

Mr Chairman and Members,

I am sure that many of you, like me, were deeply saddened by the news of Stephen Hawking's death earlier this month.

At the age of just 22, Professor Hawking was diagnosed with Motor Neurone disease and given only a few years to live.

The illness left him in a wheelchair, and then unable to speak, except through a voice machine.

However, despite this adversity, Stephen Hawking went on to become one of the world's leading scientists, making a number of significant discoveries and inspiring millions through his best-selling book, 'A Brief History of Time'.

Stephen Hawking demonstrates my belief that everyone has something to contribute to society - irrespective of disability. He should be a role model for all of us.

That's why, Mr Chairman, I am delighted to announce today that the County Council will be supporting the Disability Rights Commission's "I can make a pledge" campaign - to increase employment opportunities for young, disabled people.

The County Council is already committed to this through our Equality, Fairness and Respect Strategy.

It goes without saying that young people deserve the opportunity to participate in the workforce and live independent lives, regardless of disability.

I want to thank all Surrey employers who are already supporting this campaign, and urge all others to do the same.

Despite the challenges he had to overcome, Stephen Hawking had an unwavering belief that he could make a difference to society. That we can all make a difference. He said, very powerfully:

"However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at"

I have always been inspired by his positive spirit, and never more so than now, as we face probably the most difficult period in this council's history.

However, as those of you who know me will testify, I have never been one to shy away from a challenge!

And yes, we *have* challenges.

Yes, the need for our services is greater than ever.

Yes, there are difficult decisions to make.

And, yes, funding for these services is dwindling.

But we have a robust plan to tackle this.

We have a budget - agreed in this chamber at our last council meeting.

Next week's Cabinet meeting will include an item on our medium term financial plan - where we will take further decisions on the detailed service budgets for the coming year.

Those papers have already been published and are available on our website. I would urge all members to read them if they have not already done so.

Mr Chairman, let me assure members - we will continue to provide services for our most vulnerable.

We will continue to ensure Surrey is a vibrant and economically-successful place to live and work.

Of course the financial realities we face mean there will have to be more changes. We have already delivered enormous levels of savings. Our Public Value Review programme, for example, saw us achieve nearly £300 million pounds worth of savings whilst improving services.

But we cannot rest on our laurels. We must go further.

We need to continue making efficiencies.

That's a given.

But I know we have to go further and transform, again, finding new ways to do things.

That's so we can live within our means, do the best for our residents and energise our staff.

But it is also right to transform, again, because the world around us continues to change, at pace, and we must keep up. Driverless cars, electric vehicles, digital currencies, machine learning systems and robotics are no longer in the domain of science fiction novels. They are with us. Now.

This means we need to look to the future, as Hawkings did, and imagine the possibilities emerging from new technologies. We must innovate, working with our Universities, entrepreneurs and businesses to find new solutions to complex problems.

We must also invest for the future and plan for those things that are becoming more and more important to our residents, especially our young people – skills, connectivity, smart technologies, air quality and environmental protection.

We must be more collaborative, working with our partners and our communities to generate the practical, local solutions that will take us through some challenging times ahead. But we must also work together so we grasp the opportunities before us too.

But that work has already begun, Mr Chairman:

- Our work with district and boroughs as part of the business rates pilot will open up new ways for us to support and grow Surrey's businesses and economy.
- Our work with NHS partners to put in place a new model for health and social care through Surrey Heartlands promises to revolutionise the support we offer to residents – something my colleague Mrs Clack will say more about in her Cabinet Member Statement later.
- Our work with NHS partners and others to learn from the innovative Surrey Dementia Test Bed to find new ways of using technology to better meet people's care and support.
- And, of course, there is the work we're doing with local Rotary clubs and other voluntary, community and faith groups - to ensure that the lonely and vulnerable members of our society can be supported in their communities, by their communities – helping them remain part of their community.

But, like everyone in local government, the opportunities and challenges we face mean that we **must** step-up the scale and pace of transformation.

That's why I am delighted that our new Chief Executive Joanna Killian joined us earlier this month.

Joanna is already working with the Corporate Leadership Team to deliver our vision for a Council that supports individuals and communities to thrive.

Welcome, Joanna.

And I'm delighted that our officer leadership team will be bolstered with the appointment of Dave Hill as our new Executive Director for Children, Families and Learning.

Dave has significant experience, including as a Government Commissioner for Children's Services.

And he will play a key role in continuing our improvements and making sure our work has a positive impact for those children most in need of protection and care.

At the same, I'm sorry to see Julie Fisher leaving us.

Julie has dedicated nearly twelve years' service to the Council, and I'm particularly grateful for the role she's played over the past six months as Acting Chief Executive.

The six month progress report you all have before you is testament to the great work that has taken place under her leadership.

Thank you, Julie. And we all wish you and your family the very best for the future.

Julie has been instrumental in supporting our People and Place agenda – shaping how the Council needs to work and deliver services in the future.

This means delivering the services that our residents need - in the way that they want to access them.

This means better joining-up our own services and closer working with our partners to focus on early-help and prevention.

It means more emphasis on providing services online and making them easier to access.

And bringing services together under one roof and in the right places where they are needed.

This is part of our plan for more sustainable local services – but also for better services and better outcomes for our residents.

You will recall, Mr Chairman, that when I stood here in December, I challenged each and every one of us to be game-changers for our communities.

Be that community leader.

Work together as one team.

Help shape the future of our services.

And above all, put our residents and communities first.

Of course, for some of our twin-hatted members there are district and borough elections in May.

And many of us will I'm sure be out campaigning on their behalf.

Regardless of political persuasion this gives all of us the opportunity to be those game-changers.

Mr Chairman and Members, I want to end my speech today with a quote from Stephen Hawking that inspires me - and will perhaps inspire you too - throughout the months ahead.

“Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the Universe exist. Be curious. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up.”