

Leader's Statement – County Council (Budget Meeting), 9 February 2021

Mr Chairman, we are here today to focus primarily on the council's budget for the forthcoming year, and I'm looking forward to outlining those plans to Members and our residents this morning.

The context for this budget is challenging but also encouraging against the background of:

- a global pandemic
- a locally led response to keep residents safe and save lives
- partners in Surrey working closer together than ever before
- an uncertain financial future for the country – and the world
- and a plan for helping our communities recover from the past year that is fundamental to the future prosperity of our county.

I am justifiably proud of what this council, and its staff, has achieved over the last 12 months.

Not only in the response to COVID, which has been nothing short of incredible and something that is continuing day in day out – the national focus for our surge testing operation in Woking and Egham being the latest in a long line of challenges overcome.

But also, the way we have, as an organisation, continued in our mission to deliver our essential services and a better, brighter future for Surrey.

Better services, better support, better value for money, better resilience, better security, and fundamentally delivering an even better place for people to live and work.

To make further substantial progress in that mission, alongside responding to the biggest challenge in a generation, is testament to our staff and the clarity of our vision.

This budget encapsulates that progress and delivers the platform for recovery as we come through this pandemic.

Mr Chairman, it is important to note that it is the hard work and dedication of Surrey County Council over the last three years to get our finances in order, that means we have been able to cope with the challenges that have come this year and are well placed going into an uncertain future.

The transformation of the council during that time has put us in a strong financial position – enabling us to provide financial security and certainty in guiding Surrey and our Local Resilience Forum partners through the past 12 months.

This financial security has enabled us to meet the cost of PPE delivered to the frontline, give financial support to the care and voluntary sectors, help vulnerable residents, and provide staffing resource to help the county through the pandemic.

Alongside all of that, we have continued to deliver our vital services and protect and support the most vulnerable residents of Surrey in these most difficult of times.

It has to be said – and I'm sure many members will agree – that a few years ago, a major unforeseen issue such as COVID could have pushed Surrey to the brink. But not now.

As I mentioned earlier Mr Chairman, not only has our financial planning helped us respond to COVID but it must also help us lead the recovery for Surrey.

I will talk shortly about our huge capital investment programme that will be the bedrock of this recovery, but first I want to address the impact for individual residents.

I know that COVID has affected all of our residents in different ways – many have been heartbroken by the loss of a loved one, many will be struggling with the mental health impacts of lockdown and the stress of home schooling, and many others may be really struggling financially having seen the impact on their business or been faced with redundancy.

We have a responsibility as a council to do everything in our power to help those people where we can.

We have taken the decision this year to limit the increase on Council Tax, despite the uncertain economic future for this country.

Our stable financial position means we can limit that increase to 2.49% - or 72p per week for a Band D property.

Although any increase is unwelcome, that is half the 4.99% permitted by government and half the amount that many neighbouring authorities will be levying.

As I have always made clear, if we can't reduce Council Tax, I am absolutely determined that residents at least get the very best value for money and that their money is well spent.

I am confident that this budget does that.

Mr Chairman, this year's budget sees a slight increase in revenue spending to just over £1bn – this is the money we spend on delivering vital services to residents.

This year-on-year spending is delivering better services as we continue to transform the way we work.

Over half of that day-to-day spending - £627m - is spent on our most vulnerable residents through Adult Social Care and Children's Services, working to improve quality of life and reduce inequality.

We spend over £1m every single day on looking after vulnerable adults, and over half a million pounds every day on looking after our young people.

The pressure and demand on those services are increasing and we continue our conversations with government about the need for long term, proper funding solutions especially for Adult Social Care and for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities.

But in the meantime, we work to deliver the best possible services for those who need that support most.

These are services that most residents don't see, but they are so important in helping to reduce inequality, making sure we don't leave anybody behind and that those people that really need us are looked after and given the best possible quality of life.

But I know, as every single member here will know as our inboxes fill up with e-mails about potholes and highways matters, that those services that impact on everybody deserve serious attention too.

We will spend £140m of our revenue budget this year on Environment, Transport and Infrastructure – that's maintaining roads, pavements and bridges, managing our wonderful countryside, delivering bus services and other public transport.

Over £30m will be spent on Public Health, ever more important in the current climate and ensuring our residents can live healthier lives.

£37m will fund our Community Protection Group (including Surrey Fire & Rescue Service) to keep our residents safe.

We spend around £65m on resources – without which our services simply could not function, things like the technology that has been essential in enabling us to continue working safely over this last 12 months.

£18m on our transformation and partnerships work, that will make not only this council more efficient in what we do but help us work more productively with partners and residents.

I must take a moment here to recognise our dedicated Transformation Programme, which has so far saved this council £74m each and every year, with a further £75m projected over the next few years, all while improving services for residents.

Our dedicated Transformation Support Unit will continue to support officers to transform our services, with the focus of ensuring every service is delivering the very best value for money for our residents.

The best service, in the most efficient way – something that local government, especially here in Surrey, is becoming better and better at delivering.

The remainder of our revenue budget includes some contingency, providing extra resilience in the face of future uncertainty, and also will enable us to deliver our ambitious capital investment.

The medium-term capital programme we set out in 2020 will continue, and even increase this year as we look to the future.

This is about investing now to protect and improve Surrey's future.

This money will make a real and lasting difference to people's lives and life chances and has become even more important in ensuring Surrey and its communities can thrive over the coming years of recovery from the impact of COVID.

The total capital spend in our 5-year investment plan has increased from almost £1.5bn announced last February, to almost £2bn.

This reflects our seriousness when we commit to building a county that is fit for the future.

We have already made great progress in delivering on this investment, with extra school places provided, investment in electric buses signed off, and infrastructure projects well underway.

Our capital programme includes;

The £100m Your Fund Surrey, which has launched with huge interest and involvement from residents. It will strengthen communities; it will deliver community projects and give people more power and influence in their local area.

A £33m investment into Surrey Fire & Rescue Service infrastructure – helping to deliver the Making Surrey Safer plan and modernising our fire service.

£116m will be invested in infrastructure aimed at boosting economic growth across the county – something that will have a widespread and long-lasting impact for our residents' life chances and prosperity.

£286m is earmarked for large scale infrastructure projects like in Farnham town centre and the A320 scheme, with both schemes already being developed with local residents' involvement.

We have set out an ambitious commitment to deliver a greener and more sustainable future for Surrey residents, helping us tackle the climate emergency, that includes £105m for projects including renewable energy, active travel and the move towards zero carbon; including the £48m investment in low emission buses.

Our £268m investment in schools and £74m in SEND provision will ensure our children can overcome this year's disruption and get the best possible start in life.

The £253m investment and leadership on Surrey flood alleviation schemes, including the River Thames, will protect tens of thousands of homes and businesses from further disaster and give future security and peace of mind – the current weather another reminder of why this is so important.

On top of our huge year on year increase in revenue spend on highways, a further £264m investment will boost active travel and with the impact of the imminent roll-out of the daily charge to utility companies working on our highway will make getting around the county smoother.

And £170m will be spent on accommodation for Looked After Children, Extra Care and independent living – ensuring that those residents most in need can live safely and independently and have a good quality of life.

We can and will deliver all of this, despite the impact of COVID, thanks to the good grip on our finances.

I want to thank Leigh Whitehouse and his excellent team, who have used their expertise to stabilise and transform this council's financial position.

And of course also pay tribute to Mel Few, our departing Cabinet Member for Resources, who has been instrumental in this work – delivering balanced budgets, keeping a watchful eye over every penny spent and leaving behind a solid platform that will see our residents – and this county - benefit long into the future. Thank you Mel.

Mr Chairman we have come a long way these past four years. When I had the privilege to be elected Leader of this council in 2018 I closed my acceptance speech by saying that we must have humility, an ability to learn from our mistakes, that there was a steep hill to climb but with a commitment by us, all of us, to shape services for the future with the commitment of our partners to combine our collective strength and with the commitment of our residents to play their part, we could and would succeed.

I had no idea then that we would test all of those principles with a global pandemic, but as we enter our next phase of the council, from here in Reigate, I know that we will continue to guide and support the county through these most challenging times.

That is the commitment I make to the residents of Surrey on your behalf, as we head through these next weeks and months to a brighter future.

Thank you.

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