

Thank you Mr. Chairman. My report tonight will fall into two categories – some of the things that this council has already achieved and what it is yet to achieve. Although the first list, in its entirety, is long and impressive, the second tells us that there remains much to do. This is why the other major item on tonight's agenda (Tendring Regeneration Ltd.) is so important for our residents that want to see those achievements take place in our District - and to see them sooner rather than later.

First and foremost, I repeat once again that much less would have been achieved or could be achieved in the future if it was not for the solid state of our finances. Putting it simply, we have a very efficient council, operating at significantly lower costs than most of our peers, yet providing high quality services to our 140,000 plus residents over the 130 square miles of this District.

Financially, we are already rated by the national Audit Commission as being one of the top 6% of councils across England and Wales and our last broader assessment showed us to be moving positively and strongly in a similar direction. A rock solid foundation, all for a Band D Council tax of £2.77 a week and with a combined parish and District tax that is lowest in all of Essex and nearly £2 lower than the cost of the highest charging district or borough in the County.

Building on that financial foundation, we then have the performance of the respective services to look at. I draw on the February 2008 Performance Report to provide a few examples.

You heard earlier tonight about the excellent results that our weekly recycling and waste collection contract has produced. Those that carp and criticise need to be reminded that, nationally, the trend at the time was very much in the opposite direction, with very many councils moving to alternate fortnightly collections of waste and recycling. This Council has proved quite conclusively that it is possible to save money and still provide the quality services that our residents want.

Our Leisure Services provide a wide range of activities and facilities throughout Tendring. Again, you've heard about the undoubted success of the new Leisure Centre, where people have been voting with their feet, but walking in rather than out and joining up in their hundreds in the space of a few months.

But it is not just users of the Lifestyles Club that have benefitted – almost everyone who uses that Centre has seen significant improvements to the facilities that they use, yet prices remain broadly comparable with more inferior facilities that I have seen elsewhere in the country. Yet if your income is too low to afford it or the state of your health requires it, in many instances, the Leisure Centre is still open to all. That is not something a private sector centre can offer and our staff can help with information.

Elsewhere, Benefits and Revenue Services have reached yet higher peaks in their performance both in terms of faster Council Tax collection and benefit processing times which are the fastest ever recorded by this Council, at an average of 12½ days. Meantime, Housing Services are on track to deliver the Decent Homes Standard to our several thousand tenants by 2010, something that many councils are not able to say.

Technical and Procurement Services continue to provide strong and continuous support, not the least in overseeing the completion of the Clacton Town Centre. Inevitably controversial in its construction, the end result has prompted the introduction of several new businesses in the town, increasing the range and variety of provision to visitors and shoppers. Despite the difficult national economic climate, it is not unreasonable to predict more of the same in the coming months.

The recent publication of what is a potential Clacton Master Plan, funded by the Interaction Partnership, has provided us with a vision of how Clacton could look in a few years time, but it explicitly acknowledges the very important first steps taken in the planning and recent completion of the town centre. It is also good to see that there are others who share very similar bold and ambitious plans to transform this town and this district.

Talking of planning, we have also seen significant improvements in Planning Services and can expect more of the same shortly with the next stage of the On-Line Service. Recently rated second within Essex, this led to a very welcome and substantial planning reward grant in acknowledgement of that improvement. Whilst this aspect of the Council's business will always be dogged by controversy, it is also a fact that the greater bulk of its work in such a large and varied geographic area is done efficiently, smoothly and without comment.

Now let me remind you of the Clacton Air Show – those of you that have attended will be very much aware of the unstinting effort and hard work put in by many of our staff, across the services, over what is a long but very successful event. It demonstrates not only how well this Council can organise and run things, but also how so much can be gained by working together. Like so many other achievements within this council, it is something we can and should all be proud of.

These are only a few examples, but there is much to praise throughout our Council and it is important to record that it is not just front-line services deserve that praise, but also all the support services as well.

It is appropriate at this stage to thank all our staff for the hard work they put in throughout the year in delivering such a wide range of facilities and services to a large number of people across such a substantial area.

Having, quite correctly, said that there is much to praise and much to be proud of, there is, quite clearly, still much to be done.

Repeating comments in my budget speech, this District economically underperforms the rest of the East of England and is particularly affected by the seasonal nature of the local economy. Deprivation exists in several of our wards even though prosperity is evident in other wards only a few miles away.

As our Local Community Strategy highlights, we have to share the role, with others, of improving the health and well being of all our residents, the economic development of our district, giving children and young people a good start in life, keeping Tendring as one of the safest parts of the country, reducing deprivation in the most disadvantaged areas and safeguarding our environment for the future.

More and more, the Government is pushing these major tasks to the lowest levels of local government, something which I welcome wholeheartedly because – first - I think it is democratically right to do and – second - it is something I think we are quite capable of doing.

On the one hand, it means local services provided for local people, but decided at a local level. On the other hand, it means that we, in the public sector, have to change many of the ways that we do things, both within the Council and outside it.

This, we have already started to do. The Local Strategic Partnership, representing close to 30 of the public and private sector organisations that affect our daily lives, is about to move beyond setting strategy and structure and is now looking to delivery.

As one excellent illustration, partly mentioned above, the Primary Care Trust funds GP referrals to our Lifestyles Fitness Centres to enable people either to recover from medical treatment or as preventative medicine in its own right. By substantially increasing capacity at Clacton, this opportunity is given to very many more people - something we hope, in time - and with your support - to do at our other centres.

The Haven Gateway Partnership, covering the government-designated engine of growth for this part of the East of England, is about to provide the first stages of several million £'s of funding to help regenerate the poorer parts of our District. With the right structures and policies, we believe that there is much more to come.

An active and productive engagement with the Essex Partnership Forum, led by Essex County Council, is also needed and sought, once it has gone beyond its consultation stage. It will be the source of substantial funding for this District via the Second Local Area Agreement (LAA2), as will the County itself, the recipient of over £1 million a week of Tendring taxpayers' money.

We are also looking to develop and strengthen our relationships with other bodies, such as the East of England Development Agency and the Government Office East, particularly over the many issues afflicting parts of Jaywick. More information on that front should hopefully be available shortly.

A major component of economic regeneration will include housing of all denominations and this will mean forging the newly established contacts we have made with English Partnerships, the national housing development agency.

As you can see, Mr Chairman, there has been a lot been going on in the last few months to prepare ourselves for the major tasks ahead. But the time has come for the debate to stop and for the delivery to start.

This is why we put forward the proposal and received the approval of the Council last month to launch Project Tendring. Project Tendring will play a very key role, on our behalf, in all the relationships and partnerships that I have described above. As I said at that meeting, the debate was not whether it should be done but how it should be done. Tonight, we move to the question of how soon we can get started.

To sum up, Mr Chairman, there is much that this Council can celebrate in terms of its achievements, across the board and it is right to do so in an annual statement like this. However, it is also right to look forward to the future, to see what enormous challenges still face us and, for the first time in this Council's history, to put in place the means to resolve them for the benefit of all our residents, in all our communities across the District of Tendring.