed. Topics of most concern for people personally are the condition of roads and pavements, crime levels and anti-social behaviour. When asked about things that should be prioritised for immediate action, participants identified developing Essex's infrastructure as the top issue. This was followed by supporting those who care for the sick or vulnerable people and securing high standards in education.

In January 2024, the Mid & South Essex Integrated Care Board launched a Consultation on 'Proposed Changes to Services at Local Community Hospitals', with the future of St Peter's Hospital and medical services in the District at its heart. The Consultation finished on Thursday 11th April 2024 and at its close over 5,000 responses were received. Following the publication of the consultation responses, the Leader of Essex County Council convened a 'Maldon Summit' to discuss health and other infrastructure issues in the District. Following such wide spread public concern and intense discussion with NHS partners, it was announced that a working group would be set up to review the situation. The group have just reported back (end March 2025) and recommended that St Peter's Hospital is kept operational for approximately five years while capital funding is assembled for a purpose-built new facility, ideally on a portion of the current site. This new facility would house outpatient services and create vital new primary care space for local GP services. The group have also recommended that Inpatient Care cannot efficiently be operated from St Peter's due to low utilisation and that pre and post-natal appointments that currently take place at St Peter's each year should continue while maintaining midwife led births at the WJC birthing centre at Braintree Community Hospital. The working group's recommendations will be put into a comprehensive Decision Making Business Case and the ICB will then review and consider this business case during the summer.

A further Maldon Summit is planned shortly to continue the discussion about infrastructure issues in the District.



Maldon Summit with Sir John Whittingdale, NHS Partners and Maldon District Council – August 2024

The year sadly featured the loss of Arrows Taxis, which operated the Dengie Dart services, which many residents in the District relied on to access shopping and Broomfield Hospital. In September, the Maldon & Heybridge Transport Bus User Group convened a roundtable with Dame Priti Patel & Sir John Whittingdale, Essex County Council Passenger Transport and the major bus operators in the District. A new 45 Service has been launched running from Burnham through villages into South Woodham Ferrers and a new 99 service running from Maldon through the Woodhams, Little Baddow, Danbury and on to Broomfield Hospital which

partially make up for the loss of some of the services. Both local Bus User Groups continue to push for better transport links for the District.



Meeting with Bus Operators, Essex Passenger Transport, Dame Priti Patel & Sir John Whittingdale – September 2024

Concerns about speed and weight of traffic through our villages continue to feature highly in my email inbox. The Local Highways Panel work continued very slowly this year, with delivery of schemes once again impacted by resource issues at Essex Highways and as a result the Local Highways Panels are currently under review. I continue to argue for schemes within the Maldon Division and District to be a funding priority as speed reduction and highways safety are vital for those living and driving on our rural roads.

On a more positive note, I'm pleased to report that the Member Led Local Works Scheme, has proved to be a useful vehicle to action repairs to low priority defects such as replacement signs, bollards, barriers that make our towns and villages look untidy. Many historic defects in the Division have been repaired this year through this scheme.

The ECC Locality Fund reopened for applications last May with £5k allocated per Division. Again, I'm pleased to say that every penny of the funding specifically allocated for the Maldon Division Locality Fund, was spent. Organisations that benefitted this year were The Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival, North Fambridge Parish Council for the creation of a community seating area and the Woodham Mortimer Village Hall Committee to fund the renovation of the hall. My thanks go to the councils and community groups who approached me with their projects and for the hard work put in.

The remaining Locality funding was again directed to a new fund – the 'Local Community Fund.' The Local Community Fund operates as twelve separate funds, each covering the area of a district, borough or city council. The fund for each district was £5,200 for each county councillor representing the relevant area. The fund again had to be spent on one of three areas: Levelling up, Tackling Climate Change, and Youth services.

We (the ECC Division Members for the Maldon District) decided to direct funding specifically to help organisations in the District to purchase educational and pastoral care resources and to projects to support

young people in the District. The projects funded were Maldon Rugby Club to purchase training equipment for their thriving youth teams, SEND4All to purchase outdoor play and sport equipment for young people with special educational needs, Action for Family Carers to support their Young Carers Respite Club. We also provided funding to the Vine Schools Trust to provide 1:1 Counselling Service, Maldon & District Community & Voluntary Service for their Community Gaming Initiative and the Beyond the Ballot Conference run by Youth Services for young people in Essex.

The Locality Fund and the Local Community Fund open again for applications this May, so if you have a project or community initiative, please do contact me with your suggestions/applications at the email address below.

Alongside directing funding through the Locality and Local Community Funds, I've also supported organisations in the District to apply for other sources of funding such as the Essex Community Initiatives Fund and the Essex Passenger Transport 'Love Your Bus' grant programme launched in December so if you need my support with a project please contact me.

Throughout the year, I have continued to support residents with their concerns and to assist parishes with their issues requiring escalation. If you have concerns about an issue in the Division, please email me:

cllr.jane.fleming@essex.gov.uk



Studying Bus Infrastructure!