

County Councillor's Report, May 2021

14 more library collection points announced as over 150,000 Covid-19 tests already distributed

In the coming weeks, residents will find it even easier to access Covid-19 self-testing kits as an additional 14 collection points become operational.

In total, 34 Library Collection points will be live across Essex by 4th May, as 14 new sites will join the existing 20 that were launched a month ago. This means that there will now be three sites in each of the 12 districts of Essex.

In the month that the 20 existing sites have been operational, over 150,000 individual Covid-19 tests (Approx. 24,000 kits of 7 tests as of 14 April 2020) have been handed out to residents.

Library collection sites were launched with the aim of making asymptomatic testing more accessible and helping to prevent individuals from unknowingly spreading the virus.

Director of Public Health at Essex County Council, Dr Mike Gogarty said: "The extra 14 library collection sites announced today will no doubt make a real difference to testing capacity across the county.

"It is really positive and reassuring to see that so many tests have already been distributed in such a short space of time, and that is testament to the residents of Essex doing the right thing and protecting others by making sure they are doing regular testing.

"As restrictions ease and people start to meet up with others outdoors, the need for people who aren't showing symptoms to take part in regular testing is more vital than ever.

"We know that residents are eager to take part in self-testing and by setting up even more convenient collection points within local communities, we can ensure they have regular access to testing kits to complete twice a week.

"If regular testing is not something you have considered previously and you are not already accessing self-tests in another way, I urge you to pick up test kits from your nearest community collection point, complete them regularly and help to keep your friends and family safe."

The LFT tests are quick and easy to do, however help is available to anybody that requires assistance. A dedicated helpline has been set up for anybody who is not sure what to do, how to register the test or how to upload the results. Anyone requiring support can call 03337 726 144.

Anyone requiring additional assistance will be supported and can book a PCR test at one of the [many mobile testing units operating across Essex](#).

Targeted groups, including the households and bubbles of school-aged children and businesses with more than 10 employees should continue to use the specific testing channels designed and already in place for them.

Any residents who are showing Covid-19 symptoms should continue to [book a PCR Covid-19 test as normal](#).

Additional Library Collection sites and the dates they will be operation from

Thaxted Library, 7 Town Street, Thaxted,

Tuesday 12pm-5pm, Friday & Saturday 9am - 2pm

Friday 23rd April

Thursday 29th April

Existing Library collection sites

Details of the existing 14 collection points can be [found here](#).

Laptops for schools scheme open for donations



Essex County Council has re-opened its appeal for old laptops to be donated to help children in need to study.

Since December 2020, the council has distributed 5,000 laptops, tablets and Chrome Books to schools and colleges to give to families whose children don't have access to a device at home.

During lockdown, when schools and colleges were closed, the Closing the Digital Divide Scheme helped thousands of children and young people to join online lessons and continue learning. Now schools are back, more devices are needed for children who need to self-isolate suddenly or for homework or home-schooling. Access to online learning is also important for children in social care, with mental health issues or who cannot attend school for medical reasons.

Anyone with an old or unused laptop can drop it off at their local library during opening hours. Find your nearest library at [Library locations and opening times](#) (essex.gov.uk). Please adhere to social distancing.

We can take laptops of any age, make or condition but not other devices. All laptops received will be thoroughly cleaned inside and out with all data and programmes removed securely by our partners, EOL IT Services. No data on the device will be accessed during this process.

Any that can't be re-used will be sold for parts and the income used to buy new devices.

Businesses upgrading their IT systems can also donate. Interested business owners or residents who feel there is an opportunity to engage with their employer and would like to know how the scheme can work with businesses, can email TSLaptop.Donations@essex.gov.uk. We have already had some very generous donations from Essex businesses.

Nicole Wood, Essex County Council's Executive Director for Finance and Technology said: "Online learning is here to stay but pupils who don't have access to a laptop at home will lose out. By providing these devices we are closing the digital divide and helping all children and young people to have the opportunity to learn, develop and thrive."

The scheme has made a huge difference.

Sharon Lawrence, parent of two children at Hamilton Primary School in Colchester said during the last lockdown: “It has made a great difference. We were working off a kindle and my mobile phone during the last lockdown and the start of this one.”

A parent of two children at Fawbert and Barnard’s Primary School in Harlow said: “When schools first went into lockdown, we struggled to get the kids both online with a work laptop and phones between the four of us. The school kindly loaned us iPads in January and since having received the Chrome books the children will now be sure to be able to keep on getting online for all of their remote learning. This has been really helpful.”

Schools are grateful too. Neil Taggart, Headteacher at Ingatestone and Fryerning CofE (Aided) Junior School, said: “We have received laptops and devices as a school. They have supported families in accessing learning and supporting their children at home. The provision has enabled families, especially if they have more than one child or they are trying to work to get on with their learning.”

Closing the Digital Divide builds on the Department for Education’s ‘Get Help with Technology’ initiative which saw 2,000 laptops provided to disadvantaged pupils in Years 3 to 6 in Essex. The county council’s scheme widens availability to other families and ages where children and young people have no access to a device at home or, perhaps, have had to share a parent’s mobile phone or laptop.

Essex County Council invites bids for UK Community Renewal Fund

The UK Government is making funding available during 2021/22 to support priority areas across the country to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, bounce back and level up. In Essex, these priority places have been identified as Harlow and Tendring.

Essex County Council has been designated as a lead authority by the UK Government, and is seeking bids from organisations wishing to deliver activity as part of the UK Community Renewal Fund.

What type of bids are we looking for?

[The UK Community Renewal Fund Prospectus](#) provides detailed information on the objectives of the Fund, the types of projects it intends to support and how it operates, including the process and selection criteria that will be used to assess bids.

Bids can be submitted up to a maximum of £3m per place. The UK Government anticipates supporting a range of projects by theme and size, but applicants are encouraged to maximise impact and deliverability through larger projects (£500,000+) where this is possible.

Projects must deliver activity that is in line with the Prospectus and align with at least one of these investment priorities:

- Investment in skills
- Investment for local business
- Investment in communities and place
- Supporting people into employment

Updated information, 21 April 2021

Please read these key documents before applying:

- [Invitation to bid](#) (PDF, 97KB)
- [Questions and answers](#) (PDF, 103KB)
- [Letter of representation template](#) (DOC, 24KB)

Our closing date for Community Renewal Fund submissions to be shared with Essex County Council is 14 May, 5pm. Essex County Council will then assess the bids against the key criteria and submit a shortlist of bids to the Government, who will then decide which receive funding.

To find out further information about submitting a bid, please email the Economic Growth Team at: economic.growth.team@essex.gov.uk.

Please note: your personal information will be used to process your bid for the Community Renewal Fund and will be shared with a third party. For more information on how Essex County Council use your personal data please see our privacy notice. You can also read the Ministry for Housing, Community and Local Government privacy notice, explaining how your data will be processed by them.

Residents advised how to stay safe by Public Health Director



Essex residents will receive guidance directly from Essex County Council's (ECC) Director for Public Health from next week (w/c 26 April), ahead of the next scheduled easing of national Covid-19 restrictions in May and June.

Dr Mike Gogarty will be writing to households in the county to share the steps they need to take to keep themselves and those around them safe, as well as information about the support available locally, as they look ahead to further freedoms.

In his letter, Dr Gogarty has shared the three key actions all residents are urged to embed within their daily lives as residents look ahead to life beyond the pandemic.

These include taking up the Covid-19 vaccine when invited to and maintaining social distancing. Residents are also being encouraged to self-test twice a week if they are not showing Covid-19 symptoms. Regular testing is integral to managing any potential spread of Covid-19, particularly as people are now able to mix outside.

There is [support available](#) for anyone who tests positive and is required to self-isolate. ECC and the 12 borough, city and district councils in Essex have worked together to make it easier for people to get a £500 support payment if they need it.

People must, by law, self-isolate if they are told to do so by NHS Test and Trace or Essex and Southend contact tracing. It is now easier for people on low incomes to apply for a discretionary £500 payment if they're unable to work from home while self-isolating.

Employed people who earn less than £500 per week (net), have household savings below £16,000, are not on benefits and meet other existing criteria are now eligible. This includes self-employed and zero-hours contract workers.

Dr Gogarty, said: “The actions Essex residents have taken over the past few months has seen the county go from one of the areas with the highest Covid-19 rates nationally, to the lowest in the East of England.

“However, as we look ahead to the further easing of national restrictions, it is likely we will see rates increase again. It is therefore imperative that everyone follows the guidance I have outlined in my letter to residents.

“These behaviours must become our new normal. As we head towards 21 June and beyond, our actions will truly be the difference between containing the virus and it potentially spreading significantly again later in the year.

“The virus is not going away but we can manage the risk by ensuring we all take steps and the responsibility to protect ourselves and our friends and family.”

Included with the letter will be a leaflet outlining the Essex roadmap. This includes key dates for re-opening of ECC services.

Essex sets its sights on full fibre broadband

Essex is on its way to becoming one of the best-connected counties in the country, thanks to the roll out of ultrafast, full fibre broadband.

Essex County Council’s broadband improvement programme, Superfast Essex, is one of the main drivers helping to future-proof homes and businesses across the county.

To date, the programme has reached nearly 140,000 addresses with broadband speeds of at least 30Mbps. Nearly 20,000 of these have been connected to ultrafast full fibre, offering speeds up to 1,000Mbps, or 1Gbps, with plans to reach a further 7,000 by spring 2022.

Full fibre is a copper-free broadband connection offering gigabit-capable speeds. It is based on fibre-to-the-premises (FTTP) technology, which uses fibre optic cables for the entire journey from the telephone exchange to the property.

In practice, this means homes and businesses can connect multiple devices and carry out video calls, upload files and stream a HD movie simultaneously.

The government wants 85% of homes and businesses to have access to full fibre (gigabit-capable) broadband by 2025. Under the national £5bn Project Gigabit investment programme, Essex will be one of the first counties to benefit from a new injection of funding to bring these faster connections to parts of the county, where commercial investment is not viable.

The first step for the investment is to gain a better understanding of people’s connectivity needs and what broadband speeds are available to them. As part of this, Superfast Essex is inviting residents and businesses to take part in the [Essex Broadband Survey](#) which runs until 9am on Monday 3rd May.

The results of the survey will help Superfast Essex identify addresses that should be included in future state-funded broadband rollouts. This will help ensure that people in rural areas and other harder-to-reach spots are given the freedom to live and work more flexibly and play their part in the county's recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.

PhD student Tom Charman is one of many Essex residents whose urgent need for better internet connectivity came to light during the first national lockdown in March 2020 when he was forced to work from home with a 1Mbps connection.

At a pivotal point in his studies, Tom was grappling with an internet connection so slow and unreliable he was unable to complete his final year of research. "I had to download things onto my computer over many days and then do what I could locally," he says.

Tom had to apply for extra funding from his university to make up for the time he'd lost and was even considering moving, but then he discovered network operator Gigaclear were laying fibre optic cables in his area as part of Superfast Essex's full fibre rollout.

Tom is now signed up to a full fibre service, which has dramatically changed how he is able to work: "I can do everything now! I can participate in meetings and give a presentation and not worry about getting cut off halfway through or people not being able to hear me properly."

He adds: "I still find it unbelievable that I live so remotely but I have some of the fastest internet in the country," he says.

To find out more, visit [Superfast Essex](#)

Simon Walsh

County Councillor, Thaxted Division