

# ECC Report February 2025

## Councils will seek to participate in Devolution Priority Programme



As I reported last month, and following the extraordinary council meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> January, Essex County Council, alongside Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council, have written to the government to request inclusion on the government's Priority Programme for devolution, which includes a commitment to local government reorganisation, and a request for the postponement of elections scheduled for May this year in their areas.

Although Government indicated that we would hear by the end of January, so far, no response has been received.

Southend-on-Sea City Council has no planned elections for 2025.

The Leader of Essex County Council, Councillor Kevin Bentley, said:

"Following the debate and given Government's direction on this subject, we are one step closer to bring devolution to Essex, and I want to express my gratitude to all the councillors who contributed.

"Today's meeting showed that despite our differing political views, we all want to make Essex as great as it can be for our residents and businesses.

"Devolution is key to making this happen. It presents us with an opportunity for growth and productivity across the county like no other.

"I would also like to thank our partners in Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council for their continued collaboration. Together, we are embarking on a journey that will transform Essex for the better."

The councils will now wait to hear from the government on whether Greater Essex has been accepted as part of the Priority Programme for Devolution.

## **Joint statement from the Leaders of Essex County Council, Thurrock Council and Southend-on-Sea City Council.**

***Leader of Essex County Council, Councillor Kevin Bentley said:*** "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve local government, services and outcomes in Essex.

"Devolution and reorganisation is the best chance we have to rethink our system and bring more power into the hands of local people. It also gives us the best chance of offering decent public services at a price taxpayers can afford.

"This is a significant step in our county's future. Together with our colleagues at Southend-on-Sea City Council and Thurrock Council, we are embarking on a journey that will transform Essex for the better."

***Leader of Southend-on-Sea City Council, Councillor Daniel Cowan, said:*** "Devolution offers major opportunities to drive the investment and growth that is needed in Southend-on-Sea and across Greater Essex.

"Similarly, reorganisation gives the chance to make positive changes to local services and as a well-established unitary authority, we know the benefits of single tier local Government and are well placed to make the most of any changes.

"We know that for most people terms like reorganisation and devolution will mean little and they rightly just want to know how their services will be improved. That is how we will approach this – firmly focused on better services and outcomes for local people.

"I am pleased that collectively we have made this momentous decision and can now submit the letter to Government to be at the front of the devolution queue and shape the future with our partners across the county."

**Leader of Thurrock Council, Councillor John Kent said:** "This is the most significant change for local government in more than a generation. We want to make sure that we are at the forefront of that change and our residents and business see the greatest benefit.

"Plans for devolution and local government reorganisation will see powers taken from Westminster and given to local government, which can better drive change, growth and prosperity for Essex's residents, communities and businesses.

"Essex is blessed with almost unparalleled opportunity – it is home to two international airports, two freeports and a diverse businesses community – and we believe that by devolving powers to new locally based strategic councils we are far better placed to capitalise on those assets and create even greater opportunity.

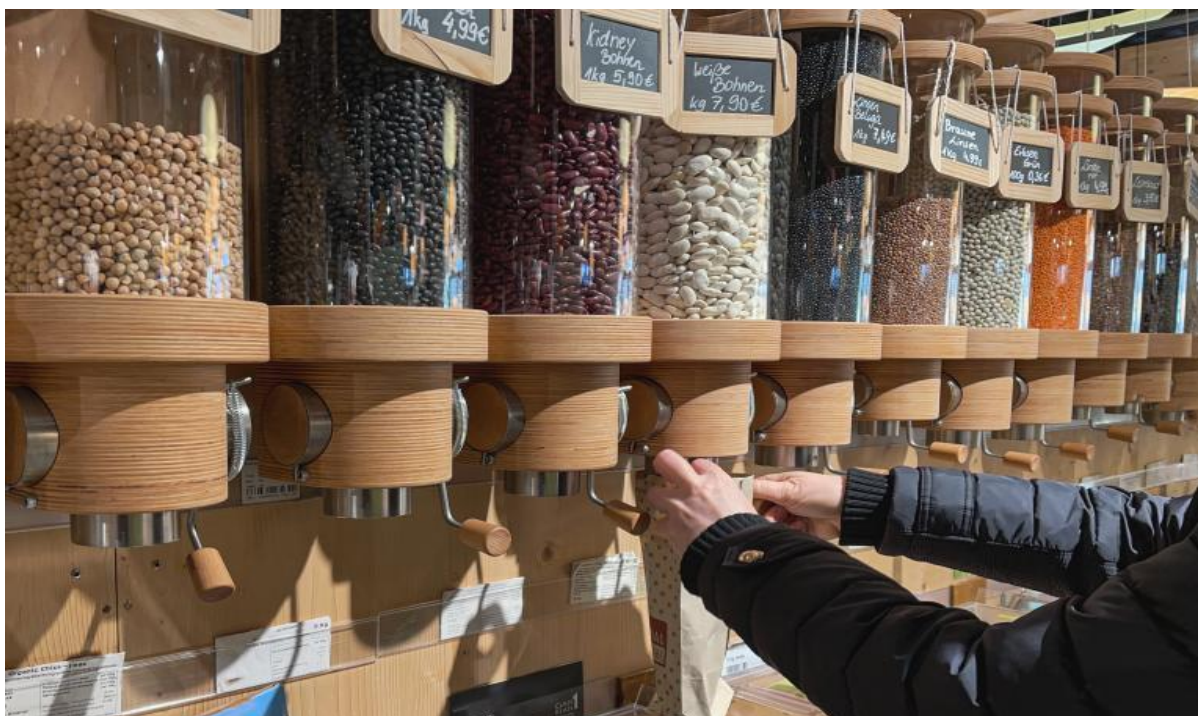
"It is truly exciting, and I look forward to joining my colleagues in Essex and Southend in seizing this opportunity on behalf of the 1.8 million people that live here in Essex."

The councils will now wait to hear from the Government on whether Greater Essex has been accepted as part of the Priority Programme for Devolution.

Councils have also committed to working together to develop proposals for local government reorganisation, with full proposals set to be submitted in Autumn 2025 in line with the Government's timeline.

[Read more](#) about Devolution.

## **The Love Essex Fund returns for 2025**



Calling all waste-reduction enthusiasts! We are offering £500 micro-grants to support reuse and repair projects in Essex. Each year, we provide funding to organisations, individuals, and schools with innovative projects and ideas to reduce household waste.

This year, the focus is on projects that encourage reuse and repair. To apply for a micro-grant, visit the [Love Essex Fund webpage](#). You will need to provide a brief description of the project and a breakdown of how you plan to spend the micro-grant.

Check out the [Love Essex reuse and repair webpage](#) and a [previous success story](#) for inspiration. Last year, funding was awarded to more than 30 projects, including:

- repair cafés
- refill shops
- textiles and toy redistribution groups
- bike, furniture, and electronics repair organisations
- clothes swap events

Don't miss out! Applications close on 9 February 2025.

## **The Relationships, Sex and Health Education survey 2025**



[The Relationships, Sex and Health Education survey 2025](#) opened on 1<sup>st</sup> January and we want to hear from young people aged 11-25 about big topics like relationships, sexual health and how young people use the internet. The information we receive will be used to shape a number of services for young people including education, professionals training and sexual health services. Findings will also be shared with Essex Safeguarding Children Board (ESCB) to inform their wider work on keeping children and young people safe across the county.

For more information on the survey please contact [YouthWork@essex.gov.uk](mailto:YouthWork@essex.gov.uk)

## **Introducing Kinder Essex**



To mark the five-year anniversary of the county's local community kindness project, it is being updated with a new name and fresh look.

Kinder Essex is an evolution of the United in Kind project. The new look reflects the expansion of the project over the last five years and how its purpose has changed in that time. It has been co-created alongside individuals delivering support out in communities. The update means the project remains relevant and fit for the future, so it can help even more people.

The community-led social movement is delivered by Essex Wellbeing Service. It involves 12 coaches who work across Essex to enable acts of kindness. They connect people to local groups and activities where they can meet others. The aim is to reduce social isolation and support people's wider health and wellbeing.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation can escalate and become worse. They can impact not only a person's mental wellbeing, but their physical health too. It's therefore important the wider causes of ill health are addressed and not just the symptoms.

Coaches also work with local groups and organisations. This might include helping them to start a new project or extend existing services. Those looking to volunteer can connect with a coach to find local opportunities too.

Over the last five years, the project has:

- Helped more than 20,000 people across the county to become more connected.
- Encouraged nearly 46,000 acts of kindness over 5 years
- Recruited over 500 new volunteers in 2024 alone.
- Supported more than 1500 new initiatives to increase community connections over 5 years
- Assisted over 250 groups and organizations in setting up new activities in 2024.

[Find out more about Kinder Essex and how you can get involved.](#)

## **Save money on solar panels**



As energy prices go up, we know that many people want to rely less on energy suppliers. Solar panels are therefore a great way to save on energy bills as they allow you to generate your own power.

By registering with [Solar Together Essex](#), you can 'group buy' solar panels with other people in your local area. This allows companies to offer more competitive prices.

Under the scheme, pre-approved and accredited installers bid to carry out the work. Installers go through a strict qualification process. This ensures you receive high-quality products and installation.

After bidding, only the most competitive pricing will be recommended. You can then decide whether to go ahead or not. If you decide it's not for you, there is no obligation to purchase.

The Solar Together scheme also offers EV charging points and battery storage. This includes retrofitting battery storage if you already have solar panels. Storage batteries allow you to store unused energy generated by the solar panels. This energy can be used at any time, not only during the day.

Investing in renewable energy not only saves you money over time, it also benefits the environment.

[Find out more how Solar Together Essex could help you](#) switch to solar energy.

## **New Chief Executive appointed**



We are pleased to announce Nicole Wood as the council's new Chief Executive.

Nicole will take over from Gavin Jones who announced his retirement in the autumn.

Nicole joined the council in 2008 after working at Hackney, the Audit Commission and Oldham Council. She is currently the Executive Director for Corporate Services and s151 officer.

As part of this role, Nicole has been responsible for procurement, finance, pensions, transformation, legal and assurance and digital services.

Nicole represents on various regional and national working groups in her capacity as an Essex finance leader and is an enthusiastic Local Government Association peer reviewer. She is also the current President for Society County Treasurers.

Nicole said: "It is a tremendous honour to have the chance to become the Chief Executive for one of the country's biggest councils. Big changes are on the horizon, as we continue our established transformation work and look ahead to the potential for exciting reforms.

"I am fortunate to already have absolute confidence in our team and partners in our ability to embrace the challenges ahead.

"The council is proud of its track record and in being one of the highest performing and most productive councils in the country. We strive every day to do better for Essex residents, and our ability to do so is all down to our leadership and the hard work of our teams who will continue to be at heart of our great work we do for residents and businesses."

Leader, Councillor Kevin Bentley said: "We are delighted to have appointed Nicole as our new Chief Executive. Nicole brings extensive experience from both her senior leadership role at the council and through the work she does as a leader in finance across Essex, the country and within local government.

"Nicole takes the reins at an exciting time for the council as we await news from the government about the devolution priority programme. She has a real grasp of the opportunities and challenges ahead.

"I am really looking forward to working with Nicole to make our county as great as it can be for our residents and businesses."

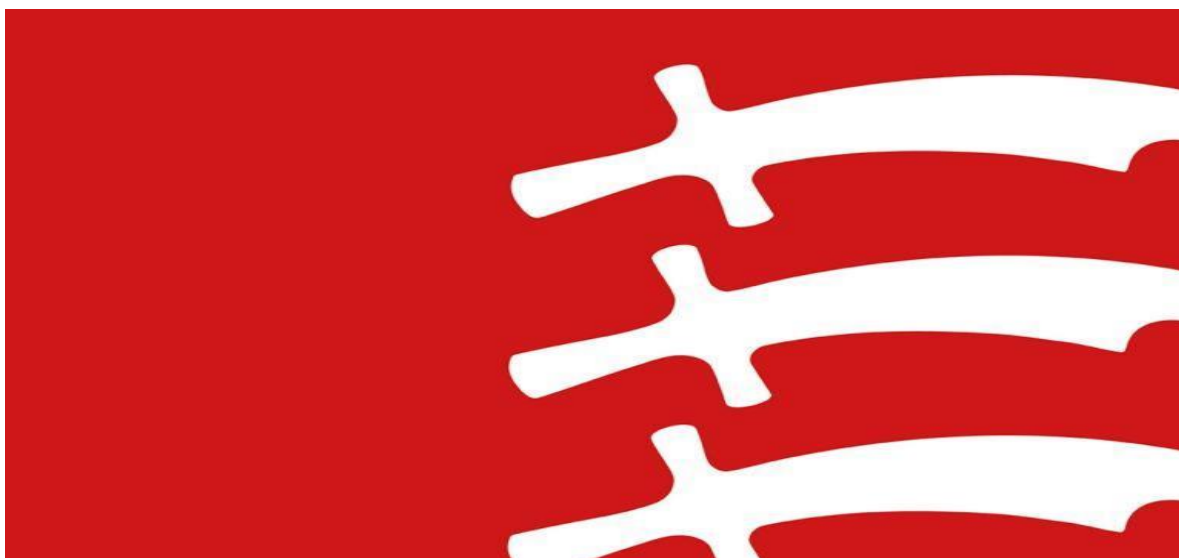
Gavin Jones, the current Chief Executive, said: "I am delighted that Nicole will be taking on the role of Chief Executive.

"Nicole brings a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to the role. She has a clear vision and will bring energy to the role.

"Having worked closely with Nicole over the years, I am confident that she will continue to help deliver excellent services for the people of Essex."

This appointment is subject to final approval by Full Council on 13<sup>th</sup> February.

## **2025/26 budget proposals revealed**



We have set out proposals for our 2025/26 budget. This includes how we plan to invest the more than £2 billion we are responsible for. Our proposals outline how we will protect essential services. They also include how we will invest in the county for the future.

Residents and businesses have shaped our plans by sharing what is important to them. More than 2,100 took part in our recent budget consultation. Key findings include:

- concern about social care has risen
- more people are most concerned about the conditions of roads and pavements
- almost three quarters of people would understand if there was an increase in Council Tax to support services for the most vulnerable

With this and other feedback in mind, we plan to invest an additional £88 million in portfolio budgets next year. This includes an additional £8 million in road and footway maintenance.

Our budget this year has also been set within a national context of:

- high inflation
- the increased cost of living and providing services
- the impact of the Government's Autumn Budget announcements
- upcoming plans to reform the local government funding system

These issues are placing additional pressures on our already limited resources. In our budget for next year, we need to address these pressures. However, we also need to limit the impact on increasing living costs for households. As a result, we have proposed a 3.75% Council Tax increase for 2025/26.

This includes a 1.75% general increase and 2% increase in the adult social care precept. For an average Band D property, this would mean an increase in the county council element of Council Tax of £1.09 a week.

Councillor Chris Whitbread, Chancellor of Essex, said:

I want to be very clear that we will never increase Council Tax more than we need to and Essex continues to have the lowest Council Tax for a county of our size. However, we must also be realistic that we are working within very challenging circumstances which we need to respond to.

“Our aim with this budget has therefore been to prioritise what residents have told us is important to them, address the current economic challenges we, and lots of other councils are facing, as well as evolve so we are fit for the future. It’s not just about the here and now, we have a responsibility to plan for the long-term. This has given us the opportunity to look at how services are currently delivered and where we can be innovative and more efficient.

“I am proud that we have once again been able to present a balanced budget for next year and hope that residents feel reassured that we are listening and by our strong track record in achieving good value for money. We never forget it’s tax-payer’s money we’re spending, and every pound is accounted for and allocated.”

Read more about [our 2025/26 budget proposals and plans](#) for next year.

## **Ministerial visit explores how Essex is supporting those with multiple disadvantages**



Last week the Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Cabinet Office Parliamentary Secretary Minister Georgia Gould MP, visited us to hear about some key work being done across the county.

This was an opportunity for us, alongside our partners, to showcase how government funding is being used in Essex to benefit residents.

The visit focused on how national programmes like 'Test, Learn and Grow' and 'Changing Futures' are making a difference, particularly for those most in need of support.

Last month, Essex was announced as one of four areas chosen by the Government to take part in the early wave of the work, with the main programme being designed in collaboration with the Local Government Association (LGA).

During the visit we shared updates on the Test, Learn and Grow programme on Temporary Accommodation taking place in Essex and what work will be done in the coming months.

Partners also attended and joined the discussion including Colchester City Council, Colchester Borough Homes and the University of Essex.

We also shared information on Changing Futures, which aims to improve outcomes for adults experiencing multiple disadvantages. This could include a range of multiple and complex needs like homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse and contact with the criminal justice system.

In 2021, the council was awarded £2.8 million from the Changing Futures programme.

This has helped:

- Partners and third-sector organisations in Essex deliver crucial support to individuals with a range of multiple and complex needs
- Fund a Mental Health and Wellbeing service
- Develop a supported employment scheme
- Provide housing for individuals suffering from homelessness

Many partners joined the visit and were able to speak about the difference the programme has made. Partners that attended included Phoenix Futures, Open Road Employment Service and East of England Probation.

Councillor John Spence, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Adult Social Care, Public Health and Integration said: "We are committed to helping people with complex needs live fulfilling lives within our communities.

"It is, therefore, always pleasing when Ministers and senior civil servants want to learn more about the innovative work undertaken in Essex by us and our partners.

"It has been a great opportunity to showcase how government funding and initiatives are delivered locally and discuss how what we are doing could help inform and support policy development going forwards.

"I would like to thank the Ministers and Cabinet Office staff for taking the time to visit us. I would also like to thank all partners that attended and of course my council colleagues too."