Contents

02 Introduction by Cllr Peter Martin
04 Executive Summary
06 Big Society in Essex
08 Building Social Capital
15 Transforming Services
22 Empowering Communities
Four years later, “Big Society” is simply what we do in Essex. We are delighted to see these same principles placed at the heart of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition’s approach to government. Government at all levels is now engaged in work to encourage and support people to take greater responsibility – whether at the personal, professional, civic or corporate level. National and local government can unite in their mission to strengthen civil society and to build capacity within the network of voluntary and community organisations, neighbourhood groups, parents’ groups and service clubs that enrich civil life in Britain.

But while government has a role to play, “Big Society” must be an alternative to “Big Government”. As individual citizens, groups and communities play a more active role in shaping where they live, government has a responsibility to break the public sector’s monopoly over assets and services. Such reform will provide a platform from which individuals and communities can be empowered to address local issues. Government can help by promoting the role of the voluntary and community sector in tackling social problems; creating self-sustaining modes of service delivery; and ultimately by reducing the role it plays in people’s lives.
“Big Society” is alive and well in Essex. Individuals take responsibility for commissioning their own care. Communities raise money and allocate grants to community projects. Volunteers already provide library services to people across the local community and many of our young people provide training to adults wanting to use information technology.

Our citizens and communities are already shaping, rather than simply accepting, the provision of public services. This prospectus is testament to this fact – it outlines how Essex has long embraced the principles of “Big Society” and it documents key projects and initiatives that are underway within the county. There are lots of other good examples across the county.

But our work to develop the “Big Society” will never be truly finished. By giving local residents, community groups and volunteers the opportunity and power to define their needs, shape their services and determine their futures, we will make Essex an even better place to live and work than it is today.

We know that this process is not easy and we know it will mean sustained and fundamental change in the way local and national governments do business.

Councils in Essex are prepared to rise to this challenge and to “let go” where others know best or can do things better. We also know that, with support from Whitehall, our work will be strengthened further as we build capacity in civil society, transform local services and pass power and responsibility to individuals and to Essex communities.

Cllr Peter Martin
Leader of Essex County Council
Executive Summary

Essex County Council’s vision is that Essex residents enjoy the best quality of life in Britain. This means people having choices and opportunities to fulfil their potential.

It is clear that public services have a part to play in making this happen. But public services alone cannot deliver these outcomes. Public services can be too centralised, too uniform, too tightly controlled and too remote from the needs of individuals. Fifteen years of the expensive top-down and target-driven approach to improvement has delivered neither better outcomes, nor higher public satisfaction. It would not have delivered these improvements over the next fifteen years either.

If our public services are to meet our modern demands, they must reflect the society we have become: information-driven, independent and less deferential. They must liberate communities, not constrain them.

To do this, we need to create more space between the state and the individual. This space, filled by civic institutions, the family, communities, voluntary activity and philanthropy can have a powerful effect: increasing choice and opportunity and teaching the virtues of fairness, reciprocity, duty and responsibility.

Government at all levels should therefore use its powers sparingly and effectively. The role of the local authority will be to strengthen our communities’ social infrastructure as well as build their physical infrastructure.

Essex County Council has already started down this path. We are now going further still. That is what this document is all about. Our Big Society prospectus sets out the range of measures we have already taken, and those we will deliver over the coming year to:

1. Build social capital – increasing the space between government and the individual and developing the capacity and readiness of individuals, neighbourhoods, community groups and volunteers to tackle social problems;

2. Transform services – changing the way services are delivered, with an emphasis on increasing the role of the voluntary and community sector and supporting individuals and communities to be intelligent commissioners of services; and
3. Empower communities – giving individuals and communities greater influence over local decision-making and opening up service providers to greater scrutiny and challenge.

The Big Society is not uniform, hence the patchwork of initiatives outlined in this prospectus can provide only a snapshot of our ongoing work to build social infrastructure in Essex. We recognise that Big Society cannot be achieved through the delivery of a specific project or programme.

Our work to build Big Society will therefore be dynamic and fluid. We will update this prospectus as our work progresses and as we find new ways to empower Essex communities and build societal capacity. We do, of course, welcome your ideas on how we might build on our achievements so far.
As we work to develop ‘Big Society’ in Essex we will continue to:

**Build Social Capital through:**

1. the creation of a ‘Big Society’ grant fund
2. the establishment of a Youth Philanthropy Board
3. our support for the National Citizens’ Service pilots
4. the ‘Thriving Third Sector’ Endowment Fund
5. capacity building with local credit unions
6. the Essex County Council employee volunteering scheme
7. our offer of voluntary secondments from Essex County Council to the voluntary and community sector (VCS)
8. our support for Royal Wedding street parties
9. the support provided to school governors
10. our work to support the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme
11. our work to support the Prince’s Trust
12. the provision of premises for young people’s support groups
13. the use of former council buildings by voluntary and community groups
14. volunteer training for those working with young people
15. the development of informal adult learning
16. our ‘Playing for Success’ programme
17. local intergenerational gardening projects
18. intergenerational ICT coaching projects
19. engaging young people in voluntary activity
20. our ongoing work to support time banking
21. the promotion of payroll giving
22. the voluntary sector funding gateway

**Transform Services through:**

23. the ‘Putting Essex People First’ programme
24. Connected Care pilots
25. the delivery of an asset transfer pilot project
26. the work of Village Agents
27. an invitation for ideas from the VCS
28. employee-owned co-ops and mutuals
29. the use of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs)
30. the transfer of County Council managed Trust Funds to the VCS
31. the Community Library service
32. our work with VCS childcare providers
projects like the ‘Legacy Skate Park’ and ‘Massive’
the development of a ‘Big Green Society’
participation in the options for independent living (OIL) transport group
the provision of befriending services for older people
the ‘Home from Hospital’ service in Mid Essex
the ‘ReachOut’ opportunistic health checks initiative
the work of stroke support partners
the work of ‘Air Search’
a new VCS strategy for Essex

Empower Communities through:

our work to ‘inspire ideas’ amongst communities
facilitating one-hundred ‘love where you live’ neighbourhood events
the recruitment of a cohort of community researchers
enhancing the role of town and parish councils
the Pub is the Hub programme
neighbourhood-level engagement
Building Social Capital

1. the creation of a ‘Big Society’ grant fund

To help ensure that those who need grant support can access it, Essex County Council commits to establishing a £1.4 million ‘Big Society Fund’, much of which will be controlled by local communities and spent by local communities. This builds on the council’s innovative and immensely popular Community Initiatives Fund which was launched in 2005.

2. the establishment of a Youth Philanthropy Board

Essex County Council will support schools-based fundraising to set up an endowed fund with decisions on awards made by a panel of children and young people. This initiative is designed to stimulate charitable giving, develop social capital and increase skills amongst the philanthropists of the future.

3. our support for the National Citizens’ Service pilots

A key commitment of the coalition government, this programme will provide community activities and residential programmes for young people across the UK in 2011. Essex County Council’s Integrated Youth Service will provide seconded staff and accommodation to support the Prince’s Trust in delivering local pilots for over one hundred young people in Harlow, Chelmsford, Colchester, Braintree and Saffron Walden.

4. the ‘Thriving Third Sector’ Endowment Fund

In 2009, the Essex Partnership Forum endowed the Essex Community Foundation with £2 million to help ensure a sustainable future for voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations in Essex. The ‘Thriving Third Sector’ fund helps build capacity and promote innovation within the voluntary sector. Applications and grant decisions are made annually.

5. capacity building with local credit unions

Since 2009, Essex County Council has worked with local credit unions to build capacity in this sector. Credit unions offer a range of valuable services to their members including affordable loans, financial education and links to a wider network of support services. To date, Essex County Council has provided over £250,000...
of financial and in-kind support that has helped increase the reach of credit unions across the county.

6. the Essex County Council employee volunteering scheme

In 2010, Essex County Council launched an employee volunteering scheme which allowed Essex County Council employees to take up to two days of paid leave each year to engage in volunteering. Essex County Council works with Volunteer Centres in each district to broker opportunities for staff and 2011 will see a drive to encourage staff to volunteer.

7. our offer of voluntary secondments from Essex County Council to the voluntary and community sector (VCS)

Essex County Council is now offering staff the opportunity to engage in short-term secondments to the voluntary and community sector. VCS organisations are able to submit requests for the secondment of Essex County Council staff to complete a discrete task or project, for up to five days. The scheme represents a targeted form of in-kind support for the VCS, whilst also giving Essex County Council employees the chance to experience working at the front line of local communities. The scheme is currently on trial in the district of Tendring.

8. our support for Royal Wedding street parties

The Royal Wedding is a national event and could be a catalyst for generating greater social capital. Essex County Council, together with the Rural Community Council for Essex is providing support to residents looking to overcome licensing and regulatory barriers to holding street parties.
9. the support provided to school governors

The recent Schools’ White Paper described school governors as the “unsung heroes of the education system.” They are also Essex’s single largest group of volunteers. Our in-house Governor Services team co-ordinates the recruitment, induction and training of this volunteer force.

10. our work to support the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme

Essex County Council supports and facilitates the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme within the county. Typically volunteering for two hours per week, participants give an average of 25,500 hours to their local communities per year. Participants choose their own volunteering activity for three, six, or twelve months depending on the level of award they are working towards. Some of the many activities carried out by these young people include: volunteering with local Brownie and Cub packs; working in charity shops; fundraising for charities; mentoring younger students; and acting as first aiders at community functions.

11. our work to support the Prince’s Trust

As part of the twelve week Prince’s Trust programme, supported and facilitated by Essex County Council’s Youth Service, young people undertake a four week community project. This involves planning, fundraising and delivering their choice of local project. Previous projects have included the creation of environmental areas in local primary schools, the restoration of village ponds, the refurbishment of playgroup buildings, the decoration of community halls, tidying churchyards and building accessible flower beds for disabled people. Taken together, this equates to an estimated 14,500 hours of community volunteering per year.

12. the provision of premises for young people’s support groups

The Essex Integrated Youth Service (IYS) has offered young carers’ groups in Loughton, Harlow and Canvey Island free use of youth centres. They have also provided free use of premises and equipment to enable Ongar Youth Centre to host a volunteer-run special needs club once a week. These offers ensure that the support groups have access to important resources whilst securing the optimal use of Essex County Council
buildings, as the youth centres are now used by local young people.

13. the use of former council buildings by voluntary and community groups

In Harlow, a number of buildings that were formerly used for services run by Harlow Council have been handed over to voluntary and community sector organisations and are now used to provide a range of activities run by the community, for the community.

The 'Kickz' project, operated by Tottenham Hotspur FC runs out of Council-owned changing rooms, offering football sessions and a range of wider activities for 12-18 year olds, three nights a week. The young people have improved the appearance of the changing rooms with a mural. As the project has grown and needed more space, the council's repairs and maintenance joint venture partner, Kier Harlow, has also provided additional accommodation on the site.

Faced with budgetary pressures, Harlow Council transferred the Dashes Family Resource Centre to local charity Young Concern for a peppercorn rent. The facility is now used to provide counselling and a range of other services to local young people.

14. volunteer training for those working with young people

Over the past year, the IYS has supported the voluntary sector by delivering training for volunteers working with young people. Youth workers from community groups have attended introductory courses, as well as first aid and food hygiene training in their areas. Youth workers from voluntary organisations are being supported and subsidised as they work towards their Vocational Related Qualification in youth work.
15. the development of informal adult learning

Essex Adult Community Learning (ACL) is working with the local voluntary and community sector to map the provision of informal learning opportunities and is inviting its voluntary sector partners from Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities funded projects to join in this year’s Adult Learners’ Week events. The team is also currently working on a Work Club initiative in partnership with JobCentre Plus to provide workshops and advice on CVs, interviewing techniques and networking skills.

In addition, ACL and Libraries have worked with the Essex Property Forum to develop hire agreements and key holder arrangements to facilitate the use of premises for community groups outside regular opening times.

16. our ‘Playing for Success’ programme

‘Playing for Success’ is a community education and sports initiative, providing daytime and holiday courses aimed at making a difference in deprived communities. Programmes are based at Colchester Community Stadium and Essex County Cricket Club in Chelmsford, and provide quality study support for local primary and secondary schools within the extended schools agenda. The programme aims to develop self-esteem and self-confidence by improving key skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT that can be applied back in school.

17. local intergenerational gardening projects

Essex has piloted community gardening projects to improve social cohesion, improve economic wellbeing and encourage healthy lifestyles.

Intergenerational activities can challenge negative stereotypes and actively demonstrate that older and younger generations have a wealth of knowledge and experience to offer each other.

The Generations Growing Together pilot offers the chance for different age groups to work together on community allotments and green spaces, sharing knowledge and breaking social barriers while growing food, cooking and eating together as a community. This pilot is working together
with the University of Essex to develop research to identify the benefits of engaging in intergenerational green exercise.

18. intergenerational ICT coaching projects

This project brings together older people who wish to learn about ICT outside a classroom environment with young people who have skills to share. It aims to use young people’s ICT skills to benefit older people and build connections between different groups. This scheme helps make older people more confident in using ICT and has helped break down both older and younger groups’ preconceptions about age.

19. engaging young people in voluntary activity

‘Positive Activities for Young People’ (PAYP) is a targeted programme aimed at 8-19 year olds. Participants are those most at risk of social and school exclusion, antisocial behaviour and community crime. The scheme helps young people develop the skills to remove themselves from antisocial behaviour and find new peer groups with which to engage.

Recently, a group of Essex PAYP members organised a ‘Six Peaks in One Week’ challenge to raise money for charitable causes.

20. our ongoing work to support time banking

Essex County Council already supports a time bank project in Colchester, but other communities looking to set up time banks have struggled to obtain funding from national sources. Time banks can strengthen incentives to volunteer by awarding ‘time credits’ that can be redeemed against other volunteers’ time. For example, those who volunteer as mentors to young people can redeem the credits they earn in the form of dance lessons, gardening or other activities delivered by volunteers.

Essex County Council commits to work with any organisation interested in setting up time banks to help them secure external funding.
Building Social Capital

21. the promotion of payroll giving

Essex County Council already has the infrastructure to support payroll giving to over 8,000 registered charities through an arrangement with the Charities Trust. This allows staff to make charitable donations from their salary and secure full gift aid on any donations. Essex County Council will promote this option to staff through existing internal communications channels.

22. the voluntary sector funding gateway

In 2008, Essex County Council launched a web portal designed to free up capacity within the voluntary and community sector by reducing the burden of funding applications. The portal consolidates Essex County Council’s grant information and incorporates an online application system. The portal is continuously reviewed to help ensure that it meets the needs of the VCS.
**23. the ‘Putting Essex People First’ programme**

The personalisation of adult social care services means that individuals and families will increasingly use personal budgets to become ‘micro-commissioners’ of bespoke care services. Essex County Council has established a VCS ‘Reference Group’ to support the development of new and existing VCS providers, enabling them to play a greater role in this expanding market.

**24. Connected Care pilots**

Connected Care aims to empower communities to do more for themselves and encourage individuals to help design local services. NHS South West Essex and Essex County Council commissioned Turning Point to conduct an audit in the areas of Pitsea and Vange in Basildon. This canvassed local people’s views on local health, housing and adult care services. The audit report was published with a number of recommendations.

A Partnership Board and an Implementation Group have been set up, co-chaired by a member of the local community to progress the recommendations outlined in the audit.

A similar initiative is under development in the Clacton and Jaywick area.

**25. the delivery of an asset transfer pilot project**

Essex County Council is working with the Cabinet Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) and the Young Foundation to run a pilot project investigating the benefits of local authorities working more closely with civil society organisations. Under this pilot, Essex County Council is investigating how the community management of assets can bring benefits to local communities and the delivery of public services.

Following a competitive application, a charitable pre-school in Walton was successful in proposing to manage Walton Youth Centre. Lease negotiations are now underway and the pre-school is working to develop community use of this hitherto under-utilised asset.
The Village Agents Mid-Essex pilot started in October 2009. Village Agents are recruited from, and operate within, their local community, providing mediated information, advice, support and signposting services on behalf of local statutory services. Although funded by statutory partners, the programme has been delivered by the Rural Community Council of Essex.

The Village Agents scheme has proved successful in identifying older people who have been left vulnerable. In two thirds of cases, this localised support has reduced the need for further interventions, highlighted local needs to the community and, through informal support, helped the older person to retain their independence.

The Village Agents have engaged with over 13,500 people and more than 800 individuals were directly assisted in the first year of operation. The number of people volunteering to support the project is increasing all the time.

Launched in January 2011, the call for ideas is a simple one-page document allowing voluntary organisations to propose ideas on how they could work with Essex County Council and become more involved in the provision of local public services.

Through its ongoing Transformation programme, Essex County Council is working with industry experts to reshape the way it delivers outcomes for local communities. As part of this work, the council is investigating the role of mutuals and cooperatives.

Public services in Essex have a committed and dedicated workforce. We recognise that employee-owned cooperatives provide an opportunity for this group to play an active role in shaping public services. They also present an opportunity to increase productivity, applying their specialist knowledge of professional services and local needs to help improve outcomes for local people.
29. the use of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs)

Essex County Council is investigating the use of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) to fund work to prevent children entering the care system and is lobbying government to agree to a local SIB focused on preventing reoffending. By doing this, Essex County Council aims to secure greater philanthropic and social investment in public services.

30. the transfer of County Council managed Trust Funds to the VCS

Essex County Council currently administers a number of small trust funds, most of which provide scholarship support for Essex residents in non-compulsory education. By transferring these funds to a specialist within the voluntary sector, we hope to see them fulfil their potential and signal Essex County Council's support for philanthropic giving.

31. the Community Library service

Essex's library service plays a key role in supporting the Big Society. Library staff work in partnership with a number of partner organisations and voluntary groups to deliver an innovative range of additional services to communities. Essex libraries host in the region of 500 regular reading groups, building social capital around shared interests. Looking toward the long-term sustainability of these groups, the council also provides holiday reading schemes for schoolchildren.

In addition to this, the service is advancing a number of more ambitious community programmes including:

North Weald library partnership

An agreement with North Weald Parish Council allows the parish council to share the North Weald Library building. The activities of the parish council allow the library to be open for an extra three days every week. As a quid pro quo, paid library staff provide parish council information to customers during opening hours.
Transforming Services

Jaywick Library Access Point

The Jaywick Library Access Point was set up in 2006 when the Essex County Council funded library was relocated. The Library Access Point involves the ‘Friends of Jaywick Library’ group volunteering to continue operations on the original library site. The building, IT equipment and library stock is provided by Essex County Council and the access point service extends and complements the council’s in-house provision.

Home Library service

The Home Library service is provided by over 400 volunteers who select material for more than 1,200 customers and deliver this to their homes. Typically a volunteer will visit customers every 3 to 4 weeks. The service is delivered from 50 libraries and covers all communities in Essex. The service aims to deliver the whole range of library resources – books, large print, audio books, DVDs, and information.

The majority of customers are over eighty years old and an integral part of this service is spending time and chatting with customers about their reading and what they would like to read next. Volunteers also help keep customers in touch with their local community and signpost them to other organisations and agencies.

Village centre libraries

In rural communities too small to sustain a permanent library building, volunteers provide a local service from village halls and other similar venues. Village centre libraries are currently operating in Clavering, Finchingfield, Steeple Bumpstead, Layer de la Haye and Great Totham.

Community archives

South East Essex Community Archives is a collection of self-governing independent groups working within their communities to document and collect memories, photographs and historical data.

Essex provides support to nascent groups and online resources that encourage people to get involved. To strengthen the community archives project further, an exhibition on the collections will tour Essex libraries, showcasing the materials collected and archived.
Young Volunteers and the Summer Reading Challenge

The Summer Reading Challenge is a national initiative designed to encourage children to read for pleasure during the summer break. To support the programme Essex libraries have recruited young volunteers who work alongside library staff, talking to children about their reading and encouraging them through the challenge.

For the last 10 years we have recruited our volunteers through the Trident work experience programme in secondary schools; in 2010 we also recruited through the V-inspired website.

32. our work with VCS childcare providers

In addition to grant funding, Essex County Council's Early Years and Childcare team provides business management consultancy and training as a means of capacity building. Many small charitable organisations need support to ensure that they are suitably constituted and sufficiently well-managed to enter into contracts with the Local Authority.

33. projects like the ‘Legacy Skate Park’ and ‘Massive’

These youth projects are run by voluntary organisations and have provided a skate park in Benfleet and recreational space in Hockley. Both ventures were initially supported with resources from Essex County Council and its partners but are moving to become self-sustaining and self-funding. The Legacy Skate Park now encourages young people to become members and pay a small usage fee. The Massive project proposes raising funds from users too, and plans to rent office space adjoining its youth space to raise further revenue.

34. the development of a ‘Big Green Society’

The ‘Big Green Society’ aims to bring a wide ranging partnership of conservation organisations (mainly NGOs) together with statutory partners in Essex to lobby for the devolution of conservation funding. These devolved funds would then be used in line with the principles of community budgets, to pursue locally identified priorities.
35. participation in the options for independent living (OIL) transport group

The OIL transport group is a partnership between Essex County Council, disabled people’s interest groups and transport providers. Together they work to reduce the barriers that disabled people face when travelling in Essex and beyond.

The group’s work is founded on the principles of the social model of disability, giving choice and control to disabled people, helping to make travel realistic and leading to confidence, freedom and independence. In November 2010 the OIL transport group won a prestigious National Bus Award for their work on accessibility.

36. the provision of befriending services for older people

Essex County Council's adult social care function funds Age Concern Essex to deliver a befriending service. The service is available to older people across Essex and provides a volunteer home visit once a week to reduce social isolation. In addition, regular telephone contact is made and, in Mid-Essex, service users are invited to join an afternoon tea group to increase their level of social interaction.

37. the ‘Home from Hospital’ service in Mid Essex

Essex County Council’s adult social care function is currently funding the Dengie Project Trust and Guinness Independence at Home to support older people and/or those with disabilities for 4-6 weeks after hospital discharge. This is designed to help them regain their confidence and independence. The service has helped over 300 individuals in its first 6 months, providing a range of support delivered through volunteers.

38. the ‘ReachOut’ opportunistic health checks initiative

This outreach service is initially targeting the two most deprived wards in Tendring district – Clacton Pier and Golf Green - to address some of the underlying health related issues in the community. Jointly funded by Essex County Council but managed by North East Essex Primary Care Trust and delivered by the local Citizens Advice Bureau, it works with as many local people as possible, providing health checks and addressing a range of public health issues.
39. the work of stroke support partners

Essex County Council's strategic commissioning team provides grants to a range of organisations to help people live more independently at home. The council has a three-year contract with the Stroke Association to improve support in the community for stroke survivors and carers, link with local organisations and offer advice and guidance on meeting local needs. The council is also planning to work with business support providers to improve support to stroke organisations, helping them to become more self-sufficient and responsive to individual needs.

40. the work of ‘Air Search’

Air Search (previously Skywatch) provides an aerial photography service for use in connection with coastal emergencies. Planes are flown by volunteers.

41. a new VCS strategy for Essex

A new VCS strategy for Essex has been produced. Entitled ‘Delivering a Stronger Relationship with the VCS’, it outlines a joint vision for how the County Council can work with the VCS in a relationship governed by respect, equality, trust, transparency, dual responsibility and mutual benefit. It contains a three-year action plan that addresses issues as wide ranging as commissioning and procurement, grant funding, asset and service transfer, engagement and partnership working, the Essex Compact and volunteering.
Empowering Communities

42. our work to ‘inspire ideas’ amongst communities

On behalf of all councils in Essex, the Leader of Essex County Council will write to more than one thousand community leaders inviting them to submit ideas to help improve their communities.

The council is keen to hear about any opportunities that local people have identified that would allow them to play a greater role in improving their communities and enhancing local quality of life. Essex County Council is keen to find out about the barriers these communities face: the processes, regulations and bureaucratic rules that block social action and stop people playing a full part in society.

The invitation will be issued to all local councillors, town and parish councils, community, neighbourhood and special interest groups and voluntary groups to send in their ideas on how local agencies, or national government, can remove barriers, cut bureaucracy or change the rules that stop people playing an active role in improving their areas. Indeed, the invitation will be open to all, through the local press and using online social media. Essex councils commit to working with communities to remove or reduce barriers where possible. Where central government is responsible for a barrier to local action, local representatives will take up the case with Ministers directly.

43. facilitating one hundred ‘love where you live’ neighbourhood events

A pledge for 2011-12, these events will see local communities encouraged to participate in events and projects to improve their neighbourhoods. These will build social capital and encourage residents to take action to resolve local issues rather than waiting for statutory authorities.

44. the recruitment of a cohort of community researchers

Building on existing partnership work, Essex County Council will recruit a group of volunteer community researchers. These researchers will provide feedback on hyper-local issues and, in the course of gathering community views, help develop social connections. These community researchers will also help to augment the council’s existing public engagement activity.

The WhyNot Older People’s Researchers are a peer group of older people trained...
by Essex County Council and Anglia Ruskin University to become researchers and are all volunteers. The group has used its training, experience and expertise to support the development and design of prevention services. The information they gathered has been fed back to Essex County Council and partners, helping us to understand the quality and impact of services.

45. enhancing the role of town and parish councils

Essex County Council has developed a work programme to enhance the role of parish and town councils. This has included:

The provision of financial support for the production of parish plans and in-kind support to ensure actions are viable before plans are finalised. Parish plans enable community groups to become actively involved in decisions affecting their area.

Two village hall projects have been completed this year with help from ‘last resort’ funding, provided by the County Council when a parish has exhausted all other funding sources and still has a shortfall that holds up the work. Several other smaller projects have also been completed.

Essex Equals (training for parish clerks to obtain the Certificate in Local Council Administration and their councils to achieve Quality Status) continues on a rolling programme. 30% of clerks in Essex are now qualified and we have 47 ‘Quality Councils’. The Bursary covers part of the cost of the training. Essex County Council continues to provide free website hosting to community groups and parish councils via essexinfo.net, along with on-site training. Over 1,000 websites are now hosted, including parish councils, community groups and individual councillors.

A programme of work is in train, in association with the Essex Association of Local Councils, to identify existing community groups in non-parished areas from which new parish councils could be developed. Essex County Council provides a grant of £1,000 to all new parish councils to meet start-up costs.
Empowering Communities

46. **the Pub is the Hub programme**

Essex County Council has partnered with the Pub is the Hub advisory body to help village pubs survive and become more sustainable. Businesses are helped to diversify and provide additional services to their community.

At the end of March, Pub is the Hub will be launching their Community Champions Programme in Essex in Partnership with Essex County Council.

A number of Essex villages are already looking into developing their local public house to serve their communities better: In Layer de la Haye the pub now offers a deli counter, bill payment facility and a non-fee charging cash machine. The community in Great Saling is currently exploring the possibility of taking over the pub and setting up a community shop to run alongside it. Following their success in setting up a local shop, a community group in Topperfield is looking to buy the village pub which is currently for sale. A pub in Cold Norton has been successfully run by the community for just over a year.

47. **neighbourhood-level engagement**

The Woodlands Avenue/Pilgrims Hatch Partnership has seen a multi-agency team including public sector partners, churches and the VCS bring communities together to identify local issues and solutions. The partnership is operating over a two-year period in Brentwood.

Action to address local issues is taken by both the public agencies and residents themselves. For example, residents have attained ‘Open College accreditation’ enabling them to undertake environmental audits and prompt action from professional partners. This approach is now being rolled out across Brentwood.

Harlow Council, too, has established a ‘Big Society Team’, which works to support Residents’ Associations and similar groups. It has established a Big Society Website with a range of information for community and voluntary sector groups and is now rolling out a series of Neighbourhood Forums across the town.
48. the development of specialist planning groups

Essex County Council has a number of planning groups that bring together service users, citizens of Essex, carers and interest groups that support people with specific needs to ensure statutory services meet these needs effectively. Council teams are also invited to engage and consult with the planning groups to ensure their views are included when policies, strategies and services are being planned. These groups play a valuable role in informing decisions and the design of services – we will continue to work with these groups to ensure they can influence the services they use.

49. the involvement of young people in service provision

Young people in Essex have, among other things, acted as specialist consultees in shaping youth centre programmes; sat on selection panels for senior staff; and managed and distributed ‘Youth Opportunity’ and ‘Youth Capital Funds’ to youth projects.

50. web-based engagement with residents

A pan-Essex, multi-agency working group is developing the use of electronic surveys and using the Engage Essex web platform to develop e-Citizen Panels across the twelve districts.

The Essex County Council website is being updated to include online polling, a complaints facility, freedom of information requests, links to consultations, webcasts of meetings and a “your right to know” section, making available a wide range of public information in one convenient location.

In addition, the County Council has a project in place to empower citizens through the use of petitions and e-petitions. It will ensure that citizens and communities can submit petitions in both paper form and online.
Empowering Communities

51. the development of Participation Networks Forums

The Participation Networks Forum (PNF) is all about people working together for Essex. It is a strong network of over 70 different organisations that all promote a better quality of life in Essex and equality for all. The member organisations represent all sections of the community with a strong focus on disability, equality and inclusion. The PNF membership now includes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller representation. The PNF co-chairs meet monthly and act as a critical friend to Essex County Council, when services are being developed. We will continue to work with these groups to ensure they can influence the future development of local services.

52. the protection of Post Office branches

In response to the closures brought about by the Network Change Programme, Essex County Council developed an innovative local model allowing ten post offices to reopen, with three of these branches being run by community groups. With support from the Retail Enterprise Fund we have enabled several other rural post offices to modernise their businesses, as well as allowing Coggeshall Post Office to relocate to a far more accessible site. We should also see (subject to a Post Office Ltd consultation process) Writtle Post Office relocate into the village library.

53. our support for police neighbourhood action panels

Neighbourhood action panels have been established to give local residents a direct mechanism to inform local safety priorities and give feedback on local policing. Panels are approximately coterminous with county council Members’ divisions. All issues identified are relayed to both the District Commander and to the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) in each district/borough. Actions are then taken to deal with concerns and many issues find their way into the strategic priorities of CSPs.

54. our support for participatory budgeting

We are working with Castle Point Council for Voluntary Services to trial a participatory budgeting programme in Castle Point. The programme will raise awareness of the opportunities for developing and improving services in South Essex to improve
community support, independence and self sufficient development. The local community will have the opportunity to vote for and engage with the project that they believe will best benefit their community.

55. our EssexWorks pledges

The community safety pledge agreed as part of Essex County Council’s budget and programme of work for 2011/12 states:

“We will enable communities to reduce anti-social behaviour and fear of crime through twelve local community engagement schemes and projects.”

As part of this, Essex County Council is making available a £50,000 fund for projects which are supported by local communities to address locally-identified concerns. This will allow us to support and establish schemes across the county where there is a local interest. Each scheme will demonstrate individual achievements and successes; associated communications activities; and an overall reduction in perceptions of antisocial behaviour and fear of crime.

In order to receive a share of the £50,000, applications must demonstrate that the issue being addressed has been identified by the local community; that there is active community engagement; that the project has clearly defined timescales and evaluations (including community feedback) and that the scheme will be promoted through community champions.

Essex County Council will engage with a range of agencies and communities to ensure a balance of schemes and projects that contribute to the Big Society within the county.
This document is issued by
Essex County Council, with contributions from Essex District and Borough Councils.

You can contact us in the following ways:

**By post:**
Essex County Council Policy Unit
PO Box 11, County Hall,
Chelmsford CM1 1LX

**By telephone:**
01245 430 430

**By fax:**
01245 430 741

**By email:**
bigsoc.prospectus@essex.gov.uk

**Visit our website:**
www.essex.gov.uk

The information contained in this document can be translated and/or made available in alternative formats, on request.

Published March 2011