

Leader's Statement – County Council, 10 December 2024

Mr Chairman, Members, welcome to the final council meeting of 2024.

A tumultuous year for the country and in many ways for this council, with big changes, substantial challenges, but also huge progress.

Public service is never easy, nor will it be.

We set ourselves the highest of standards, because we truly care about the outcomes we're here to deliver for residents.

Caring for our most vulnerable, supporting those who need us most, helping people in their everyday lives..... making Surrey a better place.

Both Members and officers strive every single day to deliver that, in challenging circumstances, and as we enter the festive period and the year draws to a close, I'd like to recognise that hard work and dedication.

Mr Chairman, at November's Cabinet meeting the draft council budget for next year was approved.

We of course need to await the final details of the Local Government Finance Settlement expected on the 19th December, but we are on track to set a balanced budget, as we have done each and every year of this administration.

But that task gets more and more difficult as demand on services keeps rising, and costs increase faster than our income.

Over the past few years we have demonstrated strong and stable financial management, guiding the organisation through the most challenging times for local government.

But even the strongest local authorities like ours, are not immune to the national and global financial challenges.

All of our key services – Social Care, Children’s Services, Highways Maintenance – are facing huge increases in demand.

On top of that rising demand, the cost of actually delivering those services – wages, materials, other overheads – is increasing at a much faster rate than our income from government funding or council tax rises.

As with most budget setting processes at this stage of the financial year, we have a gap to close in order to set a balanced budget.

There are various ways in which we have identified we can do this, and all those options are being closely considered pending confirmation of the finance settlement by government in a couple of weeks.

But we *will* set a balanced budget, as we have done in every year of this administration.

But the financial headwinds for all councils in Surrey get stronger as the government sets out its agenda for the next few years. It is going to be even more essential that we remove cost from service delivery, as they press on with a review of the funding of local councils.

The primary criteria they intend to use for determination of appropriate funding, will draw heavily on the deprivation index, as well as the ability to raise money locally through council tax - the Labour party's equivalent of levelling up.

Whilst I accept that both of those metrics are relevant, they ignore the differential demands faced in ageing rural populations and the higher cost of delivering services, particularly here in the South East.

We will lobby this government as we did previous governments to accept that you cannot ignore the demographics and genuine needs of our local population and forcing us to increase year-on-year council tax paid by Surrey residents for redistribution to other parts of the country is simply unfair and inequitable.

While some positive noises have come from Ministers in their first budget in October by acknowledging the fundamental issues in Children's Care, Adult Social Care and SEND, it is concerning that the rhetoric seems not to be followed by investment, and I suspect their focus may be elsewhere.

Failing to properly address those creaking systems, with money as well as structural reform, would continue to fail the most vulnerable people in society.

We stand ready to help the government, and I hope they are as serious as we are, about tackling these challenges head on.

Neither central, nor local government, can do that alone.

But we will do what we can, and continue to look forwards, challenging ourselves to be the best we can be, responsible with public money and delivering really effective services that the people of Surrey rely on.

To do that sustainably in these challenging financial times, we must be strict with ourselves – is every penny we spend being invested well?

Is every decision we make truly delivering better outcomes for our residents?

Yes, some difficult decisions will have to be made, and we will stop doing things that perhaps don't meet that criteria.

However, our main focus will be driving improvement and transforming the way we do things so our service – our organisation – is fit for the future.

Embracing new opportunities, new technology, using our data better.

Working across partners to deliver better, more rounded support.

Better collaboration internally too – ensuring we are all focused on delivering our core missions and shared priorities, continuing to strive towards our ambition that no one in Surrey is left behind. One council, one vision.

Thanks to strong financial management and a determined approach, we are in good shape to deliver the transformation this council – and the wider local government sector – needs.

We will make bold decisions to transform how we operate so our services can continue to improve and remain sustainable into the future.

That journey of improvement has been paramount for this council under this administration.

We have never lost focus on that, and we never will.

At the end of November, I was delighted that we could announce that our Adult Social Care service has been given a 'good' rating by the Care Quality Commission.

The inspectors highlighted a number of strengths, including the passion and dedication of our staff and our work to keep people independent in their own homes.

I'd like to thank all our staff in Adult Social Care publicly for their hard work, making a positive difference to the lives of thousands of people in Surrey.

I'd also like to thank our partners and providers, as well as unpaid carers in Surrey, who are all pivotal in our aim of supporting people to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Mr Chairman, we won't stop here – we want to keep improving and raising the bar for our residents.

We face significant demand across the county with more than 24,000 people receiving some form of support from Adult Social Care.

As we all know, we have significant pockets of deprivation in Surrey – and the CQC have highlighted that we're doing some really innovative and creative work to meet the differing needs of our population and help people keep their independence.

We know there are areas where we need to learn and develop and we are committed to doing that, and we are already actively working to address all feedback from the CQC through our comprehensive improvement plans.

Our new Executive Director of Adult Social Services recently started with us, so with her focus and commitment we are well-placed to build on this assessment.

Another area where we've made real progress is in our mission to deliver a sustainable economy here in Surrey.

We are focused on providing support in areas where it can have the biggest impact - whether that's high-growth businesses, investing in our key sectors, supporting our disadvantaged residents or providing opportunities to students.

In April, the government transferred responsibilities for business support to the County Council from Local Enterprise Partnerships.

For the first time, we have a universal comprehensive service covering the whole of Surrey, and since launching that very month, we have provided free expert advice on the levers of growth to more than 1,000 businesses of varying sizes via the Business Surrey gateway.

Work to expand this continues:

- Working with government and the business sector to help drive better use of innovation and technology.
- Delivering new opportunities with partners like our leading further education sector including the newly launched 'Future Studios' at Royal Holloway, which provides a cutting-edge space to nurture Surrey's growing creative industries.
- The Festival of Skills which took place in October and provided more than 2,000 students with the chance to connect with dozens of employers, universities, colleges and training providers.
- Surrey's Connect 2 Work programme, working with business to develop an employment support programme that enables disadvantaged groups to have an active role in the local labour market.

This is what can happen when we are given the right tools and powers to really make a difference to our county.

Mr Chairman, it won't have passed by Members that the government is due to publish a White Paper next week outlining its ambitions around devolution and potential reorganisation of local government.

It is clear that those ambitions could be advantageous for Surrey, and we will of course engage with Ministers and Civil Servants about any plans that could help deliver benefits for the people of Surrey.

I believe there is general consensus, in government, across our council partners and residents, that the current structure of local government – here and elsewhere in the country – is not the most effective.

Different tiers of local government, different scales and responsibilities, can be confusing for residents and result in too much bureaucracy, inefficiency, and barriers to progress.

I have long advocated for a real examination and review of how local government is structured – to make it more efficient and more effective for residents.

It is not an easy thing to deliver, and there is not always an obvious or simple solution. That's why previous governments have perhaps not addressed it boldly or seriously.

But it does appear that this government IS serious about reorganisation and genuine devolution from the centre.

Whilst of course we need to wait to see the detail, I am sure that all Members will want to engage constructively with government on this, and also with our District and

Borough and Parish Council colleagues, with a central focus to deliver better outcomes for Surrey and its residents. I think everybody here, and everybody involved in local government across the UK, would be an advocate of further devolution – from Westminster and Whitehall to local regions and communities.

We are told that the proposals in the White Paper will be bold with a particular emphasis on the creation of Mayoral Combined Authorities alongside greater devolution of powers from Westminster. But as local government is just one part of an eco system we also need to see at the same time reform of public service, including amongst other things more democratic accountability of the health system.

Members, we should relish this opportunity to deliver something meaningful, for the future of Surrey – together.

Councils, communities and residents themselves know what they need and want.

We know – together – how best to deliver it.

We have – together – the skills and the motivation to deliver it.

With true devolution we can have – together – the power to deliver it.

Mr Chairman, on a slightly lighter note, as this year draws to a close, we can look back with pride on many of the things we have achieved, but also look back with lessons to learn from and improve.

But our main focus must be looking to the future – with the potential for bold strides forward for Surrey. We want to be and indeed must seek to be, in control of our own destiny.

We can deliver that brighter future, but we must roll up our sleeves and work for it and grasp the opportunities in front of us.

I'm confident the next year will be a good one.

I wish you all a merry Christmas, and a peaceful new year.

Thank you.

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