

Leader's Summer Statement

In my Budget speech to Council back in February, I spoke of how 2021/22 had been a challenging one for Maldon District Council both financially and operationally. In today's speech I want to look forward and wish to focus everyone's thoughts on the challenges we all face due to the increased cost of living, the additional financial pressures on this authority and on all public services. With these pressures must come opportunity and a renewed focus.

In times of austerity, we can't just simply blame everything on lack of funds. We must ensure our approaches, behaviours, and governance act as positive enablers and not as barriers that prevent us from doing the right thing. We often forget to look back and recognise that we do things now for less money, with better outcomes. It hasn't been easy, but it has sharpened our thinking and has tested our most talented staff.

Whilst we must continue to prioritise our resources, work in partnership where possible and invest our time and effort in areas that will fulfil core services, we also need to help support our residents and communities to improve quality of life and increase social value and support them with the increased cost of living that we are all experiencing.

To really add value, we must first ensure that our core services are being delivered effectively and efficiently and that we are focussing on our finances and delivering a balanced budget for the coming years. We continue to seek opportunities with other authorities to identify where services can be shared, something that is becoming common practice for all financially pressured local authorities.

In March this year, the Council published its Commercial Strategy, which is essential to our financial sustainability in the long term. This strategy and commercial thinking are vital to generate income from our assets and estate and to realise the projects in our commercial pipeline.

As well as bringing forward commercial projects, one of the key aims of the commercial strategy is to 'Be more commercial in our approach across all viable activities'. Through our new Corporate Strategy, I want to see the same approach to quality of life and social value, in that we look at how we achieve them through the way in which we deliver all of our services, and that we are taking the opportunity to build social value into everything we do.

A good example of this is how we ensure that we maximise the health and wellbeing outcomes from our leisure contracts. As well as ensuring value for money, I want to ensure that they are accessible to all of our residents and enable health benefits that will contribute to the well-being of the whole community. It is striking to see the impacts of the pandemic, we must help to prevent additional burden on the NHS and enable residents to live healthier, more active lives.

Again, in March, we held the first meeting of the new 'One Maldon District' Group. Our health is influenced by a range of factors, including access to housing, employment, education, exercise and living in a safe community. This group brings together agencies such as the police, NHS, schools, and Maldon District Council, alongside businesses and voluntary groups to look at how, collectively we can improve the health and wellbeing of the District. Through this group we want to build on the learning and partnership working we developed through our Districts covid response.

In addition to this, I also want to put a spotlight on the current funding bids and investment plan work we have underway for Levelling Up and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund as these are a priority

for the Council at the moment. All funding we successfully secure for the District is going help bring forward exciting projects that achieve outcomes for our people, place, and communities.

Alongside partnership working, progressing commercial activities, and bidding for government funds, we also have a responsibility to give our younger residents a voice through a Youth Council and encourage them to feed their views into initiatives that help them gain new skills and to encourage them to lead climate action.

Our Climate Action Strategy, Our Home, Our Future continues to deliver activities against our pledges and officers are working with Essex County Council to develop a transport strategy. Our new Climate Action Officer starts with us in at the end of August and will help to engage with communities and enable further positive change.

We are all pleased that the District is open again for tourism and inward investment, both of which were impacted by the pandemic. We must ensure we help to promote the District and will be doing this through working with partners at Essex County Council through the Promoting Essex project and through the launch of our Investment Prospectus.

Residents and visitors have welcomed recent events and we look forward to the opening of the Splash Park this summer, delivered through our latest contracts with Places Leisure and Amphora. We mustn't forget however that a lot of time and effort still goes into event planning and delivery. To avoid becoming victims of our own success and to support this, I expect to see an events and concessions strategy come forward in the autumn.

During this year, we will also update our Customer engagement strategy. We have made great strides in developing improved online access to our services and support, and we've had great feedback on how accessible our online services are. Even so, we are ensuring that our new Customer Engagement Strategy takes an Equality led approach to ensure that all members of the community have a route to contacting us and accessing our services that is appropriate to them and their needs. Currently if an in-person appointment is required this can be arranged at our reception desk and will be offered between 10am and 4pm Monday-Friday.

Our Local Development Plan Review will continue during 2022/2023 with the next step being for the Council to formally review the comments and opinions people kindly gave in response to the Issues and Options Document consultation at the start of this year. We appreciate the time invested by residents, businesses, and communities to make responses and we will consider this feedback when reviewing the LDP, as well as how we can ensure the council meets its legal and national policy obligations.

So, we will engage, when/where appropriate, in opportunities to support climate action, recover and boost our economy, build the capacity and resilience of our communities. But we are not without challenges and we must continue to look and work with our partners in areas like:

- (i) Economic and cultural renewal; following the pandemic and development of jobs that underpin our wellbeing
- (ii) Equality of opportunity; through connectivity infrastructure, public transport, access to education and skills, that will maximise potential and supporting our young people in getting the best start in life.
- (iii) Tackling social challenges, social isolation, physical and mental well-being, access to health and care and pockets of deprivation.

The Levelling Up White Paper and subsequent Bill presents an opportunity to reset the relationship between central and local government and put councils at the heart of delivering the Government's ambitious programme to improve opportunities in all parts of the country.

We are already playing an active role in the North Essex Economic Board. Together with 5 other North Essex authorities, the Board is responsible for driving and delivering growth to a population of 835,000 and 41,000 businesses.

Through engagement of the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives discussions about Levelling Up and devolution it is planned, via working groups, to explore the potential opportunities that devolution could offer in terms of improving outcomes for residents and businesses.

In September, we will begin work to renew our Corporate Plan. This will give the authority, along with our residents and local businesses the opportunity to inform and set out priorities for the future. I am keen that we use this opportunity to focus on the quality of life of residents.

We have achieved a lot in the last two years even though gripped in the restrictions and impacts of the pandemic. We now march forward with positivity, ambition and with intent on collaborative working to enable delivery of the best outcomes we can for our communities.

I want to close by saying all of this work and more is delivered by only 197.62 FTE (headcount 223) number of staff . I thank each and every one of them for their continued dedication, commitment, professionalism and passion. As a small local authority, prioritising what can be delivered will always be a tough decision to make and one that has to be balanced against budgets, demand, and capacity to deliver. This authority continues to strive to do more than the minimum. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve with our partners and communities in the coming months.