

Essex County Council

Hedingham Division

Annual Report 2025–2026

Introduction – The Hedingham Division and What It Represents

The Hedingham Division is a diverse and proudly rural part of Essex, made up of 33 parish councils and a network of villages, farmland, small businesses and community organisations that define its character.

Representing the Hedingham Division means understanding that rural issues differ from those in urban areas. Road maintenance affects farm access as much as commuters. Transport links influence young people's access to education and employment. Social care provision must take account of distance and isolation. Protecting our countryside is not an abstract policy issue — it is central to everyday life.

This annual report sets out the work undertaken during the 2025–2026 municipal year and reflects five years of steady representation and delivery for the Hedingham Division as a whole.

Throughout the year I have attended parish meetings across the division, responded to individual casework, worked with officers to resolve local issues, supported community organisations and represented rural concerns at County Hall.

The aim has been consistent: to ensure that the Hedingham Division is not simply part of Essex on a map, but actively heard, properly supported and fairly invested in.

Highways and Transport – Practical Delivery Backed by Policy

Highways remain the most frequently raised issue across our parish meetings. In rural areas the road network underpins farm access, school transport, emergency response and local business logistics.

Essex maintains one of the largest highway networks in the country. It is managed through routine safety inspections, risk-based defect prioritisation and planned resurfacing programmes.

Delivery mechanisms include the Priority One programme for proactive maintenance, the Members' Highways Initiative which enables local priorities to be addressed, and Local Highway Panels which support new safety and design schemes.

Within the Hedingham Division this year we secured and delivered:

- Resurfacing works in parts of Sible Hedingham, Bulmer Tye & Lamarsh
- Road 'top dressing' improvements in Gestingthorpe.
- Extensive white lining improvements across multiple parishes.

- Replacement and upgrading of road signage.
- Continued engagement regarding drainage and long-term maintenance priorities.

These improvements enhance safety, visibility and long-term resilience. Sustained investment in rural routes remains essential and I will continue pressing for it.

Education and Children's Services – Quality and Accountability

Children's services remain one of the most scrutinised and high-priority areas of local government.

Essex County Council has strengthened safeguarding, improved oversight and raised standards. Ofsted inspections have recognised improvements in leadership and service consistency in recent years.

Demand pressures remain particularly significant in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), requiring continued reform, financial planning and expansion of appropriate provision.

In rural areas, access to services is often as important as availability. Ensuring families receive equal standards of support regardless of geography remains a central priority.

Adult Social Care – Managing Rising Demand with Stability

Adult social care represents the largest area of County Council expenditure and one of the greatest financial pressures nationally.

Essex continues to perform strongly, with positive Care Quality Commission assessments recognising effective commissioning, safeguarding and partnership working with NHS services.

Investment has focused on prevention, independent living, workforce retention and support for unpaid carers.

For rural communities, transport access and social isolation are important considerations. Balancing compassionate care with financial sustainability remains central to responsible governance.

Finance, Efficiency and Governance – Scale and Stability

Essex County Council is one of the largest county authorities in England, serving over 1.8 million residents and managing a multi-billion-pound budget.

In February 2026, Full Council approved a total council tax increase of 3.95%, comprising a 1.95% general increase and a 2.00% Adult Social Care precept.

For a Band D property, the Essex County Council element rises from £1,579.59 to £1,641.96 annually — an increase of £62.37 per year or approximately £1.20 per week.

Despite national pressures affecting many authorities, Essex remains financially stable and is widely regarded as one of the better-managed county councils nationally.

Disciplined budgeting, long-term planning and responsible capital investment underpin this stability.

Economic Growth, Skills and Rural Enterprise

A thriving rural economy sustains village life. Essex supports economic growth through infrastructure investment, skills development and support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

For the Hedingham Division, agriculture, independent trades, hospitality and local services remain central to economic resilience.

County-wide initiatives promote apprenticeships, vocational training and alignment between education providers and employer demand, ensuring opportunities remain available locally.

Community Grants and Parish Partnership

- Ridgewell History Society
- Birdbrook Bowls Club
- Castle Hedingham Tennis Clubto name a few.

Strong partnership between parish, district and county levels of government remains fundamental to effective local delivery.

Environment, Waste and Energy from Waste

Essex County Council has ended the use of landfill for household waste and transitioned to Energy from Waste treatment, including the Rivenhall facility.

Residual waste is now used to generate electricity rather than being buried, reducing environmental impact.

Food waste recycling has been a particular focus this year. Food makes up around a quarter of general household waste in Essex. Through targeted initiatives, the Council has helped households increase food waste recycling by providing caddy liners, local information packs and direct neighbour support.

Thousands of tonnes of food waste from Essex communities have been diverted from general rubbish and used to produce green energy and agricultural fertiliser, reducing carbon emissions and saving money on disposal costs.

The Council continues working to improve recycling rates, manage waste infrastructure and protect rural landscapes and biodiversity.

Arts - Heritage and Culture

Essex is proud of its heritage, historic towns and rural character.

Through investment and partnership working, the Council has:

- Supported local museums and cultural organisations
- Promoted Essex's heritage assets
- Backed community arts initiatives
- Strengthened cultural tourism

Cultural regeneration supports not only community pride, but also local economic growth -particularly important in rural areas.

Libraries continue to evolve as community hubs, offering digital access, skills support and inclusive community spaces.

Local Government Reorganisation – Future Structures

National government has indicated an intention to simplify two-tier areas such as Essex by moving towards unitary authorities.

This may involve the dissolution of Essex County Council and district councils, with responsibilities consolidated into new single-tier authorities.

Service continuity, rural representation and protection of parish councils must remain central during any transition.

I will continue to ensure the voice of our 33 parish councils is clearly represented in future discussions.

Five Years of Delivery – A Rural Perspective

Over the past five years, Essex has maintained stability during significant national financial pressure.

Across Essex there has been sustained highways investment, strengthened children's services, responsible management of adult social care pressures, transition from landfill to Energy from Waste, and continued economic and infrastructure investment.

Within the Heddingham Division, my approach has remained consistent: attend meetings, respond to residents, raise issues promptly and secure practical improvements.

Closing Reflection

Serving the residents, businesses & 33 parish councils of the Hedingham Division has been both a responsibility and a privilege.

Essex County Council combines scale with stability, ambition with financial discipline, and investment with accountability.

At a time when many authorities nationally face uncertainty, Essex remains one of the strongest and best-managed county councils in the country.

Local government is not about headlines. It is about steady leadership, responsible decisions and visible results.

I remain proud to represent our villages and communities within one of the strongest county authorities in England.



Cllr Peter Schwier AIEMA

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