

Essex County Council Elections Thursday May 2nd 2013

Green Party

Manifesto

for **Essex**



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Essex County Council is an authority in need of reform

ECC is one of the largest local authorities in England and takes the lion's share of the council tax paid by Essex residents. Its annual budget is in excess of £2 billion.

Yet many people see ECC as a remote organisation that does not listen to local communities – and an authority still mired in the legacy of the former Leader Lord Hanningfield.

In autumn 2012, the County Council released details of the spending on council corporate credit cards by the disgraced former Leader of the Council.

During his time as Leader, Lord Hanningfield spent hundreds of thousands of pounds including on numerous trips abroad and hotel bills, some of which were never properly accounted for. Destinations for the former Leader included the USA, China, the Bahamas and India.

It is not clear if there was any evidenced benefit to Essex residents from this taxpayer funded touring of the globe – or why the Conservative administration allowed this to take place for so long.

If that was the only criticism of County Hall it would be bad enough, but it is only part of the picture.

Essex County Council has been widely criticised for not listening to local communities on planning issues, such as the proposed waste incinerator at Rivenhall Airfield, the current Minerals Plan consultation, school re-organisation, the poor and chaotic management of highways repairs and other issues.

It took Freedom of Information requests by Green councillors to discover the full extent of ECC's interest and support for the waste site and incinerator on Rivenhall Airfield. And further Fol Requests were needed to reveal that the troubled Maltings Lane development in Witham was not just the result of the actions of private landowners at the site. ECC owned over 40% of the land and took over £11 million net from land sales but did not reinvest in the town - such as to help secure the long awaited community hospital for the town and surrounding villages.

Green Councillors also uncovered that ECC pays its senior councillors the highest allowances and expenses in East Anglia. In the council year 2011/12, 15 county councillors each received over £30,000 in expenses and allowances and of those, 5 accrued more than £50,000 a year (source; Essex County Council) - which is about double the average full time wage for Essex.

But even that is not the total of what some Essex County Councillors get from the taxpayer because a number of them are also on other councils and boards, where they also get allowances.



When the Green Group of Councillors on Braintree District Council proposed that no councillor should get more than the average full time wage from all their public positions added together, this was voted down by the ruling Conservatives at BDC.

So whilst local communities across Essex have had to endlessly chase county highways to get potholes mended and other basic maintenance carried out, funds that could have helped those communities have been used instead to keep high living councillors in the manner to which they have become accustomed.

Green Councillors have also researched the extent to which the public can participate in ECC meetings. The answer is very little. At most of the meetings at which ECC councillors make decisions the public cannot even ask questions. At planning committee there is little opportunity to speak and the few people allowed to do so have to fill in forms for the privilege.

At this election the Green Party has a 5 point plan for democratic reform of ECC. Green County Councillors will work with like-minded councillors across party lines to advance a reform programme.

The Greens 5 point plan to reform Essex County Council:

- ➔ Cut the perks – corporate credit cards, chauffeur driven cars, no more 'trips' abroad.
- ➔ Reduce Councillor allowances – capped at average full time wage.
- ➔ Become more accountable – open up all meetings to more public participation.
- ➔ Work with local communities, not against them – no waste incinerator at Rivenhall Airfield.
- ➔ **Get back to basics – fix potholes quickly, sort out parking problems. Listen to communities.**

Can the Greens gain their first seats on Essex County Council in 2013 ?

Yes. There are now 4 Green district councillors in Essex, 2 in Braintree District and 2 in Rochford District. The Greens are targeting Witham Northern (where they came 2nd in 2009) and Rochford West to gain their first seats. Cllrs. James Abbott and Michael Hoy are the Green candidates respectively.

Across Essex there is once again a big slate of Green candidates, standing in 88% of seats and with full slates in all but 3 districts in the ECC area.

Across Eastern region the Greens are standing in 63% of seats. The Greens have advanced from 2 principal authority councillors in the region in 1999 to over 40 now and are aiming to gain more seats on county authorities where they already have groups, including Suffolk and Norfolk.

Essex in 2013

Essex is a great county. An historic county. Home to around 1½ million people it stretches from the edge of London in the west, to the Essex estuaries and beaches in the east, from the rolling landscape of the Suffolk border in the north to the Thames estuary in the south. Essex is a county of contrasts. Southend and Finchingfield. Harwich and Harlow. All so different from each other and yet the identity of Essex is one of the strongest and best known in Britain. Essex is a county that says what it thinks and lives life to the full.

Situated near to London and the sea, change has always been embraced by Essex, but it is a county that has largely maintained its characteristic mix of town and country, where the town centre is never far from the truly rural.

But that character is being eroded.

Development pressures on the countryside continue, whilst many town centres are declining and villages are losing their traditional services. Village pubs, rural garages and local small shops are disappearing fast

Despite the withdrawal of the planning application for a second runway at Stansted (the development of which was supported by the previous Labour Government), the Coalition Government has embarked on yet another round of reviews into aviation and noises are once again being made about a two – or more - runway Stansted plus the possibility of a major hub airport in the Thames estuary. Major aviation expansion in or near Essex remains the single biggest threat to people's quality of life. Essex would become a more polluted, more noisy and less pleasant place to live with further urban sprawl and major new roads cutting across farms and woodlands, its roads clogged with ever rising levels of traffic and its skies even more crowded with jets.

Despite the recession, the abolition of the East of England Plan and the Coalition's promises on Localism, plans are underway for major greenfield developments in Essex. Growth areas include along the Thames, the M11 corridor and A12 corridors, including more houses in flood risk areas, despite the warnings. Recently developers have proposed over 11,000 houses along the A120 corridor between Colchester and Braintree. There is already severe peak time congestion on the road network in many parts of Essex as well as overcrowded commuter trains.

Essex already has a large ecological footprint – the county does not have enough fresh water within its boundaries and has to import water. It is the driest county in the UK. Energy demand from Essex is rising year on year, mostly from burning fossil fuels in power stations outside the county. Yet Essex stands to be hit hard by climate change. Rising sea level will flood low lying coastal settlements and farmland. Hotter drier summers will worsen the county water deficit, cause subsidence on clay soils and put more stress on native trees and wildlife. More intense rain events and increasing areas of hardstanding will threaten river flooding in historic villages and towns.

The Government wants the Essex and east Coast ports to become ever larger, importing ever more manufactured goods from abroad, especially the far east. Even more HGVs will thunder through the county every day and the ports will spread further along the coasts, turning night into day for local residents and consuming the wildlife-rich Essex mudflats. One of the reasons for damage to roads in Essex is the high flows of HGVs.

Green growth is good. Essex needs more well designed affordable housing on appropriate sites, investment in renewable energy and insulation, localised recycling infrastructure and more local manufacturing. But too often growth is driven by short-term profit motives such as the boom in low cost airlines at Stansted and expensive housing on greenfields sites around towns. Essex County Council's long term waste contract at Basildon, where 50% of what goes in will come back out to be landfilled or burnt is geared towards the commercial goals of big business instead of promoting local recycling businesses and jobs. Lord Hanningfield's personal pledges not to allow an incinerator in Essex fell away as ECC actively supported the planning application for a 360,000 tonne per year burner on Rivenhall Airfield.

There is a huge opportunity over the next few years to invest in Green jobs – building a sustainable future for Essex. The Green New Deal offers a way out of recession and towards a low carbon economy. On councils across the UK, Green Councillors are already promoting this vision – more recycling, local manufacturing, better public transport, free insulation for all homes that need it and a big expansion in energy efficiency and renewables.

The Green Party believes its time to fight back against both the failure of the establishment parties to deliver on the green agenda and their failure to uphold high standards in office. It is time to stand up for Essex and not be dictated to. If this is a democracy then Essex should be largely deciding its future, not the Government or big business. And Essex County Council needs radical reform to make it more open to public scrutiny and more focussed on local needs, not its own self-publicity.

Groups such as Stop Stansted Expansion have already shown how effective campaigning can be. But there also needs to be a more powerful political voice for Essex. The “main” parties have largely failed to slow the tide of unsustainable development heading for Essex and sometimes they have shown themselves all too ready to accept it. There is an urgent need for independently minded grass roots politicians who will truly represent the people of Essex.

The Localism Agenda was proudly announced by David Cameron as he became Prime Minister. But for many communities in Essex it is difficult to see much sign of it. Greens have always believed in localism. But if it is to mean anything communities need the freedom, the budgets and the powers to make it happen. Although council budgets are being squeezed, investment money is still available both through the public sector and developer contributions to infrastructure. Greens support devolving budgets to local communities to progress projects - and work that can be better done locally. This could include developing community hospitals, public transport schemes, road safety projects and local delivery of routine highway maintenance.

Greens strongly oppose the tightening squeeze on the incomes of the working poor and disabled people imposed by the government, which is being delivered by local authorities through benefit cuts, the bedroom tax and other measures.

Essex is fortunate to have relatively high levels of employment but this masks a high level of commuting which is very expensive by rail, and the growth of low paid jobs in the service industries. Essex used to be a strong county for food growing and manufacturing. But in these areas too there has been decline. Greens support investing in manufacturing and encouraging small businesses, self employed people and co-operatives. The best way to reduce dependence on benefits for those that can work is to generate well paid rewarding work. State benefits have become in part a subsidy to large companies that pay poor wages. Re-localising food production will also generate local jobs and reduce food miles. There is huge potential for more market gardens, allotments, orchards and organic agriculture in Essex.

Green Priorities for Essex

- Fight back against the Government and big business dictating what they think is best for Essex. Essex people should have the major say in the future of their county.
- No expansion of Stansted beyond 25 million passengers per annum. No second runway. Stansted Airport will still be a successful airport catering for the equivalent of half the population of England flying every year. That's large enough and avoids the massive damage to the environment that further expansion would cause. At the national and EU level, aviation fuel should be taxed like all other fuels to create a level playing field in transportation. No to "Boris Island" which would devastate habitats in the estuary and disturb peoples sleep.
- Support sustainable development that benefits the people of Essex with affordable housing for local people on town and small village sites and more local manufacturing, IT and other enterprises that help build sustainable local economies and reduce the need for commuting.
- Strong protection for the countryside. Development to be focused on brownfield sites, re-using empty offices and small scale village sites. No further major urban extensions into the countryside. Special protection for the jewels of Essex such as Hatfield Forest, the Essex coast and the river valleys.
- Specific protection for ancient woodlands which continue to suffer damage despite their importance. Work with partners to plant new woodlands both for habitat benefit and as working woods for economic benefit.
- Work with district councils to better protect Conservation Areas and establish local community heritage asset registers.
- An end to tick box planning which ECC excels in. Consultation should mean just that.
- Total opposition to waste incineration. Incinerators pollute and waste precious resources. Incinerators hamper efforts to recycle because they have to be fed continually. The Greens have helped lead the so far successful battle to stop incinerators in Essex, despite Essex County Council's behind-the-scenes efforts to get one built. Recycling rates are rising strongly thanks to the support of residents for new collection schemes. Greens support further investment to help everyone recycle – to get rates to at least 70% by 2020. Local scale, not industrial factory scale, recycling plants are needed to help process materials and compost food waste. Markets for materials need to be encouraged.
- Green Councillors will work with others to strongly oppose moves to privatise waste collections in Essex, which may be done in order to feed expensive waste factories and an incinerator at Rivenhall Airfield under a PFI scheme. Essex County Council must back local communities to recycle more, not bow to multinationals who see big profits in mashing up and burning waste – that could and should be recycled.
- Develop resource conservation and recycling strategies to minimise gravel extraction, resource loss and waste. The current proposals for the Essex Minerals Plan are unsustainable and concentrate around 60% of total extraction to 2030 in one area in and near to the southern half of Braintree District.

- ➔ Switch investment away from more major roads though the countryside of Essex towards giving people better travel choices. £ billions are needed to upgrade the railways and to make existing roads safer and to relieve villages of through traffic. Traffic reduction should be the priority, not expanding capacity for ever more cars, lorries and pollution. The Green Party will support light rail or tram systems for the larger towns and commuter bus links on the main inter-urban routes and around main stations.
- ➔ Greens will bring forward traffic calming proposals for more town centres to encourage walking and cycling. Greens will start a programme of rural roadside footway extensions with the aim of linking villages with safe routes for walkers. Green Councillors will build on the scheme working with parishes to improve winter gritting of main pedestrian routes and areas. An enhanced role for the Highways Panels could help deliver more such local priorities as well as devolution of minor highway work to parishes to speed up repairs.
- ➔ An open investigation into what has gone wrong in the ECC Highways Department. Unacceptable delays in pothole repairs, chaotic reporting systems and questions over the use of subcontractors botching surfacing work all need to be looked into.
- ➔ Headline Green transport priorities (to be taken forward with other authorities and bodies where appropriate):
 - ◆ Drop plans to widen the A12, make it safer instead with junction improvements, speed management and stopping areas.
 - ◆ Redevelop the A120 east of Braintree on-line but with bypassed section to relieve villages.
 - ◆ Prioritise safety over speed on the roads – rural road speed limits need to be reduced from the current 60mph to 40mph to reduce crashes
 - ◆ Upgrade the main railway lines into London
 - ◆ Invest more in rural bus services
 - ◆ Provide a passing loop on the Braintree branch line to increase capacity
 - ◆ Build a new rail link between Braintree and Stansted which will also improve north-south connections across the region
 - ◆ Investigate light rail or tram system for the larger towns
 - ◆ Develop commuter coach links on urban connecting routes and light bus links for villages near mainline stations
 - ◆ More rural community bus schemes
- ➔ A Green energy revolution for Essex. Support for windpower on appropriate sites, especially offshore (subject to wildlife audits and safety). Following decommissioning, Greens will support the Bradwell Nuclear power station site becoming a renewable power site. Total opposition to any new nuclear build at Bradwell or anywhere else. No nuclear dumps in Essex.
- ➔ Every new building in Essex expected to incorporate renewable on-site energy generation. This could include one or more of: solar PV, solar hot water, air or ground source heat pumps, biomass boilers. Higher energy conservation standards to be encouraged in new and existing buildings - domestic, commercial and industrial. Other green design features should become routine – including grey water recycling, sustainable drainage and a full range of recycling storage facilities.

- ➔ All street lighting and other significant sources of light to have a phased replacement to modern, low energy fully shielded designs with controlled systems. The Green Party supports the midnight switch-off of streetlights, subject to local consultation and the need to keep some key areas lit all night such as town centres, public transport facilities and where there is local need. These policies will provide better quality lighting, when it is needed and greatly reduce lighting energy demand, saving money and reducing carbon emissions. It will also reduce the “orange fog” that hangs over Essex every night - light pollution. The people of Essex should be able to see the stars again (most currently can only see a fraction due to light pollution).
- ➔ Support moves towards less reliance on fixed curriculum teaching and testing – allow Headteachers more flexibility. Speed up improvements to school buildings to higher standards of comfort, space and energy conservation. Speed up phase-out of all remaining demountable classrooms. 20 MPH zones and Safer Journeys schemes for ALL schools in Essex. Work towards major reduction in child traffic casualties. Develop an integrated and fair school transport system to reduce the “school run” and give parents and pupils choice as to how they travel to school. School buses should have an adult supervisor as well as the driver. Improve school dinners with more organic food and fruit.
- ➔ Maintain high quality adult education in Essex as part of the “education for life” philosophy.
- ➔ The Greens will oppose moves to close and merge schools, especially for property asset sales.
- ➔ The Greens will work with other parties to oppose mass privatisation plans for services. Vital public services and jobs need to stay public.
- ➔ Essex County Council reform (see page 2 above for details).
- ➔ Green Councillors will work to strengthen links with communities, not alienate them. Restart Area Forums.
- ➔ Council tax levels should meet the priorities of Essex people. If investment is needed and Essex people support it, local priorities should come first. Ever more cuts in public services hit the poor and vulnerable hardest. In the longer term the Green Party would replace Council Tax with a fairer system based on the ability to pay.
- ➔ The Green Party will not operate a party whip over its councillors and will work across party lines and with Independents where there is common ground.
- ➔ The Greens will work with others to raise standards in Social Services and Children’s Services. There needs to be better integration with NHS services, particularly for continuing care for the elderly.
- ➔ Greens will campaign to roll back the centralisation of health services. There needs to be more community non-acute units for local people, reducing the need to travel.
- ➔ Green Councillors will work to improve provision for elderly care, both residential and at home. This is a vital area given the aging population. Planning for an older population must be improved. Greens will support state funded care for elderly in residential homes. There needs to be

improved integration with health and social services to minimise avoidable health problems and accidents for elderly people. Greens support a big improvement in pensions and encouraging choice for active elderly participation in society, including employment.

- ➔ Encourage quality schemes for apprentice learning.
- ➔ Greens support disability access to make all buildings and services as accessible as possible.
- ➔ Greens support firm anti-discrimination policies.
- ➔ Greens will work for a GM free Essex and use land under the control of Essex County Council to grow more organic food, including for schools and other public organisations. There needs to be investment in more allotment land so that people can grow their own local food.
- ➔ Green Councillors will work to improve library services including more integration with other public information services ie “one stop shops”.
- ➔ Work with district and parish councils to better protect market town centres and village services from the relentless decline in their viability caused by out-of-town retailing and over-dominant supermarket chains.
- ➔ Greens will strongly oppose closure and sale for development of local fire stations.
- ➔ Greens will oppose development of sports fields.
- ➔ Greens will support better youth activities which can help cut anti-social behaviour.
- ➔ Greens will support further development of Childrens Centres.
- ➔ Greens will support sustainable tourism.
- ➔ Green Councillors will build on the ongoing work to get more local police and support officers on the beat to help prevent crime before it happens and further improve liaison between police and local communities and councils.
- ➔ Greens will work with the travelling community and resident community to avoid conflict and to help plan the required amount of sites.
- ➔ Green Councillors will help to develop co-ordinated approach to improving animal welfare and rooting out animal cruelty.
- ➔ Greens will call for an audit of ethical policies within Essex County Council, including pension investments and procurement. Greens support ethical spending and investments by councils. ECC's investments in tobacco companies should be transferred.

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