

Leader's Statement – County Council, Informal - 18 January 2022

Madam Chair, Members, as we enter 2022, unfortunately we are meeting remotely once again, as we reconvene the postponed final council meeting from last year.

I sincerely hope, and expect, that this will not return as the norm and we will indeed be meeting in person next month as planned.

We have always been clear that COVID has not gone away, that we should be cautious and not be complacent.

The sudden and dramatic arrival of the Omicron strain before Christmas was both unwelcome and deflating, as I'm sure we had all hoped for a normal festive season following the disappointment of 2020.

However, we have met that fresh challenge head on as ever, and I want to pay tribute once again to our Public Health Team here in Surrey who – with their expertise and relentless attention to detail and data – guided us through the early stages of uncertainty, were open and honest with our residents, and supported our schools, care settings and businesses with the clarity, calmness, and assuredness that we've become accustomed to.

As I've said many times over the last couple of years – thank you to Ruth Hutchinson and her team, who have been outstanding.

I should also thank our residents too, who have behaved sensibly and cautiously to protect one another.

Our vaccination rates across Surrey are above the national average; our residents are recognising the value in getting jabbed and getting their boosters, not just for their own protection but also to protect those around them.

I've seen first hand the tremendous work of our NHS partners and resident volunteers in vaccination centres like the one at Sandown Park in my area – indeed my wife Dr Oliver is there most days helping deliver the vaccines.

There are still some pockets where vaccination numbers could be higher, and I'd ask all Members here to spread the message and encourage all residents to take that opportunity to get jabbed.

If they are unsure, our Public Health Team and our colleagues in the NHS can explain and reassure.

Please, reiterate far and wide – get boosted now.

Madam Chair, thanks in a large part to that vaccination programme, I remain confident looking to the year ahead.

Finding a way to live safely and normally with COVID will enable us to crack on with our ambitious agenda for this county.

It is already clear that 2022 and beyond holds many challenges for us, as an organisation and for our residents, but we have already made great strides in tackling those challenges. We are relentlessly chasing more solutions, more progress, and a brighter future - for everyone.

Here in Surrey, we have an ultimate ambition – that no one is left behind.

It's an ambition that is shared – with our residents and partners – through the Community Vision for 2030.

I believe, and indeed hope it is shared by every Member here, whatever their political background.

I believe we are all proud of this county, and all eager to see the benefits shared by everyone.

As the County Council, we must lead by example and play our part in delivering that ambition.

We want everyone here to be able to take advantage of the great opportunities this wonderful county offers - whoever they are and whatever their circumstances may be.

Surrey is a great place to start a business, and has world class job opportunities, beautiful countryside, supportive communities and first-rate health and social care.

But equally we know life is really difficult for some people here, making really tough choices every day, and that not everyone shares the same advantages.

That's why we're determined to do everything we can to make life easier for those who need us, to help everyone reach their full potential and set a level playing field.

We will make it happen:

By being out in communities talking to residents to understand what people really need in their local area, with the £100m Your Fund Surrey making community-led projects happen.

By improving access to our countryside – one of the best ways to improve health and wellbeing for everyone.

By investing tens of millions of pounds to help people with special educational needs and working with businesses to provide thousands of apprenticeships across Surrey.

By revolutionising Adult Social Care to support older people to live in their homes and communities for longer, with modern technology, appropriate accommodation, and specialist support for people with complex needs.

By making it easier to travel around Surrey more efficiently, with better, cleaner bus services and electric car infrastructure – so our economy thrives in a sustainable way.

All these things – and more - will help those who need us most and improve quality of life for everyone.

We're also working hard to help those who are in need right now – boosting financial support through the Surrey Crisis Fund, our additional grants to voluntary and charity groups, our pioneering work to tackle Period Poverty alongside Binti and our investment in tackling homelessness across the county.

We are determined that Surrey County Council will strive to make sure that no one is left behind. Either now, or in the future.

This work is not just soundbites or corporate gobbledeygook – it's real life, and it's vitally important.

It is critical that we are serious about this and that we deliver.

We have with us these next 2 weeks the Ofsted team of Inspectors who will be assessing the improvements we have made in delivering services to our children across the County. We have been open and transparent in relation to the past failings

of the service and I very much hope the team will see the very real dedication and determination of all those working in Children's Services as we continue to deliver our transformation and improvement plan.

And let's be honest, if we're going to do it right, that commitment and delivery costs money.

As we all know here, this Council has come a long way in a short space of time. A few years ago, our financial situation was on life support.

Credit must go to our Finance Team for their expertise and innovative thinking, and our workforce for delivering a transformation that puts us on a much more stable footing.

But we can't pretend that everything is plain sailing, and that money grows on trees.

The government played their part during COVID in supporting local authorities with critical grants and additional funding to meet those immediate short-term challenges, but that funding was never going to address the longer-term issues coming out of the pandemic.

Or indeed the critical funding issues facing local government even before COVID.

If we're serious about our ambition for Surrey, we must plan on the basis that we will fund it ourselves.

We're taking the difficult decision to raise Council Tax this year to help achieve that ambition, and we recognise that puts an additional burden on people across the county.

But we must - and we will - deliver.

We can see future crises and we must get ahead and tackle them now.

That is responsible leadership.

I will set out the detail of our budget proposals at our council meeting on the 8th February but our first and foremost priority must be to support our vulnerable residents which is why yesterday we announced an extra £8m investment for mental health provision.

More and more people are suffering severely from mental health in Surrey - we must deliver better mental health prevention, care, and support to stop people reaching crisis point. That is what the additional funding will be used for.

More people are being discharged from hospital for us to assess and care for in the long term – we must deliver that care, that is right for those individuals who need us.

More people are claiming Universal Credit, struggling to find work or keep their businesses thriving through COVID – we must deliver opportunity and the right conditions for business to grow.

We will stand up and take the tough choices to make this happen.

We will help businesses thrive - delivering skills, jobs, and opportunity for all.

We will address root causes of ill-health.

We will do all that we can to ensure all of Surrey's children get the best start in life.

We will be an active partner with local communities to deliver projects, opportunities and support that is right for local places.

We will tackle the Climate Emergency.

We will protect Surrey's future.

These commitments don't need sticking plasters and short-term handouts – they need real, meaningful investment. And that is what we will continue to do with our residents' money.

More mental health practitioners, better and quicker specialist care for those that need it, more special educational needs places, modern school facilities, safer roads, cleaner air, more efficient public transport, investment in community projects.

A better quality of life for our residents and their families.

We know for many people a council tax rise of any amount is unpalatable – we don't want to raise the tax burden on anyone.

But there is some stark inequality in this county that is not always recognised.

We are not only recognising it. We are committing to tackle it.

Helping those that need us most and improving the quality of life for everyone.

Madam Chair, I am confident in this Council and its workforce delivering for the people of Surrey.

We've come a long way, and are making a positive difference every day, but there is always more to do. This is not, and will not be, a complacent Council.

We have some big challenges ahead, but I believe we are well placed to meet those head on. Let's tackle those challenges together and deliver a brighter future for Surrey.

I wish you all a happy and healthy 2022.