

Essex County Council

8 December 2020

Answers to Written Questions

Agenda Item 13

1. By Councillor Mitchell of the Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities

'As a Royal Navy Veteran myself, I've recently been made aware of the Veterans Railcard scheme.

As a Climate Action Commissioner, I'm very keen to encourage more sustainable transport options for all, especially for those who have stepped up to serve their Country in times of conflict.

I would therefore ask if the Cabinet Member could share details with all Members so they can also support this honourable initiative throughout their Divisions?'

Reply

'Essex County Council proudly hosts the Essex Civilian Military Partnership Board (CMPB) which offers strategic direction to the county's shared Armed Forces community covenant commitments. The Board is made up of representatives from the armed forces, Veterans' charities, Essex councils, and a range of public sector bodies.

As part of the work we do with Board members, we have shared with them, and promoted through our channels, details of the new Veterans Railcard scheme. This is a fantastic new initiative that helps enable Essex veterans and their families to have access to cheaper rail travel, in order to visit family and friends or simply enjoy a day out (covid restrictions permitting). It also encourages the use of more sustainable transport.

The Railcard is now on sale and is available to those that have served for at least one day or more in Her Majesty's Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) and can be purchased for an introductory price of just £21 for one year until 31 March 2021.

Like other Railcards, the Veterans Railcard offers savings of 1/3 on most rail travel. It can be purchased online at: <https://www.veterans-railcard.co.uk/>.

I would encourage members to share these details throughout their divisions to enable as many veterans to take advantage of the introductory offer.

More information about what support is available to veterans can be found here: <https://www.essex.gov.uk/essex-armed-forces-community-covenant>

2. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care

‘Given that suicide rates in Tendring and Colchester appear to be higher than other districts, please can you let me know the levels of spending on mental health services by this authority every year during the past ten years and whether additional resources are going to be made available to target Colchester and Tendring and other areas with a high number to try to improve things?’

Reply

‘Suicide is a devastating and tragic event which, although comparatively rare, has profound impacts on families and communities. The latest suicide data, covering 2019, was published in September 2020 by the Office of National Statistics. This shows that Essex has a higher rate of suicides than the national average and has had so for the past five years. Suicide rates in Tendring and Colchester are higher than the norm, based on their socio-economic ranking nationally and the reasons are unclear. On average, between 150 and 165 people die by suicide in Essex each year and every one of these deaths is a tragedy. This calendar year there have very sadly been four suicides in the under 18 population. Two of the young people were from Colchester; one from Basildon; and one from Braintree.

Essex invests significant funds in mental health services for both children and adults across the County. It is not possible to provide the full ten years of data. However, the previous five years, plus the committed funding for this financial year is available. The figures for children’s services include the contribution that Essex County Council makes to the collaboratively commissioned Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service (EWMHS) and funding for early intervention programmes. Within the figures for 2020/21 is included the committed funding for a pilot project which commences for a period of 18 months from January 2021. This project establishes a new multidisciplinary team, which will be focused on Tendring and provide mental health support alongside drug and alcohol misuse support. The spend on Adults’ services includes our spend on Assessment and Case management, Care and Support and commissioned services.

| Financial Year | Children’s Mental Health Service | Adult’s Mental Health Services |
|----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2015/16 | £2,768,727 | £19,318,000 |
| 2016/17 | £2,115,319 | £19,507,000 |
| 2017/18 | £2,137,242 | £19,407,000 |
| 2018/19 | £1,957,634 | £18,960,000 |
| 2019/20 | £1,984,684 | £19,495,000 |
| 2020/21 | £2,557,081 | £21,182,000 |

Suicide is very complex and most individuals who take their own lives have a history of mental illness, especially depression, and there are often a range of additional underlying risk factors, such as unemployment, debt, or other adverse life events. Services do play a role, but it is important to note that the national data shows that only about one in four of those who take their own lives are known to mental health services. Therefore, investment in broader, early intervention and prevention and awareness campaigns are paramount. Essex County Council

commissions a range of early intervention and prevention support, including our Family Innovation Fund services for children and families and the Futures in Mind community support offer for adults. The Essex Adult Mental Health and Wellbeing Team also provides direct, early help to adults in Essex who are beginning to experience poor emotional wellbeing who do not meet the threshold for statutory services. Essex County Council has also recently run an Adult Mental Health communications campaign across social and mainstream media and are continuing to develop and publish content to highlight the services available and encourage anyone who is experiencing poor emotional wellbeing or mental health to access help.

There are specific interventions already in place in Colchester and Tendring, with two mental health hubs in those areas. There is targeted work to support Veterans and the 'Never too late Mate' campaign is focusing on improving the knowledge and understanding of local providers and businesses in the area to be more mental health and suicide aware. Other services include the two crisis cafes in Colchester and Clacton, commissioned by Essex County Council and North East Essex CCG, and the Men's Mental Health Community Fund, which is being run by Tendring CVS. There is also a task and finish group being established to cover both Tendring and Colchester to carrying out a deep dive into the suicide rates there to get a better understanding of the issues and potential mitigations.

Finally, suicide was a major topic of discussion at the most recent Essex Health and Wellbeing Board, reflecting the concern felt across the whole system, and where we were grateful to the office of HM Coroner for Essex for their engagement.'

3. By Councillor Harris of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Could I ask the portfolio holder for an update on the Review of the Essex Speed Strategy mentioned at last Full Council meeting please. How is the review going for 20mph Policy please, and will the LHP be consulted in the next few months?'

Reply

'I thank the member for Maypole for his question on the review of the Essex Speed Strategy.

Since the last full council, I have had a meeting with officers to discuss the Essex Speed Strategy to start the review process and make it fit for purpose. We will also be bringing in Hertfordshire County Council Officers in the new year to discuss how they changed their policy to be more effective with their strategic aims such as sustainable transport and clean air.

We currently intend to formally consult with the LHPs in the spring but of course we first need to make sure we have looked into all the options as we normally do before consulting on topics.'

4. By Councillor Young of the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care

‘One of my constituents has raised the important issue of malnutrition of the elderly. She has urged us to review the council’s spending on food for older and disabled people in the Wivenhoe area and in the rest of Essex, and in particular to ensure that funding for meals on wheels services is made available.

Across the country, numerous community groups have started providing meal delivery services for those in need during the initial lockdown. But to be sustainable, these groups need financial backing as well as support to integrate with adult social care so that they can access regular and appropriate referrals.

My constituent has requested that Essex County Council takes the following action;

- protects or reintroduces and enhances a local meals on wheels service,
- promotes a ‘more than meal’ approach where services include welfare checks, links to other support, and a lifeline of regular contact and
- champions innovative and strategic approaches that recognise the long-term benefits and cost-savings of meals on wheels for older people, for communities, and for the public purse.

Please can I request that an urgent review is conducted focusing on the existing arrangements and addressing these specific points.’

Reply

‘Essex County Council mobilised the Essex Welfare Service (now known as the Essex Wellbeing Service) in March 2020 with the aim of deploying food and medical supplies and supporting people’s wellbeing during lockdown and in recovery from COVID-19. This involved:

- Deploying emergency supplies to those people identified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable who had not received food supplies from Central Government
- Working with over 3,000 volunteers to provide shopping for people who were unable to do so themselves
- Working with the district, borough and city councils through community hubs to connect people to volunteers and services that provided support with food, (be it through shopping or direct food bundles)
- Funding foodbanks to support the most vulnerable members of our community.

It must be remembered that ECC moved away from providing a ‘meals on wheels’ service because of the falling demand from residents, which led inevitably to the meals merely being delivered without the social interaction that residents so appreciate. We are working with local communities to promote the ‘more than meals’ offering to which you refer, as evidenced by the grant schemes that have been announced. One of these provides a facility for local councillors to provide funding to organisations and community groups in their own area, for the very purposes you describe. We believe that councillors, faith groups and other

community organisations are the best placed to identify where the hidden needy are.'

5. By Councillor Reid of the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

'Two-thirds of schools have students who are self-isolating. Government statistics reveal that almost two in three secondary schools in England had at least one student self-isolating as a result of potential contact with Covid-19 last week. Nearly two-thirds of secondaries are sending pupils home and we have a chaotic system rota system by default.

Schools need to give the latitude to move to a planned system. Teacher absence also mean many schools face closures. The impacts of loss of schooling over the pandemic is going to have an enormous impact on those students who are taking exams this year.

Can we as a County Council put pressure on the Government to decide what form of attainment is going to be used in England (Scotland and Wales students already know what they will be assessed on) so that students can feel more confident about their expectations and teachers know what they are going to base the assessments on.'

Reply

'I share the concerns raised about the impact of further loss of in school learning on pupils this year, especially on those taking exams in the summer of 2021. As a result I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education on 13 November 2020 to request urgent information is provided by the DfE in respect of the contingency arrangements that will need to put into place to ensure a fair and equitable examinations system for all pupils next summer. The letter was copied to the Schools' Minister and Children's Minister. We are awaiting a response to my letter.

In addition, the government last week issued further information around their plans for exams for 2021 to address the disruption faced by students during the pandemic.'

6. By Councillor Reid of the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

'Home schooling numbers are up by 38%. A survey of 151 councils by the Association of the Director of Children's Services (ADCS) has found that the number of home-schooled children in England has risen by 38% year-on-year from 54,656 on 1 October 2019 to 75,668 on the same date this year.

Councils have reported that fears around Covid-19 were the top reason given by parents for home-schooling their children with many parents saying that they would send their children back to school once they feel it is safe to do so.

The ADCS 'want to be able to support these families to make an informed choice

and are equipped to offer a good and broad education' but cautioned that without a statutory register it is impossible to know every child or young person who is being electively home educated.

We know the impacts of the pandemic will be far reaching for all of us and especially for our young children. We realise this also will come with safe-guarding issues. Over this period, we feared an invisible crisis and that abuse and other issues were going unnoticed behind closed doors and it has been reported that since the first lockdown has ended, we have seen a rise in referrals to Children's Social Care.

Can we put pressure on the Government to revisit, at the earliest convenience, the response to a 2019 Department of Education consultation on setting up a register of children and young people who are not educated in school?'

Reply

'The Education Select Committee recently conducted an Inquiry/Call for Evidence, specifically linked to the topic of 'home education'. Essex County Council submitted, at the start of November 2020, a thorough response to this Inquiry and, on the matter of setting up a mandatory register of all home educated children and young people, we stated the following:

To reiterate some of the points made within our responses to previous DfE consultations/calls for evidence on this exact point, Essex County Council would welcome a duty to maintain a register of ALL children and young people who are home educated within our jurisdiction for the following reasons:

In Essex a voluntary registration scheme is in operation and we do not believe that this has been fully utilised by our local home education community. Our available data shows that on 1 October 2020, we had 2018 children and young people, falling within cohorts Reception through to Year 11 registered in Essex as home educated. This is compared to 1,578 on the same date in 2019 and 1,510 on the same date in 2018 - an increase of 33.64% over two years.

It is our view that the advantages of mandatory registration of children educated at home (with duties on both local authorities and parents in this respect) would be:

- all children and young people will be known to the local authority whose jurisdiction within which they reside. Local authorities will be better-equipped to safeguard their children and to ensure that the right level of school places are available, should parents elect to return their children to the school system at any point;
- the local authority would be in a position to ensure that all key services available to children and young people are aware of every child that is eligible for their services. Currently, much information is shared by these services via schools but children and young people not on roll at a school are not in receipt of information which may be of use to them. By introducing mandatory registration, a fairer system can be introduced by local authorities to address this current issue.
- Currently, home educating families are able to move from the jurisdiction of

one local authority to another, without any expectation that they notify each relevant authority of their move. This leads to families 'falling off the radar' and causes significant work for local authorities who are forced to follow their 'children missing education' procedures in attempts to locate families who are found to have left their jurisdiction, often after some time has passed. By placing joint duties on both local authorities and parents, in respect of mandatory registration, any such provisions should include the need for families to alert their local authority when any significant changes to contact details take place e.g. address, email address, telephone contact number, etc.

I hope that the above information evidences that, as a local authority, we continue to urge the Department for Education to review existing practices and systems that are in place in respect of elective home education. We are taking every available opportunity to share our views in respect of the need to introduce a mandatory register to allow all local authorities to be better-informed regarding the size of their local home educated cohort and to enable them to plan, resource and safeguard this specific cohort as effectively as possible.'

7. By Councillor Davies of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Will the Cabinet Member commit to reviewing the parameters and methodology for Essex speed surveys, in order to bring in lower speed limits and traffic calming measures based on safety?'

Reply

'I thank the member for Laindon Park and Fryerns for his question on Essex Speed Surveys.

The methodology for Essex Speed surveys is designed purely to collect accurate data which then can inform decision making. The Essex Speed Strategy sets out the policy for that decision making and it is in the process of being reviewed.

Since the last full council, I have had a meeting with officers to discuss the Essex Speed Strategy to start the review process and make it fit for purpose. We will also be bringing in Hertfordshire County Council Officers in the new year to discuss how they changed their policy to be more effective with their strategic aims such as sustainable transport and clean air.'

8. By Councillor Scordis of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Could I ask the portfolio holder to confirm the extent of ongoing works to resolve the flooding of Haven Road, Colchester at high tide?'

Reply

‘I thank the member for Abbey for his question on Haven Road, Colchester.

This is a longstanding problem and not one that can be solved by highways alone. ECC have a coordinating role as the Lead Flooding Authority and we have investigated several potential mitigation measures to try and address this issue over the last few years. After extensive feasibility studies, we delivered a flood alleviation scheme immediately upstream of Haven Road which has reduced flood risk to several residential properties. This involved reinforcing and ‘straightening’ an existing culvert to make it more hydraulically efficient. However, in relation to the flooding of Haven Road itself (downstream of our scheme), none of the proposed solutions were financially viable, meaning we have been unable to resolve this issue.

Water is constantly running through the whole system and discharging into the River Colne. When the tidal flap is shut, the water cannot outfall into the river meaning, backs up and floods Haven Road. We’ve explored the possibility of increasing the number of outfalls discharging into the River Colne, installing pumping stations to get the water away from the low point on Haven Road and increasing the capacity of the upstream Distillery Pond. All of these would be extremely difficult to deliver and very costly.

Officers continue to look into this issue and work collaboratively with partners to explore what options there are to solve this longstanding issue.’

9. By Councillor Durham of the Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities

‘Can I ask the Cabinet Member to confirm that library membership is open to all Essex children free of charge and that Essex County Council will continue to offer the Book Start programme throughout the county.’

Reply

‘Library Membership is open to all Essex children and adults free of charge and we are committed to continuing to offer the Bookstart Programme across the county. Bookstart is a national book gifting programme that offers free book packs for every child and guidance materials for parents and carers. The packs help families develop a daily reading habit at home and give every child a flying start in life.

In 2019-20 we gifted 15,006 Baby book packs (91% of the birthrate of 16,550) and 19,808 Treasure book packs, for children aged 3 (100% of eligible children). Despite a small pause as a result of COVID, we have continued to run the Bookstart programme this year.’

10. By Councillor Harris of the Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

‘Local school, Thomas Lord Audley has reported the good news that more students

than ever are cycling to school. It does create an issue for them though, as their existing storage facility for 60 bikes is insufficient. They've also said that they have limited money to match-fund anything that external funders such as ECC might contribute, claiming the money needs to be focused on the education of disadvantaged students.

A new cycle shelter is needed. They range in value from about £9,000 up to £21,000, both without VAT.

Are there any funding streams that the portfolio holder is aware of, other than the Local Highways Panel, which could contribute to this cost? Is there anyone else you would recommend asking about funding or could Essex County Council portfolio holders provide assistance?

Reply

'It is really positive that more children are cycling to school than ever before at Thomas Lord Audley.

I have made some enquiries, there is, however, no funding available for such projects within the education portfolio. As the school is an academy it receives its funding directly from government and is responsible for its own budgeting.

One thing to consider is whether Cllr Harris might want to use some of the £10k County Council members locality funding that he received for local projects to help with the school's expenses.'

11. By Councillor Scordis of the Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care

'Can the portfolio holder provide me with an update on the local test and trace scheme please? Specifically, how effective is it? And what could be improved about the system moving forward?'

Reply

'Essex and Southend Contact Tracing Service (ESCTS) was set up to work closely with PHE Local Health Protection Teams to manage exposures, clusters and outbreaks in settings such as schools, universities, businesses, care homes and health care settings.

It is well thought of regionally and nationally and was asked to support Norfolk County Council around poultry farm outbreaks some weeks back.

The service also took over responsibility for what are called the 'Lost to Follow Up' cases (LTFU) from the national team on the 24/10/20. In doing so, ESCTS has improved the rate of positive cases successfully closed from 69% on the 24/10/20 to 86% on the 27/11/20

The number of settings and 'Lost to Follow Up' cases has significantly increased

over time; the service dealt with in excess of 1,800 incidents in different settings in November. A number of service developments are currently underway including increasing capacity, providing backward contact tracing and welfare calls to all positive cases, and contacting all asymptomatic contacts of positive cases and encouraging them to get tested. This involves an additional £1.6m investment by Essex County Council.'

12. By Councillor Mackrory of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Can the Cabinet Member explain the process for determining the order of repair for the '50 Worst pothole' procedure within a Division? The question arises after potholes were repaired in one road in my Division on one day but another group in an adjacent road were repaired a week later and others mid-way between are still waiting as are others elsewhere in Springfield?'

Reply

'I thank the member for Springfield for his question on the Member-Led Pothole Scheme.

The County Member might remember that this was covered in my note that launched the scheme where I advised that the highways teams would look to assess the requests to be delivered alongside other highways activities until the end of project which is due to finish at the end March 2021. I have added the notes that Members might find helpful below.

Members will no doubt appreciate that each defect needs to be considered for repair taking the road, speed limits and surrounding conditions into consideration. This also means that different traffic management and permitting requirements may be required.

The team are circulating a weekly email to all councillors advising them of road repairs that are happening in the following week too.

For information:

- a. Repairs will be grouped into areas that will benefit from the same method for repair, so we gain the greatest efficiency of operations. This may mean that repairs may be made at different times/dates, in different parts of your division. We will try to let you know ahead of time when repairs will be carried out so that you can attend if desired.
- b. Where your list identifies a fault that we already know is already going to be resolved through a future confirmed programme of work such as major resurfacing, we will inform you.
- c. Some faults may meet our criteria for 'making safe' urgently, in which case we will do that urgently as we cannot compromise road users' safety.
- d. Repair crews will, where possible, repair adjacent carriageway defects where the defect is also inside the marked traffic management zone, and when the gang have the right materials and equipment immediately to hand. This may mean that

- you get more defects repaired nearby in one road than you had listed.
- e. Scheduling and completion of works will be subject to prevailing weather conditions.
 - f. We will maintain all necessary social-distancing guidelines related to Covid-19.'

13. By Councillor Mackrory of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'Can the Cabinet Member ensure that highways works contractors remove their signage once the works are complete? For example in Epping High Street two road works signs have been propped up against a speed camera sign for two years and at the southern end of Main Road, Great Leighs a large 'Road closed ahead' sign has been prominently displayed for well over a year. Apart from being unsightly this leads to drivers doubting the relevance of current warning signage.'

Reply

'I thank the member for Springfield for his question on removing signage after works are completed.

Under the legislation governing roadworks, and through our roadworks permit scheme, ECC is able to impose a financial penalty on any organisation that leaves signage or other materials on the highway once they have completed works. We have a team of roadworks inspectors who undertake a variety of inspections of sites, who will pick up as many of these issues as possible; however, it is always helpful if these things can be reported to us so that we can direct the inspectors to specific issues/locations.'

14. By Councillor Baker of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families

'The Chief Executive of East Anglian Children's Hospice (EACH) has publicly stated that the hospice is in need of additional funding if it is to continue to provide the high quality health care for the children and young people of East Anglia who have life-limiting conditions or who require end-of-life care.

I understand that the National Health Service (NHS) currently provides 17 percent of the necessary funding to the hospice and that the remaining 83 percent of the funding comes from voluntary giving. Due to the current pandemic, the voluntary giving has reduced drastically, and this vital service provided by the hospice for the children of East Anglia, which includes Essex, is asking the NHS to increase its funding.

My question to the Cabinet Member is:

Will Essex County Council, on behalf of the children, young people and families of Essex, write to the Secretary of State responsible for the National Health Service requesting that the NHS review its financial support for East Anglian Children's Hospice (EACH) in order to compensate for the reduced funding it is currently receiving from voluntary giving because of the pandemic, in order to maintain its

vital service of health care and support for those children and families in Essex requiring it.'

Reply

'Thank you for the question. While we have highest regard for the wonderful work that children's hospices do, we do not think it is in the remit of Essex County Council to seek to persuade the government to ask the NHS to allocate more money – particularly given the other huge strains on their resources at the present time.

We are, however, aware of considerable pots of money being made available to the voluntary sector by the government at this time and would suggest that this is where the hospices could consider looking for increased resources.'

15. By Councillor Deakin of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families

'Does this council have any concerns over the procedures to enable the Half Term Grants to be issued quickly?

Were appropriate checks on the details of the applications thoroughly checked and verified?

I do understand the necessity for speed and I'm sure the grants were welcomed by the successful charities. Many have posted photos on social media showing families eating or volunteers delivering bags of food. These tell a good story but it's not evidence.

With another funding stream now open, what checks are in place to ensure all the funding is actually spent on purchasing and providing of supplies for those families most in need?

Does this council have assurances from EALC that the successful charities will be required to provide evidence, such as invoices, on how their grants were spent?'

Reply

'The applications come from locally trusted organisations, many whom ECC teams already work with as well as the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC). Where there is an application, and the applicant is not known, then the EALC team will do additional checks and have a phone call conversation to find out more about the project.

There is a certain degree of trust as these not-for-profit organisations are going to use the funding to reach families and individuals most in need, for many they have been set up specifically to support the most vulnerable residents.

Officers have been managing the relationship with foodbanks across Essex since the beginning of lockdown and so we have a good understanding of the work they

deliver and how they target those most in need.

With the foodbank fund it is clear in the criteria what this funding is to be used for and there is a list of conditions that projects have to agree to. EALC are clear on the criteria and we get sent a list of applications each day and we have the opportunity to ask questions about any of the applications before an acceptance letter is sent out.

We check the expenditure and monitor this against the grant conditions set by the DWP to ensure that the fund is being used correctly. Third-party organisations must stipulate their estimates for target volumes they intend to achieve, and this is calculated at the end of the process to ensure that the funding is being used as it should.'

16. By Councillor Deakin of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure

'In Chelmsford we have a number of underpasses which link communities and key areas such as the city centre, railway station, bus station, schools and several industrial areas.

Every time there is a heavy downpour the underpasses flood and force people to have to cross some very busy roads, including Parkway, to continue their journeys.

Will the Cabinet Member expedite the clearing and cleaning of the drainage systems and associated gullies for these underpasses as the safety of our residents is paramount?'

Reply

'I thank the member for Chelmsford West for her question on underpasses in Chelmsford.

Flooding may occur after very heavy rainfall over a relatively short period means the drains don't have the capacity as water always finds the lowest point and this usually means subways flood.

Officers are aware of the importance of these underpasses and action is swiftly taken when problems occur, we are also aware that not all subways have pumps. It needs to be appreciated that a number of different agencies have a direct influence on the successful workings of the drainage systems given that Chelmsford City Council are the street cleaning authority and these systems discharge into a water authority outfall.'

17. By Councillor Abbott of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure?

'The recent closures of the A12 by Highways England for roadworks led to

significant disruption, several incidents of damage to ECC highways infrastructure (streetlights, a bridge, highway signs and verges) and damage to private property - all caused by HGVs diverting through villages including Rivenhall. The police, ECC Highways and UKPN all had to be called out several times.

Whilst the roadworks were necessary, surely the disruption and damage caused by HGVs was avoidable if better planning had been put in place?

Is ECC satisfied with the arrangements made by Highways England for the diversions - and what lessons can be learned for the future?

Reply

'I thank the member for Witham Northern for his question on Highways England's roadworks on the A12.

The A12 roadworks were part of Highways England's (HE) Concrete Roads repair programme and necessitated several periods of complete road closure. We know that disruption to local journeys was at times severe and yes, we do have some evidence of damage to assets on our network. We have to be careful here. Where it was an obvious consequence of the works, we will take these matters up with HE. However diversionary routes properly signed and used are a feature of such works, and the routes, whilst not always ideal, are the ones that have been used for many years. In some cases are the only ones available for the largest of vehicles which is why they are signed as they are. Better planning is always at the forefront of everybody's minds when things go awry, we have already spoken at member and senior officer level about the change to the road closure programme made at short notice and with ineffective on-street signing. We have reminded HE that although there are many social media and electronic means of conveying changes to programmes of work these cannot be assumed to be read by the public at very short notice. To be fair to HE, managers were attempting to compress the works programme to save on the need for further road closures later in the month. I think we have to remember that if we want an efficient programme of work that responds to circumstances that this may come with short notice changes to traffic management. The alternative is to stick to an original schedule even when it is obvious that work could be completed more efficiently and in shorter time. We will review the diversionary routes with HE especially with the road widening in mind. We will look for alternatives but ultimately in many cases the options are limited and we do have to sign routes for the largest vehicles on the network although drivers of smaller vehicles will inevitably use their sat navs to use other routes.'

18. By Councillor Henderson of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families

'I am sure the Portfolio Holder for Children and Families is aware of Tendring District Council's recently published 2020-25 Housing Strategy. The publication refers to Government welfare reforms in recent years and highlights how they have impacted on the lives of children and families living within the Tendring District.

The publication states that 'There have also been a number of welfare reforms in

recent years that have impacted on the housing market and the lives of residents in the district.'

Tendring has suffered disproportionality from benefit cuts, the spare room subsidy, the introduction of universal credit, the freezing of the local housing allowance and the reduction of Council Tax Benefits. Consequently, it has increased deprivation and has a high prevalence of mental health disorders in children, which is not surprising given the high levels of child poverty and deprivation in the district. Mental health disorders in children have an impact on educational attainment and Tendring generally ranks poorly compared to the rest of Essex in terms of educational attainment.

Can I ask the Portfolio Holder, having now been made aware of the hard evidence highlighting how recent welfare reforms are having a serious, lasting impact on the lives of children and families living within this county, does she still stand by her publicly made statement that: "These are promising times and it is great to see the Conservatives tackling the issues that really matter; cutting benefits..."?"

Reply

'I stand by what I said in 2015, which was a blog that I wrote in relation to the first 100 days of the Conservatives winning the general election. The government's approach through universal credit, replacing the out-dated, bloated and complicated benefits system, combined with support for return to work, has clearly developed greater opportunities for people to enter employment and be rewarded for it. Indeed, the UK employment rate was estimated at a joint record high of 76.6% between January and March 2020. This means more people able to earn a living, start careers and become more self-reliant.

In March 2020, the whole world entered a once in a century pandemic which obviously has had a vast impact on the economy, employment, needs and welfare of communities. The repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis will be felt for years to come. Using a partial quote from 2015 during an unprecedented global crisis is certainly taking things out of context.

The question appears to suggest that the challenges in Tendring have only come about since the Conservatives made changes to welfare and benefits, which we all know is not the case. Furthermore, whilst there is clearly much more to do, this administration at Essex County Council has done much to support the area and continues to do so. From building new roads to providing key programmes of intervention to help the most vulnerable.

In just the last year, we have supported families through the Working Families Programme, which is an ongoing suite of initiatives to help those families who are working or seeking employment. The summer camp scheme, which offered free childcare over the summer to families right across Essex was hugely successful and is set to be expanded further. I draw Cllr Henderson's attention to the holiday hunger programme and winter food money which is supported by vast investment from the government and the County Council. I led the introduction of a laptop scheme to provide children in need with the technology to do their schoolwork at

home. We have identified young people leaving care as a vulnerable group and are providing additional support for them and removed the need to pay council tax until they are 21. Finally, on 7 December, I will be in front of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee and will be talking to them about a new project specifically for the Tendring area, designed to focus additional resources and look at new forms of intervention for vulnerable families.'