

Leader's Statement to County Council – 17 March 2020

Mr Chairman, no sooner had the country's political uncertainty and gridlock been resolved, than a different kind of disruption reared its head.

We now find ourselves in the midst of a public health emergency, one that will test our resilience as an organisation and will need strong leadership to guide us through.

I must take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work already taking place here in Surrey to deal with Coronavirus and the impact it is having on our communities.

Surrey had the dubious honour of being the home to the first case contracted within the UK, which certainly brought public health and communications challenges with it.

But it meant that we put into immediate action our emergency response, which ensured that any public panic was restricted, that the right information was disseminated and that all our services were well prepared to deal with the ongoing disruption this caused.

The team remain on high alert. Surrey County Council staff across the board are working tirelessly on this – supporting our schools and care facilities, liaising with our contractors and providers, working with districts and boroughs and health partners and communicating with our residents.

Obviously, the updated guidance from Government last night means that society is fundamentally changing, for the short term at least.

Working remotely, or indeed in isolation, will become the new normal.

We are guiding staff through this process and analysing the impact across the organisation.

But essentially, we are a public service and our staff are proud and dedicated public servants.

Our priorities at this time are to ensure that we do everything we can to reduce the pressure on the NHS, to protect our most vulnerable communities, and support our staff and residents.

To do this, we must protect the democratic process. Indeed Mr Chairman, this may well be the last public meeting in-person for some weeks or months, but we are putting in place the measures to hold meetings virtually if required, as guided by government.

Legislation is being adapted nationally to guide the nation through this crisis, and we are ensuring our constitution here at Surrey County Council is updated to enable us to continue making the required decisions to keep Surrey functioning.

I would remind all members and residents to heed the guidance from Public Health England not only to keep washing their hands, but also to be alert to information and follow that official guidance and communications directions meticulously.

We have an important role in guiding our communities through this as best we can.

I'd like to thank in particular Ruth Hutchinson, our Interim Director of Public Health, for coordinating this work and showing the leadership so required in fast moving situations like this, as well as the Communications team who have been on call 24 hours a day.

Mr Chairman, this issue has brought into focus our partnership working across the County, and how important those relationships and open lines of communication are.

We have been clear, through our Vision 2030 work and our organisational strategy that was brought here to Full Council before Christmas, that partnership working must be a clear area of focus for everything we do. And I genuinely mean that.

This means proper engagement with partners and communities across Surrey.

Whether it's dealing with Coronavirus or redesigning our services, those relationships are vital to deliver what our communities really need, and want.

As all members are aware Mr Chairman, we have for some years now facilitated a series of Local and Joint Committees, that effectively join together County councillors with their colleagues at a District and Borough level to examine issues and make local decisions.

Today, we are also discussing our Member's Community Allocation, which is proving a useful tool for us to directly support community groups and projects locally.

I'm delighted to see that 96% of that allocation has been spent in 2019/20, demonstrating really effective delivery.

However, even given these tried and tested channels of local engagement and partnership, I think we can and should be doing even more.

Mr Chairman, we are ready to move forward, to utilise new technology to engage even more effectively, and to start thinking bigger in terms of what we can do together.

So, what does that mean in practice?

Next month we are planning to begin a pilot of a new forum – the Local Partnership Board.

These boards will be established at a district and borough level and will bring together not only the County Council with districts and boroughs, but also voluntary sector partners, health, businesses and other key stakeholders.

They will engage local people to help deliver solutions to local issues.

This will enable true partnership working - looking at the bigger picture to fundamentally address place-based issues, by understanding an area's priorities and delivering sustainable solutions.

Mr Chairman, I am confident that this way of working will also prove effective in tackling some of our big challenges.

Our health and wellbeing strategy, reducing inequality, supporting the local economy, tackling the climate emergency, rethinking transport and improving air quality.

We cannot solve these issues alone.

Working in partnership is key to unlocking the expertise and potential of this County, and delivering real change for our residents.

Mr Chairman many of our residents of Surrey will have received their Council Tax demand through their letterboxes. Indeed, some have taken the trouble to write to me.

However unpopular that piece of mail may be, I'm proud that this year we can include a bold and optimistic message alongside it:

That Surrey County Council is investing in our residents of today and of the future, ensuring Surrey is a place fit for the future and ready for the challenges that may emerge over the next decade.

So, the second initiative and a major part of that investment is our Community Projects Fund – initially called the Community Improvement Fund.

This is another example of our desire to work in partnership - helping Surrey's local communities create a better place to live.

During our budget setting process this year, we were able to allocate a £100m capital investment over the next five years as part of the Community Projects Fund.

That is a significant amount of money and it must deliver real benefits for the people of Surrey.

We have a working group putting in place the necessary technology and structures to ensure that we engage with our local communities about exactly what they need and want in their areas.

We want to hear people's ideas and ambitions. Not just traffic schemes and landscaping projects, but ambitious legacy projects that will fundamentally change a place for the better.

And we are here to help deliver it.

This is all about co-design and partnership.

We want boroughs and districts, local business groups, residents' associations, charities, voluntary organisations, the health sector all working alongside us.

We want the whole community involved - shaping the County they want to see for the future, together.

The money is in place, ready to be unlocked and invested, so let's all actively engage our residents.

Mr Chairman, as I draw to a close, I reflect that again we stand here discussing the efforts and ambition of this council against the backdrop of national disruption and uncertainty.

But we are demonstrating our resilience, our leadership and our desire to fulfil our public duty.

The challenges being brought by Coronavirus are not going to go away any time soon, we will be tested further in the coming weeks and months almost certainly, but it is during times like these that we must all pull together.

I hope I have outlined exactly how we're doing that – harnessing all of the creativity, energy and expertise this County has to offer – not just to tackle public health emergencies, but to deliver a sustainable future for Surrey.

Our residents must be assured that we will continue to deliver the vital services they rely on.

And we will continue to show the vision and ambition that is needed to create a better place and a better quality of life for everyone in the County.