

Leader's Statement – County Council (Budget Meeting), 8 February 2022

Madam Chair, Members, I'm delighted that we're back meeting in-person again, in our still-new Council Chamber as a full group.

I sincerely hope and believe this will now be the norm, and there'll be no turning back.

This is what democracy is all about and full, in-person meetings like this, is conducive to good local government, proper scrutiny, healthy debate, and ultimately positive outcomes for our residents.

Today we are bringing the Council's 2022/23 budget for discussion.

It is a budget to be delivered in a year that holds many challenges, but also many opportunities as we finally come out of the pandemic and welcome back many of the norms we have missed for so long.

The challenges however are very real.

Many we were already facing, like tackling the Climate Emergency.

Many have been exacerbated by COVID, like pressures on mental health services and Adult Social Care.

Many are new and emerging, with different social and behavioural patterns in our post-COVID, post-Brexit world.

This budget is all about responsible, strong leadership in the face of those challenges, to deliver our collective ambitions for Surrey.

Ultimately – that no one is left behind.

You have all heard me speak about this a great deal over the past 3 years, but particularly over the last few weeks as we really look to build on the great work already done and turbo charge our efforts to deliver it.

The short video I showed you highlights that No one left behind is the guiding principle for all that this Council does – helping those that need us most and improving quality of life for everyone in Surrey.

This is particularly pertinent in the context of our budget.

As the County Council, we're responsible for a huge range of services for all of our 1.2million Surrey residents.

The majority of our spending is – quite rightly - spent on looking after those who need us most:

Adults and children with disabilities, Looked After Children, our elderly residents as they need a bit more help, young people with Special Educational Needs to make sure they can access opportunity, and people with really complex needs who need specialist care and support.

These are the most expensive public services - more than £1 million every day delivering services to adults, and half a million pounds every day supporting children and their families.

We don't begrudge this – that is what our society is all about, and it plays true to our principle that no one is left behind.

We are also the organisation responsible for Surrey-wide services such as our roads and pavements, transport, countryside, major infrastructure projects like flood defence, and new road building.

We're responsible for schools, recycling centres, libraries, birth, death and marriage registration, public health, and trading standards.

We also have responsibility for Surrey Fire & Rescue Service.

All of these services too, are relied upon by so many people – to get around, to work, to learn, to live healthy lives, for protection, for peace of mind, for celebration and for support in good times and bad.

We are here for you Surrey.

Every single penny of Council Tax – every single penny we spend – is spent to make Surrey a better place.

Madam Chair, we have worked hard to get our finances on a steady footing over the last few years – we are in good shape thanks to that hard work, and huge credit should be given to all the staff and of this organisation, and indeed elected Members for that.

For striving to deliver services in the best way possible, for being open minded, dedicated, committed public servants.

Our Transformation Programme has so far saved £240m and that's more than £75m each and every year, with a further £75m projected over the next few years, all the while improving services for residents.

We will continue to be responsible with taxpayer's money.

We have reduced risks around our budget, delivered services in a more effective and efficient way, and provided a stable platform to invest in the county's future.

We have been able to provide a financial bedrock for the county to deal with COVID and a platform for recovery.

However, more, and greater threats are coming. There are more hurdles to overcome.

There are still huge pressures on our budget and public finances across the country are stretched following COVID.

There is no expectation of more money from central government, with a tightening of budgets more likely.

Our progress and future sustainability are still at risk. We cannot lose focus and we still must find new and more efficient ways to deliver services.

But we are Surrey County Council.

We're a strong, ambitious, responsible organisation with great people here always ready to tackle the next big challenge.

While we will lobby government for what we feel is fair and necessary for Surrey, we will look to the future, prepare properly, and crack on delivering for our residents.

To truly make Surrey a better place, and to truly deliver the County's No One Left Behind ambition, we must work together – us as elected Members with partners across the Surrey system, and most importantly with our local communities.

Collaboration and cooperation are key to delivering our services sustainably going forward. Nobody, and not one single organisation, can do this alone.

Teamwork. Togetherness. Surrey working as one. Everyone playing their part.

That is how we tackle the big fundamental challenges heading our way – public finances, climate change, a shifting society.

We are ready to do our bit – this budget underpins that.

We'll try to make it as easy as possible, but everyone has to step up and take responsibility alongside us.

Thriving and engaged communities will help.

Active residents and local community support can prevent longer term health and social issues and can play an important role in tackling the fundamental issues like Climate Change.

Neighbourliness and support networks can help more people to live independently, in their community for longer.

More local provision – like the wonderful Normandy Community Shop that has just been awarded Your Fund Surrey funding – means people have less need to get in their car and can live healthier lives.

More and stronger local networks and relationships can bring together different skills and grow ideas that can solve issues – locally and on a bigger scale.

Stronger local economies provide more jobs and opportunity.

Let's make it happen.

Madam Chair, as I've said earlier, the vast majority of the money we spend – indeed the vast majority of people's Council Tax in Surrey – is spent on looking after a tiny proportion of our population.

Adult Social Care, Special Education Needs Provision, looking after children in care – it's all hugely expensive, but this is what we're about.

So it is important that we remember what this Council is here for; it is helping those that need us.

Providing *everyone* with opportunity.

Demand for care has been increasing for a long time, and the type of care needed is often complex and specific to individual circumstances.

COVID has increased that pressure further.

The NHS provide world class, life saving care at the point of need. They come to our rescue when we're hurt and acutely ill.

But long-term care, often for many years, falls to local government.

None of us know when we might need it, or when our family might need it, or how complex that care might need to be.

But we will be there.

Here in Surrey, we want to modernise care, make sure it is right for each individual and also to increase independence. We want residents to stay in their community for longer, to have the support to live independently where possible rather than taken into care.

We are investing in this ambition now, through technology and new, more effective forms of care and accommodation, to deliver a better quality of life and prevent reliance on expensive care packages.

The government's National Insurance tax rise is for the longer-term, with money initially going to the NHS so the cost of social care right now falls on local authorities.

We're determined to do right by all generations. To provide dignity and a better quality of life.

A rise in the Adult Social Care precept is unavoidable if we want to deliver this ambition and look after residents most in need.

The average cost of supporting an older person has increased by 13% compared with pre-pandemic levels and across all groups we have seen an increase of 7%.

So 3% of our proposed Council Tax rise will be dedicated to Adult Social Care through the precept.

We have an ageing population and an increasing number of younger people moving into adulthood that need services.

Equally we have an increasingly frail care market at a time when the government is rightly proposing radical changes to national policy.

That suggests the cost of delivering social care is only likely to increase over the next few years and that is why we are committing a further £24m to ensure that we can meet the needs and demands we are likely to face.

We will not shirk from our responsibilities.

Another key factor in this budget Madam Chair, is mental health.

We have seen a huge increase in those needing to access mental health support throughout the pandemic, caused by a combination of family crisis, bereavement, loneliness, isolation, employment, or financial challenges.

Following the second COVID lockdown in 2021, we saw increases of up to 89% in referrals through the Council's Children's Single Point of Access and a 66% increase in demand for children's eating disorder services.

In terms of adults at the same time, there was a 45% rise in referrals to Home Treatment Teams, Psychiatric Liaison, and intensive support teams.

Referrals and pressures have remained high ever since.

With partners we've carried out a widescale review into mental health provision and identified where improvements can be made.

We must invest in prevention and early intervention and ensure that children and adults can access services as soon as they need them

The 1% rise in Council Tax ring fenced for mental health will be used for exactly that:

- More mental health counsellors in education settings
- Extra help in schools to improve young people's mental health
- More practitioners to aid people's recovery

- Grants to mental health charities
- Investment in suicide prevention
- More practical advice for residents to enjoy better mental health
- Increase in early support like talking therapy
- More mental health hospital beds for people in crisis
- Specialist accommodation for people in recovery

And we will continue to work with our partners, including the NHS to seek match funding for even greater investment.

Madam Chair, local government is also at the forefront of tackling the climate emergency and Surrey County Council has set out bold ambitions to deliver a greener future for Surrey.

If we are serious in this endeavour, if we really want to deliver change, then it needs meaningful investment.

Members, we are serious.

Investment in green infrastructure and new technology will both make the Council an environmentally friendly organisation, but also enable every single Surrey resident to play their part.

We are asking people to use their cars less - so we are investing in better cycling and walking networks and public transport.

We are asking people and businesses to be more energy efficient - so we are investing in renewable energy and better insulation.

We are asking people to move away from petrol and diesel - so we're leading by example by investing in electric vehicles and machinery for our work.

We're planting more trees, we're installing LED streetlights, we're investing in an electric and hydrogen bus network, we're tackling congestion and air quality with our highways planning.

We are tackling the climate emergency – together.

Alongside our day-to-day service delivery, and our revenue budget, we have also set out an ambitious - but deliverable - 5-year plan of investments that will deliver both immediate improvements for Surrey residents and long-term savings to our budget including:

£139m to create more school places,

£126m to provide supported living and independent care accommodation,

£64m increasing provision for special education needs and disability in schools,
£51m on safer highways infrastructure,
£65m as the first tranche of a budgeted £273m on reducing carbon emissions to tackle the climate emergency,
£100m to be invested in projects promoted by our communities,
£200m improving our roads and footways,
£34m increasing the capacity and quality of residential homes for children.

Things that simply make the day-to-day life of all residents better.

We are getting on and delivering that investment plan, so we can start to see the positive impacts as soon as possible.

Madam Chair, Council Tax now makes up around three quarters of our funding – money from central government has reduced since 2010, while demand on our services has increased.

Over the last year, the cost of meeting that demand has also gone up considerably with inflation high and supply chains stretched.

We must be responsible with our budget, and with our services, and stay true to our ambition that no one is left behind.

We recognise that household budgets are feeling the squeeze just like ours – that any further increase for many people is unpalatable but we're deciding to tackle the root causes of hardship and inequality, instead of just applying a sticking plaster.

For those that need financial help now, who are facing crisis point, we will actively support them. The Surrey County Council website provides details of organisations that they can turn to including:

Debt Support,

Household Support Fund,

Surrey Crisis Fund,

Community Foundation for Surrey,

Housing Benefit and Council Tax benefit.

We are boosting funding already, and there is help at hand.

The government recently announced a Council Tax rebate for band A to D householders which will also assist. A band D house in Surrey will see a £1.48 pence increase in Council Tax of which £1.19 will be spent on mental health and social care. But with the £150 rebate from government, those households will in fact be £58 better off even assuming the District and Boroughs and the Police increase their element of Council Tax to the maximum, whilst band A to C will see even more.

Madam Chair, as I've outlined – like local authorities up and down the country, we are facing some fundamental challenges.

We could shirk our responsibility, put our head in the sand and muddle along hoping for government money that will not come.

But we're not going to that.

That is not the way of this Council.

That is not the way of Surrey.

We are going to stand up, roll up our sleeves and not only tackle those challenges – we're going to make the best of them.

We're going to make Surrey a better place.

And we're going to make sure no one is left behind.

Madam Chair and Members, I recommend the budget to this Council.

Thank you.