

Leader's Statement – County Council, 12 October 2021

Madam Chair, Members, we come together for the first time since the summer break and for the first time in our new Council Chamber here in Woodhatch, and there is a real sense of renewed energy in Surrey as we approach autumn and the winter months ahead.

As we move out of major incident mode from COVID-19, we have faced new challenges as a County – whether that's welcoming evacuees from Afghanistan, dealing with the ongoing disruption to fuel supplies, or preparing for winter in the face of higher energy prices.

The partnerships that were forged and strengthened through the pandemic have again been relied on and are again proving strong and resilient here in Surrey.

I'm immensely proud of our people and our communities in meeting these challenges head on and maintaining an overriding objective of looking out for those most vulnerable in our society.

Surrey is a place where nobody should be left behind, and the dedication of our staff and partners over the last few months continues to demonstrate how we are making that ambition a reality.

We have also made real progress in tackling some of our longer-term challenges as a council and put in place a solid foundation from which to tackle new and emerging issues.

Madam Chair, we are approaching our budget setting period, with a draft 2022/23 budget due to be published next month and some early resident engagement underway.

We have worked hard, transformed the Council, and got our finances in order with balanced budgets, ambitious investment and building back our reserves.

But it is clear that greater challenges are on the horizon.

Local and national government stepped up during COVID and that has added severe pressure to public finances.

Climate Change is a real and imminent threat that must be tackled seriously, and we have set out our ambitious plan to do that – that kind of action does not come cheap.

The government's funding plans for Adult Social Care is longer-term and the immediate burden remains squarely on local authorities.

Demands on our services continue to increase, while funding streams are being squeezed.

While we will lobby government for what we feel is fair and necessary for Surrey, we must look to the future and prepare properly for these anticipated budget impacts.

We have done the tough slog to base camp, but we still have to scale the mountain and there is a storm coming in.

We need to collect ourselves and find renewed energy and vigour to tackle these next challenges together – with our staff, our partners, and our residents.

Madam Chair, later this month we will take our Climate Change Delivery Plan through Cabinet, setting out how we plan to reach our climate objectives in Surrey.

We aim to be a net-zero organisation by 2030 and help deliver a net-zero county by 2050.

These are not just soundbites or lip service – this is a serious plan, to tackle a serious threat.

Cllr Heath will discuss this further later today with her motion, and it is a plan that requires everybody to play their part.

We will do everything in our power to do our bit – we'll electrify our transport fleet, we'll put green infrastructure in place, we'll get home insulation and renewable energy schemes together, we'll plant trees, make our buildings efficient, lobby government...

But we can't do it alone. We need collective responsibility. We have to do it together.

Another significant area where we are committed to putting the right foundations in place, to tackle a long-term challenge, is social care.

While we continue to spend over £1m every single day on caring for vulnerable adults, we are also working hard to transform our care provision to provide better quality of life, greater independence, and more effective and efficient support for those that really need us.

Our overriding ambition is to increase independence and modernise care.

We want residents to stay in their community for longer, to have the support to live independently where possible rather than be taken into care.

We are investing in this ambition now, through technology, modern supported living accommodation, and extra care schemes in the community, all to deliver a better quality of life and prevent reliance on residential care.

Again, this will only be successful working together with a thriving community sector, and health partners to deliver stronger, joined-up local support.

Madam Chair, the challenges we have faced across Children's Services over recent years have been well documented – it's something we have not shied away from, in fact the opposite. We have put in place a fundamental transformation programme and a rigorous structure to make the improvements required, with positive progress noted at every step of the way from Ofsted.

A formal letter from the latest monitoring visit from Ofsted is due to be published today and will recognise further good work specifically in our duty to care leavers.

There was some very positive feedback about our direct work with young people around mental health and abusive relationships, the breadth and depth of our local offer, and the strong support we offer to older Care Leavers until they are 25 through personal advisors.

One area we're particularly proud of, and praised by Ofsted, is our support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

We take seriously our responsibility for the care of asylum-seeking children – ensuring that we properly assess the needs of unaccompanied minors and place them in the most appropriate care, so they can settle and go on to play a full and active role in our society.

I reiterate – nobody in Surrey should be left behind on this Council's watch.

This support for young people, accompanied by the welcoming and compassionate nature of communities across Surrey, has really come to the fore in recent weeks as we've welcomed people of all ages from Afghanistan.

These are people who have been forced to flee their home country, many of whom have put their lives at risk for the values and principles of freedom and democracy, and who we should be proud to welcome into our wonderful county.

They have come here with nothing, to an unfamiliar country, often having been through severe stress and trauma, many with young children or acute healthcare needs.

I have been so impressed by the work of County Council staff, alongside Surrey's Districts and Boroughs, and health providers, in making sure Afghans can settle here safely and happily, ensuring access to healthcare, education and secure accommodation.

I'd like to pay tribute to all those people working tirelessly on this resettlement issue, and to our communities for their generosity and compassion.

Our country is built on the contribution of a diverse range of people, from all across the world, with different backgrounds, experiences, skills and ideas, contributing to a free and open society.

And while we welcome newcomers from Afghanistan, and previously Syria and elsewhere, into our communities, this month of October is also used to recognise the historic, and ongoing contribution of people from African or Caribbean descent to our society.

Black History Month is hugely important in helping us promote our principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion, taking time to learn about the specific contributions of black people.

I would encourage everybody to take a look at Surrey History Centre's powerful exhibitions this month and engage and promote Black History Month activities going on across the county.

Our history, and our historic challenges, must guide our future.

We must learn from past mistakes – and past success – to shape our future. To play our part in creating a better place and stronger, thriving communities across Surrey.

Madam Chair, as we look to the immediate challenges in front of us, we must work together, and each and every one of us should look out for each other in society.

Let's redouble our efforts to protect our most vulnerable.

We announced at the last Cabinet meeting more funding for people at risk of fuel poverty to make home improvements. We will also make sure there is wider support available for people this winter through avenues such as the Surrey Crisis Fund and Winter Fuel Payments.

Members, look out for your neighbours this winter and make sure they're aware of the support available if needed.

Madam Chair, I have always aimed, as Leader of this Council, to work openly and collaboratively. I have encouraged scrutiny of our decisions as well as early sight of policy changes through the select committees, I have tried to stimulate thought and contribution from all members and communities, and I will continue to promote transparency and honesty.

As I have shared with all of you - and spoken about publicly - we are ready to stand up for Surrey and ask for greater local powers from central government in the form of a County Deal.

And I make no apology for being ambitious for this county. Ambitious to improve the lives and livelihoods of all our residents and I urge all leaders of all councils across the county to share that ambition.

It is right that we seek further devolved powers from central government – if we have the levers to grow our economy, to tackle health inequality, to enable a greener future and to support our communities we WILL deliver.

We must, and will, drive forward with completion of our transformation programmes. As each week and month goes by we improve the delivery of our services as I have set out earlier.

There will always be more to do but we have a Council – a team – that truly wants to deliver and although there will be bumps in the road – though less potholes - we must remain focused and committed.

We shall continue to press government for a County Deal, for sustainable funding for social care, and we will do all that we can to level up our county as we contribute to the national programme.

Of course, there will be frustration at the pace of improvement, none more than from me, but what is important is the desire to achieve a better and fairer life and whilst this council is only one part of the wider ecosystem we can and should lead from the front.

Not everything is perfect but let's be constructive, let's be realistic, let's be supportive and above all let's get it done.

As a country we need to invest in ourselves, in our infrastructure, in our manufacturing capacity, in being self-sufficient, in creating equality of opportunity in all four corners of the UK.

We must better support those that are vulnerable, help those struggling with mental illness and social isolation, wherever possible create an environment where people can enjoy gainful employment, reskill, or upskill if they want to.

We equip the next generation to help deliver that brighter future, where our streets are safer, where we can breathe clean air and live healthier lives.

These are all worthy ambitions many of which touch upon the work of this council but equally much of which is outside of our control. We must therefore come together - playing to the strengths of each organisation, getting behind a single vision for this county and a vision where we genuinely and sustainably address the inequality of opportunity, to create a better future for everyone.

That is why we are elected to this Council and that is not only our opportunity, but it is also our duty.

What that will look like specifically is not yet known, but from our conversations together so far, it's clear that the vast majority of local partners and stakeholders share our ambitions of a stronger county, with more control of our own destiny, delivering the right local solutions so that Surrey can be the very best place it can be.

The government have set out their agenda and we have a responsibility to engage with that, as local leaders across the country (from all political persuasions) are doing.

Their four levelling up objectives are things all of us in this council chamber should be aiming to deliver for Surrey:

- Empowering local leaders & communities
- Growing the private sector & boosting living standards
- Spreading opportunity & improving public services
- Restoring local pride

We want to and need to do that so we can ensure :-

- A **stronger** Surrey economy
- A **sustainable** Surrey
- **Safer** Surrey streets
- **Supportive** and thriving Surrey communities

Ultimately, a healthy place where there is equal opportunity for everyone, and nobody is left behind.

We owe it to our residents to step forward, grasp this opportunity and deliver this agenda locally.

It is our future. It is our residents' future.

Let's seize it, together.

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