

Essex County Council Elections Thursday 6th May 2021

Green Party

Manifesto

for **Essex**



Vote Green 6th May 2021



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The 2021 Green Party pledge to Essex voters:

Supporting local communities and protecting our shared environment

The past year of the Covid pandemic has hit many communities and businesses hard, on top of the health impacts and the loss of life. The Government has given financial support including for local authorities. But the underlying trend for councils is still one of reduced resources into the 2020s, and so services are likely to be squeezed further in the next 4 years.

Green county and district councillors in Essex have been active in fighting against cuts to services over the last 4 years – including to libraries, Youth Services, Children’s Centres, Recycling Centres, school transport and highway safety projects delivered locally by the Highways Panels. Greens will continue to work with like-minded councillors to protect services as much as possible.

With the UK now leaving the EU, there are concerns that this will be used as an ‘opportunity’ to reduce environmental protection in a similar way to how the Conservatives have tilted the planning system heavily in favour of volume developers and speculators at the expense of the Essex countryside and habitats. It is vital that laws and regulations drawn up to protect our shared environment are not scrapped.

The Conservatives under David Cameron said they would develop “Localism” and invited voters to “Vote Blue, Go Green”. Both are now widely seen as political tricks by a major party.

The Greens offer a fresh and clear vision, and one which they are committed to delivering on. Voting Green is the best way to achieve real Green progress, as opposed to rhetoric. Green councillors will fight for:

- ✓ ***Local green spaces***
- ✓ ***Decent social care***
- ✓ ***Air fit to breathe***
- ✓ ***Affordable homes***
- ✓ ***Action on climate change***



Greens supporting people and local communities

Independent of the Tory/Labour ding dong and genuinely rooted in their local areas, Green councillors directly represent people and local communities.

And the Greens stick to their pledges. In 2013, the Greens said that Essex County Council was an authority in need of reform; that it was seen as a remote organisation that did not listen to local communities – and an authority still mired in the legacy of the former Leader Lord Hanningfield.

The 2013 Green Manifesto for Essex set out a 5 point reform package for ECC.

Prior to the 2013 elections, the Greens uncovered that ECC paid its senior councillors the highest allowances and expenses in East Anglia. The Greens also researched the “free meals” that county councillors enjoyed at taxpayer expense, finding that some were munching their way through nearly £1000 worth of food a year - yet none of it was being properly accounted for. Green councillors made sure that these expenses were declared and subsequently the free meals were scrapped.

The Greens also asked about the extent to which the public could participate in ECC meetings. The answer was very little. At most meetings where major decisions were taken affecting local communities, the public were not even ‘permitted’ to speak !



At the 2013 elections, the Greens set out a 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**
- **Get back to basics – fix potholes quickly, sort out parking problems. Listen to communities**

In May 2013, the first ever Essex Green Party County councillors took their seats and they immediately started to call for these changes. In response, the ruling Tories said that the free meals were “an entitlement” and that opening up meetings to the public would be “unworkable”. But with public pressure for reform, change became inevitable. It seems incredible now that it was ever different, but all main meetings at County Hall are now open to public participation, though over the past year this has been via video conferencing as meetings have not been held in person due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

‘Free meals’ were scrapped and there was a review of allowances – and the foreign trips were cut. But there is more to do – especially in the way that ECC consults communities.

At the elections in 2017, the Greens renewed their pledges to work for reform at County Hall and to protect public services. But to the dismay of all opposition groups, the ruling Conservatives tried in the 2017-2021 session to close libraries. Consultation documents revealed that unless some categories of libraries were run by volunteers, they would shut. A massive public campaign led by Save Our Libraries Essex (SOLE) stopped the Tories in their tracks – a campaign strongly supported by Green councillors and supporters.

Over the past year ECC has worked well to support communities through the pandemic and a number of initiatives hold out the prospect of a move towards a greener future – including the Essex Climate Action Commission and the Essex Forest Initiative. But these need to be set against the ruling Conservatives being still being too remote, the ongoing frustrations with highways maintenance and trying to face both ways on climate - a major road building programme is being proposed.

May 2021 County Council elections – another strong Green slate in Essex

The Greens will once again be standing candidates in the majority of ECC seats in Essex. There are 44 Greens standing with full slates in Brentwood, Chelmsford, Colchester, Maldon and Uttlesford.

There is a full slate of Green and Independent candidates standing in Braintree District as part of the G&I Group and there will also be Greens standing in some divisions in Epping Forest and Tendring.

District and borough seats will also be up for election on 6th May in some parts of Essex and there will be full slates of Greens standing in Southend Unitary and Colchester Borough.

Growing Greens

- In 2013 there were 4 Green principal authority councillors in Essex sitting on 2 authorities
- In 2017 the Greens held 8 seats on 4 authorities
- Now in 2021 there are 15 Green councillors in Essex serving on 6 authorities. In Braintree District the Greens and Independents (G&I Group) are the main opposition to the Conservatives. There are also Green councillors now on Epping Forest, Uttlesford, Colchester and Rochford councils as well as at County Hall.

Green councillors continue to work across party lines for the benefit of local people and the environment. These remain challenging times in local government, which requires as much co-operation as possible when tough decisions have to be made on services - as a direct consequence of the spending squeeze being handed down by the Government.

Across England and Wales, there will be around 3,000 Green candidates at the May 2021 elections, a record number. Around 60% of all available seats will be contested by Greens.

Essex Trends

The trends identified by the Greens when they first took seats at County Hall in 2013, largely continue in 2021.

Dominated by 'elite councillor' groups of Conservatives at district and county level, Essex is being lined up for high levels of growth but without a viable strategy for how that growth could be sustainable. This is being compounded by continuing austerity, with local authority services needed to support growing communities but being placed under ever greater strain.

Development pressures have increased following the introduction of the developer-friendly National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and requirements on local authorities to allocate more land, but with limited ability to direct the types of housing built.

Local authorities In Essex are having to set very high development targets in their Local Plans but many are exposed to developer pressure on greenfield sites before those Plans are complete, with Government Inspectors increasingly granting schemes on appeal.

Whilst it is clear that new housing and job opportunities are needed, the scale of what is being proposed and the "Build, Build, Build" agenda is leaving many communities bewildered and there is growing animosity that it is developers in charge, that "Localism" has evaporated and that all too often decisions are in effect being imposed. Large scale housing extensions into the countryside around the main towns and even around villages are accelerating. Yet at the same time, many traditional market town centres are declining and villages are losing services such as buses and their local pubs.

The problems with planning in Essex were greatly compounded by the failed 'hyper-growth' agenda of the "Garden Communities" project - aka New Towns. With no specific consultation whatsoever, small elite groups of councillors and ministers drew up plans for around 60,000 houses to be built along the A120 corridor from Stansted to Harwich.

But two Local Plan Examinations – for Uttlesford District and the joint North Essex Authorities (Braintree, Colchester and Tendring) saw Planning Inspectors politely, but devastatingly, reject the New Town plans. £ millions of public money were wasted and years added to the Local Plan processes, leaving volume developers even more time to pick off greenfield sites.

The New Towns plan was linked to the major transport policies which remain dominated at County Hall by support for road building, aviation growth and bigger ports with little or no thought as to the consequences for worsening congestion and declining air quality. And even while Essex County Council embarks on its Climate Change Strategy, with emerging ambitious

aims, it cannot see that its planning and transport policies are completely contrary to the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to protect the countryside and biodiversity, as Green councillors have pointed out. There has been talk at County Hall of more investment in cycling, which has emerged as a more important agenda from the Covid-19 pandemic, but to date plans appear to be minimal compared to the need and are concentrated on selected urban centres.

At the same time public transport in many areas is inadequate, and rural bus services particularly so. Essex County Council under the Conservatives has reduced access to school transport, forcing more parents to drive their children to school.

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 Government remains in support of aviation growth and the owners of Stansted are applying to expand its capacity on one runway.

Although the pandemic has reduced demand for flights, in the longer-term aviation expansion in and near Essex remains a significant threat to quality of life. Essex will become a more polluted, more noisy and less pleasant place to live with further aviation growth.

One area of progress has been in communications. The roll out of broadband is to be welcomed, though the pace of delivery has not been as good as promised. Whilst access to fibre-based broadband in the main towns is becoming well established, reaching some rural communities is more challenging and requires more investment and support, but in this area there is a drive by ECC to finish the job.

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. The high growth levels proposed for Essex will place further stresses on the water and sewerage systems of the county.

Between 2013 and 2017 there was welcome progress in developing renewable energy in Essex, but following changes in support mechanisms from the Government, progress has faltered in terms of rooftop solar. Essex offers massive renewable energy capacity, particularly solar and offshore wind, but very large farm-based solar schemes are not always the right choice due to the loss of productive farmland.

Essex stands to be hit hard by climate change in the longer term. Rising sea levels could flood low lying farmland and hotter drier summers will worsen the water deficit, cause subsidence on clay soils and put more stress on native trees and wildlife. More intense rain events in winter will bring surface and river flooding.

The Green Vision

Almost all political parties now make “the right noises” on the green agenda, but with Conservatives still the dominant political power in Essex, the gap between policies and actions has grown. Greens ‘say it how it is’ and voters can be sure if they vote Green, they will get the real thing. Greens will also work with like-minded councillors such as Independents as they have been in Braintree District since May 2019 where the Green & Independent group (G&I) is the main opposition to the Conservatives.

We set out our vision of how Essex can become a better place to live and work, not based on “Growth at all Costs”, but on thriving communities, sustainable development and a high quality environment where wildlife can thrive just as much as people can. This is a vision that places high value on “Quality of Life” in 5 key areas:

- ✓ ***Local green spaces***
- ✓ ***Decent social care***
- ✓ ***Air fit to breathe***
- ✓ ***Affordable homes***
- ✓ ***Action on climate change***

Local Green Spaces

In our towns and villages it is vital that local green spaces are protected and not bulldozed for short term aims. We will support greater protection for green spaces through the planning system and encourage looking after them such as through local management, community litter picks and more tree planting. The Covid-19 pandemic brought great stress to many people having to live isolated lives, but green spaces and nature became even more highly valued in offering relief and mental health support. In the countryside, our biggest green spaces, we will oppose unsustainable development and will support measures to protect ancient woodland, improve habitats, maintain public rights of way and curb light pollution.

Decent Social Care

The pressure on Social Care budgets is increasing. While the Government has allowed authorities such as Essex County Council to apply a Social Care Levy on top of the council tax, it is not enough to keep pace with real demand. This divergence

has led to the Conservative Leader of Essex County Council warning of a funding “crisis”. Greens support the need to help vulnerable people lead a decent life.

Air fit to breathe

The UK remains in breach of agreements to curb air pollution and Brexit raises concerns that EU regulations designed to allow people to breathe clean air will be weakened. There is a clear need to invest in more sustainable forms of transport that both give people viable options on how to travel and will help reduce air pollution. Green councillors support rebalancing transport spending towards walking, cycling and public transport, including a network of dedicated cycle routes. And Greens will maintain an absolute opposition to waste incineration which both destroys resources and lowers air quality.

Affordable homes

Green councillors recognise that Essex needs more well-designed affordable housing on appropriate sites. These need to be planned with local communities. Neighbourhood Plans can give local communities more say in planning.

Action on Climate Change

The noises-off from “climate sceptics” have waned in recent years but the Conservative Government’s reductions in support for renewables, poor performance on home insulation and weakening of the planning system have hindered progress. Green councillors will support measures to take action on climate change, from local community volunteering and projects to large scale investment and everything between. Developing a green economy and society will have many benefits in itself including cleaner air, sustainable transport, a cleaner environment and more locally produced energy.

Green Priorities for Essex

How in practice Green County Councillors will continue to support local communities and work to protect our shared environment

- ➔ Government, big business and 'elite councillor' groups often hand down what they think is best for Essex with minimal consultation. The residents and communities of Essex should have the major say in their future and their county. Greens believe in real Localism. Local Plans should be based on evidenced local needs, not targets imposed via Government prescription. When ECC proposes changes to services, it should not 'consult and ignore', but instead 'consult and listen'.
- ➔ It is likely that there will be a reorganisation of local government in Essex in the next few years. The Greens do not support the creation of a few unitary 'mega-councils' and a Mayor for Essex as recently proposed. This would centralise power and make worse the gap between communities and the 'elite councillor' groups.
- ➔ Greens will support sustainable development that benefits the people of Essex and does not harm the environment. Affordable housing is needed for local people on town and small village sites, and with a 'brownfield first' approach. More local manufacturing, IT and other enterprises that help build sustainable local economies will also reduce the need for commuting.
- ➔ Greens support strengthening ties with district, town and parish councils. Neighbourhood Plans developed by local communities should be supported and taken notice of by decision makers.
- ➔ Despite the image sometimes portrayed, the people of Essex know that the county has wonderful countryside and many historic towns and villages, plus a long coastline. Development must not be allowed to harm the landscape and destroy habitats as all too often is happening due to changes in the planning system. There is also a need for specific protection for ancient woodlands and sensitive habitats which continue to suffer damage despite their importance. Greens also strongly support the planting of new woodlands both for habitat benefit and as working woods for economic benefit.
- ➔ The 'lions share' of transport investment in Essex is still going towards roadbuilding through the countryside, such as the Lower Thames Crossing and the A120, even while Essex is developing a Climate Strategy. The Greens will continue to argue that there needs to be a better balance of spend, moving investment away from major new roads though the countryside towards giving people better travel choices. Priorities should be to upgrade the railways; make existing roads safer and relieve villages of through traffic and develop new dedicated cycleways. Traffic reduction and road safety should be the priority, not expanding capacity for ever more cars, lorries and pollution. Greens will also support transit systems and commuter bus links on the main inter-urban routes and around main stations. The decline in rural bus services and school transport should be reversed.
- ➔ Specific transport projects Green councillors will support include: a new rail link between Braintree and Stansted (which will also improve north-south connections across the region) and a passing loop on the Braintree branch line to increase capacity.

- ➔ Greens will support traffic calming proposals for more town centres to encourage walking and cycling and will seek support for a programme of rural roadside footway extensions and off-road links with the aim of linking villages with safe routes for walkers. Funding for Highways Panels has recently been restored having been halved by the Conservatives 5 years ago – LHPs are a positive means of delivering more local safety projects and access improvements.
- ➔ Whilst there have been some improvements to road surfaces in recent years, the repair of potholes and footway defects continues to be a major source of frustration for residents. Greens are proposing a 'Back to Basics' approach that gets repairs done faster and more efficiently – more action needed with less repeat inspections and painting around potholes. There also needs to be improvements to the ECC reporting system so that it is more user-friendly and responsive.
- ➔ Greens will continue to support disability access to make footways and paths and all buildings and services as accessible as possible and will support firm anti-discrimination policies.
- ➔ 20 mph zones and Safer Journeys schemes will be supported for all schools in Essex. More needs to be done towards a major reduction in child traffic casualties. The cuts to School Transport should be reversed; Greens will support 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.
- ➔ Greens will oppose further expansion of Stansted Airport and there must be no second runway. Further growth would be incompatible with climate targets and will generate even more jet noise nuisance over communities.
- ➔ Recycling rates are stalling. Greens support further investment to help everyone recycle – and to get rates to at least 75% by 2025. Green County Councillors have strongly opposed, and will continue to oppose, reductions in recycling services such as the restrictions introduced at Recycling Centres by ECC in 2016. These cuts risk increasing fly-tipping which is a cost to the district authorities and to private landowners.
- ➔ The centralised waste plant model followed by ECC has been shown to be deeply flawed, as the Green Party said 2 decades ago. The alternative remains the development of a network of district-scale recycling plants to process materials and compost food waste, as well as support for re-use businesses. Markets for materials need to be encouraged. Green councillors will continue to oppose 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 battle to stop incinerators in Essex, including the plant at Rivenhall Airfield.
- ➔ Essex needs to develop resource conservation and recycling strategies to minimise gravel extraction. The Essex Minerals Plan is unsustainable and concentrates around 60% of total extraction to post-2030 in one area in and near to the southern half of Braintree District.
- ➔ The Greens will continue to lead on the need to tackle climate change. Essex could lead the way in a green energy revolution including more offshore wind power and using existing areas of roofing (such as on industrial estates) for solar PV. All ECC new buildings, including schools, should incorporate renewables where it is physically possible to do so. Local Plans should promote renewable installations in new housing and commercial developments. Ideally, every new building in Essex should incorporate renewable on-site energy generation. Further green design features should become routine – including grey water recycling, sustainable drainage and a full range of recycling storage facilities.

However the ability of planning authorities to deliver on this agenda is being undermined by changes that the Government has made to the planning system.

- ➔ Greens will continue to oppose fracking and new nuclear at Bradwell or anywhere else, will oppose nuclear dumps in Essex and will call for an end to FED discharges.
- ➔ Street lighting and other significant sources of light should be better controlled with a phased replacement to LED, fully shielded designs. The Green Party supports the part-night lighting scheme operated by ECC, subject to local consultation as different areas may have different needs. There is a need to keep some key areas lit all night such as town centres and public transport facilities. Better quality lighting, on when it is needed and dimmed or off when not needed, could greatly reduce lighting energy demand, save money and reduce carbon emissions. It will also reduce 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). The switch to white LED by ECC needs to be carefully monitored. White LED can be much more intrusive into people's bedrooms and is more harmful to nocturnal wildlife.
- ➔ Greens will support improvements to school buildings towards higher standards of comfort, space and energy conservation with the phase-out of all remaining demountable classrooms. Greens will oppose moves to close village schools, especially for property asset sales.
- ➔ Greens will support the development of more organic food production and consumption, 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.
- ➔ Greens will support investment in high quality adult education and apprentice learning in Essex as part of the "education for life" philosophy.
- ➔ Green Councillors will support improved Social Care. This is a complex and growing part of what county councils do with rising demand set against tighter budgets. There needs to be improved integration between health and social services to minimise avoidable health problems and accidents for elderly people.
- ➔ Youth Services are a vital support mechanism and an integral part of the range of services that help young people get a good start in life. Green councillors will support investment to strengthen them.
- ➔ 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 support Children's Centres and related services which have come under funding pressure in recent years.
- ➔ Library services have largely avoided cuts but the attempt, under the guise of "reform" to close libraries by the Conservatives was a warning of what could be to come. Only a massive public campaign stopped the library closure plans. Greens support a professionally staffed library service and 'hub' offers where this is physically possible to do so to expand the range of services on offer. People who wish to volunteer to support their libraries should be encouraged to do so, but should not be expected to run libraries as a substitute for professional staff. Libraries have a key role to play as 'safe spaces' for people of all ages.

- ➔ Green Councillors will continue to call for more local police and support officers working in communities to help prevent crime before it happens and to strengthen local liaison between police, local communities and councils.
- ➔ Green Councillors will support a co-ordinated approach to improving animal welfare and rooting out animal cruelty.
- ➔ Greens will support an audit of ethical policies within Essex County Council, including pension investments and procurement.
- ➔ Reform at County Hall has been a success story for the Greens, who have worked across party lines to achieve the ending of “free meals” and the opening up meetings to greater public participation. Next steps should include webcasting of all main meetings as well as making public consultations more meaningful and reflective of actual public responses.
- ➔ 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.

Contact: *Essex Co-ordinator* Cllr. James Abbott tel: 01376 584576 e-mail james.abbott@greenparty.org.uk

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Promoted by: Philip Hughes 163 Honeysuckle Road. Witham. CM8 2YD on behalf of all Green Party candidates for Essex

Web: www.witham-braintree.greenparty.org.uk

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