

# Member Development Strategy 2026

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# 1. Foreword



The **Member Development Strategy** sets out the objectives of member development, the development offer and how the Council supports its delivery to all Councillors.

The role and expectations of an elected Member are changing more quickly than ever before. Essex County Council must now continue to deliver excellent services to the residents of Essex and navigate Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation. We believe that the personal development of all Members is essential to the successful delivery of its strategic priorities on behalf of the people they represent and serve. This requires a proactive member development plan to enable members to understand the key issues facing the Council and respond positively to the ongoing organisational change.

Ensuring that every Member has the knowledge and skills required to represent their Division and undertake their role as a Councillor in regulatory roles, strategic functions or scrutiny, is essential to delivering value for money services for Essex residents. It is also important that Members are equipped with the skills and resources to help play their part in realising the digital ambitions of the Council as a whole.

Members have a vital role to play in the changing landscape of local democracy and it is essential that all Members have the skills to play a leading role in their communities. I would, therefore, urge all Members, even those with many years of experience, to take full advantage of the range of development opportunities on offer.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jill Reeves". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a long horizontal stroke.

Councillor Jill Reeves,

Chairman of the Member Development Steering Group, Essex County Council

April 2025

## 2. The aims and context

The aims of this strategy are:

- to ensure that there is support in place to enable every Member to acquire and develop their knowledge and a full range of skills to support their communities and achieve their potential
- to clearly define Member responsibilities in relation to Member Development
- to clearly define officer responsibilities in relation to Member Development
- to identify adequate resources to meet the objectives of the Member development programme

Member development opportunities help support the Council's Organisational strategy '[Everyone's Essex](#)' 2021-25 as well as the overall [Future of Essex](#), which is the vision shared with partners. In working towards this the following principles will be followed:

- provide a Member-led planned approach to Member Development
- involve Members in their development, from planning the member development programme through to supporting delivery of the sessions
- support individual Member Development needs, valuing and recognising the skills and experiences that Members already have or need to acquire
- ensure that the member development programme has objectives and links to the aims of the Council and the roles and functions of Members
- deliver development in innovative ways to make the best use of the resources available.

Member development is owned by the Members through the Member Development Steering Group, which is responsible for the development and delivery of the Strategy on behalf of all Members.

It is because Members have taken ownership of their own development needs that there is such a comprehensive programme in place.

A comprehensive induction process is already in place and reviewed on a regular basis so that Members quickly feel equipped to represent their communities appropriately and to undertake their other roles and responsibilities.

Through regular information sharing, Members are given the knowledge and support they require to respond to residents' enquiries and to make informed decisions.

The Member Development Strategy has been developed based on Members' experience since 2008, and through discussions with the Member Development Steering Group.

In recognising the important roles that Members play on behalf of their communities, the Council is committed to providing a comprehensive and flexible approach to development opportunities for all elected Members.

The Chief Executive's commitment for ECC to become a 'learning organisation' is set out in ECC's People Plan 2021-25 while this plan relates to Officers this ethos is also embedded in the Member Development approach. Element such as:

- Collaboration
- Diversity equality and inclusion
- Continuously understanding the long-term future of work

Are central to both ECC's People Plan and the Member Development Strategy.

### **3. Roles and responsibilities**

#### **The Member Development Steering Group (MDSG)**

The County Council is committed to supporting and developing its Members and it is important that all Members are engaged and understand the direction of travel of the Council so that communities can be supported and decisions taken.

The Member Development Steering Group is made up of Members and officers who are ambassadors for member development, working with all Members to identify their needs and to encourage Members to attend and participate in the various development sessions on offer.

The Group will:

- identify the individual development needs of each Member by ensuring each Member has the opportunity to produce a Personal Development Plan
- provide direction and guidance to officers in respect of all member development issues
- promote best practice amongst all Members
- encourage participation in member development sessions and through other development opportunities
- review the Member Development Strategy to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and continues to support the Council's strategies and the needs of Members
- ensure that all new Members have access to a comprehensive induction programme following the County Elections.

#### **Officer support**

The Democracy Team within Legal and Assurance has responsibility for Member Development and will:

- a) provide dedicated officer support for member development activities
- b) ensure that all Members are made aware of all development opportunities through appropriate publicity and promotion
- c) devise and deliver a comprehensive induction programme for new Members
- d) deliver a comprehensive annual development programme for all Members
- e) provide administrative support, and evaluation of Members' needs

- f) undertake Personal Development Planning (PDP) with Members, including maintaining plans
- g) offer exit interviews of questionnaires with those Members not seeking re-election.
- h) record instances of member development attendance on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS)
- i) advise and support the Member Development Steering Group
- j) lead and support the work towards maintaining the Councillor Development Charter Plus standards
- k) research and provide feedback on development opportunities
- l) research alternative learning provision and its feasibility with Members (e-learning, etc.)
- m) liaise with officers with regard to member development activities
- n) consider opportunities for joint working
- o) Review the Member Development Strategy with the Member Development Steering Group on a regular basis
- p) participate in regional and national learning networks.

### **The individual Member**

Whilst the Council will offer practical support, encouragement and resources, as appropriate, for training and development, each individual Member has to take responsibility for their own development needs.

Part 3.8.2 of the Constitution covers duties and responsibilities of all Members. The following points relate to member development.

Members of the Council shall be responsible for the following duties and responsibilities:

(vii) To develop and maintain a working knowledge of the Council's services, management arrangements, functions/duties and constraints, and to develop good working relationships with relevant officers of the authority.

(viii) To develop and maintain a working knowledge of the other organisations and services which serve the County.

## **4. The Member development offer**

### **Key themes**

Member development at Essex County Council is split into themes:

- Induction
- Frontline Councillor (including community engagement/leadership)
- Strategic (including corporate governance, legislation and service development)
- Fulfilling their role within the Council, Council Committees and Overview and Scrutiny and Committee Development
- Supporting Councillors in undertaking their role (Member Support including IT support and realising the digital ambitions of the Council)
- Personal Development.

## **Member Induction**

The induction programme is essential for all new Members of the Council. The aim is to make new Members feel welcome and to “*fast track*” them into their role so that they can effectively support their communities and undertake Council roles and responsibilities.

The induction process has been developed and enhanced over time and is added to when changing needs are identified.

The process starts with providing potential candidates with information about the role before the election process through communications, our website and events.

Induction materials, including a comprehensive Members’ Handbook are provided to all Members elected. This includes details of the full training programme and appropriate officer contact details. The induction programme lasts three to six months. Information is made available and regularly updated via the [Members portal](#).

Copies of all materials including recordings of induction sessions and lessons learnt have been kept, to ensure that if the membership of the Council changes mid-term a comprehensive induction programme can easily be provided.

## **Member Development Sessions**

Members have the opportunity to attend a range of member development sessions annually including briefings, seminars and workshops. The overall aim is to ensure Members feel that they can continue to develop their knowledge throughout their term of office. Members have the opportunity to contribute ideas for sessions.

Member development sessions are held regularly throughout the year on different days and times, taking into account members other commitments. These sessions aim to provide members with knowledge to support them to make effective decisions, undertake appropriate scrutiny and support their residents and the people who live and work in Essex more generally.

We have asked members for their views on member development sessions taking place virtually and for most sessions the majority of members have supported this. Members have been supported with the use of the relevant technology to ensure this is not a barrier to their attendance. Member briefing sessions are made available after the session for members to watch back or watch if they were not available when the session originally took place.

Member development opportunities with other authorities continue to be explored, together with greater recognition and linkage of activities which Members undertake at other Councils.

Specific sessions, where it is important for Members of a particular Committee to attend, will be held as part of or before or after a meeting of the committee wherever possible.

Some sessions are deemed to be mandatory, members will be asked to attend these sessions or watch back the recording and confirm they have done so. All other sessions are deemed desirable and enabling members fulfil their role

## Blended approach to learning and development

A number of blended methods will be utilised in delivering Member development, these will include:

- In-house briefings, workshops, seminars and webinars run by senior managers and specialist officers
- Skills sessions
- External conferences and seminars
- Peer coaching and mentoring
- Visits to other authorities and meetings
- E-learning packages
- Books, workbooks and information guides
- Training with partner organisations and agencies
- Personal Development Plans/discussions.

Enabling Members to find the time to undertake learning and development activities will be a key priority. To do this it is proposed that:

- Formal sessions will, where possible, be programmed in advance to ensure that they do not clash with the committee meeting cycle
- Activities, if required, will be programmed at different times of the day and days of the week to accommodate individual commitments and to take into consideration the responsibilities of Members who sit on another Council
- Limited activities will take place during peak holiday periods.

## External Member Learning and Development

In the interests of fairness and transparency, a protocol has been established to set out the process for Members who wish to attend an external conference, course or seminar. The process makes clear for Members and officers what is required.

1. Members who wish to attend an external event are required to complete an External Member Development Nomination Form online in advance of making any arrangements.
2. Once the form is completed, the cost of the conference will be determined.
  - a. If the cost including entry, travel and where applicable accommodation is less than £500, the Head of Democracy and Transparency will determine the application in line with the Member's Personal Development Plan and subject to budget provision. Once a decision is made, the Member will be informed and the relevant support officer will make the arrangements.
  - b. If the cost including entry, travel and where applicable accommodation is more than £500, to comply with the Constitution – Part 5, Appendix 1 (k) activities over £500 will need to be given formal approval by at least two of the Chief Executive, the Section 151 Officer or the Monitoring Officer:

Once a decision is made if it is approved the Member will be informed and the relevant support officer will make the arrangements.

3. Members attend the external event.
4. Following attendance at the event, the Member is required to complete an Event Evaluation form and provide a copy of the programme, materials received and a short note summarising what they learnt.

In making decisions, subject to budget provision, the following criteria will usually apply:

- Cabinet Members and Deputies to Cabinet Members may attend events relevant to their portfolios;
- Committee/Board Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen may attend events relevant to the work of the Committee/Board;
- Members in receipt of SRA's may attend events relevant to their special responsibilities;
- All Members may apply to attend events relevant to the work of a Committee/s of which they are a member, or to the work of an outside body to which they have been appointed by the County Council or as otherwise agreed.

### **Personal Development Plans (PDP)**

Personal development planning should be seen as a means to help Members update their knowledge and learn new skills to help them to be more effective in supporting their communities.

In personal development planning, Members should have regard to their future aspirations as well as their current position.

A PDP questionnaire and a confidential, individual meeting will be offered to all Members; it is then up to them to decide how they wish to take this forward. The personal development plans will feed into the Annual Member Development Programme and the process will be reviewed by the Member Development Steering Group.

### **Equality of access**

When developing this strategy and the annual programmes, access and inclusion for all Members is a crucial factor. One of the key factors which shape member development is the number of Members who have commitments at District level. Therefore, the majority of Member sessions will take place during the day to coincide with other Council meetings and to ensure that all Members have sufficient opportunities to attend. The Member Development Steering Group will undertake:

- to provide at least four weeks advance notice of sessions where possible
- Limit sessions later in the day, taking into account Members commitments at a District level
- to repeat key induction sessions at different times of the day and different days of the week
- to restrict sessions to weekdays only
- to provide opportunities for Members to obtain copies of the materials used during the session and notes taken, usually via the [Member Portal](#)
- to develop and improve the quality of sessions through evaluation and feedback from Members
- to trial different methods of learning

- to provide regular briefings on key issues.

In addition to discussions that take place as part of the induction process and the Member evaluation of individual sessions, Members will be given the opportunity to provide comment on scheduling of meetings through the personal development planning process.

### **Joint working**

Joint working between Essex County Council and other local authorities is encouraged, to bring about benefits to the Essex tax-payer and the members.

## **5. Evaluation**

It is important that all development activities are evaluated to ensure that the Member sessions meet Member's needs and identify future opportunities and all external courses/training provided will be analysed to establish their relevance and effectiveness.

Members will be encouraged to complete a short online evaluation form, providing feedback on all development sessions organised or facilitated by the Democracy Team including briefing, skill and external development. The Democracy Team can only provide a programme that meets the needs of Members if sessions are well attended and feedback is given to officers.

On a six-monthly basis, the Member Development Steering Group will assess and evaluate Member development. The Group will also review the strategy and update it, taking Member feedback, latest developments and best practice into account.

## **6. Councillor Development Charter and Charter Plus**

The Councillor Development Charter and Charter Plus provides councils with a robust framework and encourages member development across the sector.

ECC has continuously held Charter Plus Status since 2014 (and held the charter since 2013) being formally reassessed every three years, this status would have been due for renewal during 2025. In April 2025 the MDSG considered the pros and cons of seeking formal reaccreditation. Members agreed, given ECC's commitment to Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, the direct costs involved and significant resource pressures, that formal reaccreditation would not be pursued. However, the MDSG remain committed to maintaining the standards set out within the Charter Plus criteria.

## **7. Organisation Strategy 2021-25**

The organisation strategy '[Everyone's Essex](#)' is ECC's Plan for Levelling Up the County for the period 2021-25, this sets out our aims and priorities and articulates how we will

achieve better outcomes for Essex and secure the ambitions set out in the [‘Future of Essex’](#) vision for Essex. While originally set for 2021 to 2025, Everyone’s Essex has been extended to 2026 and therefore continues to guide our priorities and delivery, with refreshed commitments aligned to its four strategic aims.

The Member Development programme is underpinned by this vision and any successor to it and provides Members with the necessary support to undertake their role in line with the Commitment. The Member Development Steering Group review the Member Development Programme in line with the strategic aims and objectives set out in the strategy at least one per year.

## **8. Contact details**

For further information please contact the Democracy Team by email [democratic.services@essex.gov.uk](mailto:democratic.services@essex.gov.uk), by telephone 03330 139825.