

Leader's Statement – County Council, 22 March 2022

Madam Chair, Members, once again we meet in the midst of yet another global crisis, with the despicable attack on Ukraine, dominating the world agenda.

Firstly, our collective thoughts are with the Ukrainian people and their government at this time. Our support and solidarity with them as they fiercely defend their country is unequivocal.

For those Ukrainians who have had their homes and livelihoods destroyed by Putin's senseless and illegitimate violence, we stand ready to help you in every way we possibly can.

Our communities – as ever – have already sprung into action, with donations, messages, and offers of all kinds of support flooding in.

The people of Surrey are generous, welcoming, and passionate about helping those in need – making sure that no one is left behind, and that includes people they may have never met, from countries they may have never visited.

We are here as residents of Surrey, and we are here as Surrey County Council.

Members, I and officers here have held several calls with central government about the routes through which we can help, and we expect to see the first Ukrainians arriving here within days.

We will continue those calls with government colleagues, and partners here in Surrey, including Districts and Boroughs and the voluntary sector, to ensure that the right support can be provided, the right safeguarding in place and the right funding provided to make sure refugees – from all countries – can arrive here safely and sustainably.

Madam Chair, I know you have spoken on this issue in recent days also, expressing your support and that of the Council, and Members I am sure you will echo those sentiments both here today and in your communities.

We have set up dedicated webpages on our website with all the latest information – about government schemes, charitable appeals, how people can help and the support available. We will continue to promote this information to try to ensure those who want to help, can, and those who need help can access it.

As we see those brave people stand up and defend their land, and their belief in democracy so passionately in Ukraine, let us all reflect here that we, as Elected Members, have those fundamental beliefs in common.

I am certain that all of us in this room are here for the right reasons, with a shared passion for fairness, freedom, and a desire to do right by the people we represent.

Let us remember that commonality, which often gets lost in the cut and thrust of political debate in this country.

Madam Chair, away from the brutality and heartbreak of war, this last month has seen some incredibly important developments here in Surrey.

As all Members will no doubt be aware, we finally received the outcome of Ofsted's inspection of our Children's Services – something we had been waiting for, for quite some time.

To put the importance of this report into context – our Children's Services had been deemed inadequate by Ofsted on the last two inspections. We had commissioners appointed and ultimately had not been trusted to deliver that service without government oversight for at least eight years.

For a local authority that is one of the ultimate challenges. And turning around a failing service is not an easy thing to do, or something that can be done with soundbites or simple political will.

But Madam Chair, I am pleased to say that the service has been turned around, with all the might, all the expertise, all the sheer hard work of both the leadership and the staff of this organisation.

And it's been done while facing numerous storms including a 2 year pandemic.

It is official.

Ofsted do now have confidence in our Children's Services, and its leadership.

We are no longer 'inadequate'. We are trusted.

The inspectors noted 'significant change', that our leadership is already implementing a "clear and comprehensive" improvement programme, with a "strong foundation" to strive for excellence.

We have achieved that very difficult first rung on the ladder, and while yes, we do still require further improvement, it is clear that we are on the right path, making progress and picking up speed.

This report will help us accelerate further, especially in the area of recruitment of more permanent staff, breeding further confidence in what we're doing.

I must pay tribute to Rachael Wardell and her team, and to the late Dave Hill before her - for their dedication and expertise in turning that service around. I would very much hope that this Council will recognise the huge amount of progress that has been made right across the board and indeed pay tribute to the fantastic staff that have made this possible. I know that we are not there yet and there is more to do over the coming

months to ensure that the good practice we are seeing is replicated and deeply embedded across all areas of Children's Services.

I know the team will have taken the briefest of deep breaths, before cracking on again - implementing that further improvement, and we look forward to OFSTED capturing that continued progress on their future visits.

Supporting, caring for, and keeping our young people safe is central to our role as a County Council, it is paramount in making sure no one in Surrey is left behind.

I care deeply about that - rooting children and families in our hearts and minds - and I am heartened by the fact that we're in a much better place.

Another huge milestone in terms of the progress this organisation is making was also achieved this month – with our Youth Offending Service rated as Good by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation.

Again, this service was rated inadequate just three years ago.

The improvement and transformation is remarkable, and further proof that this Council is well on the way to delivering a brighter future for everyone in Surrey.

Here, I must simply echo HMIP's Chief Inspector:

“To go from an ‘Inadequate’ to ‘Good’ rating, in just a few years, is quite an achievement. Surrey's Youth Offending Service is now an organised and focused service that understands the children under their supervision. They have an impressive range of innovative services for each child, which look to deter them from further offending at the earliest opportunity.

“I commend the staff at Surrey YOS – they have shown a commitment to improvement and a dedication to a once-struggling service. They faced the challenge and have succeeded to become a developed, well-motivated and knowledgeable service.”

Not my words Members, but the words of an independent inspector.

This month has also seen independent auditors produce their report following inspection of our financial management and value for money.

Their detailed report was very positive outlining our ability to ‘maintain an improved financial position’, despite the challenges of COVID-19 and the short-term nature of government funding settlements.

There are no areas of significant weakness identified across financial sustainability, or our improving economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

As with our Children’s Services, and our Youth Offending Service, our financial management has been transformed.

We are seen as an industry leader, with our finance academy model and expertise already guiding other local authorities through financial challenges.

Madam Chair, these official, independent, detailed reports into this Council are evidence of the massive improvement undertaken over the last few years.

And this is just what’s been published in the last few weeks.

Add to this, three years’ worth of balanced budgets, increased satisfaction from residents, an improved report from HMICFRS into our Fire Service- and yes Members, while still filling potholes and repairing roads.

I have said it many times, I have recognised poor practice and areas of failings, but I have also outlined a vision for a brighter future, I've defended our services and our staff from political point scoring.

But here we have it in black and white.

This Council has made huge strides across the board. This is not just talking about what we are going to do – it is absolutely about delivering that improvement.

And we've done it while guiding this county through the biggest challenge it's faced in a generation in the form of Covid-19.

Rest assured however, we're not celebrating, we're not complacent and we're not going to slow down on our efforts to get this Council to where we want it to be.

We're accelerating this improvement even further and we will not let up in our effort to deliver the very best for our residents.

We've got so much more we can do, with detailed plans already in place to deliver.

Madam Chair, you will have noticed being here in Woodhatch, that there is a buzz around the place.

Here we are in our Surrey HQ – another promise delivered I might add – working hard, with more of our staff now able, and more confident to come to into the office after two years of remote working.

We know that this transition into the new normal of proper agile working will take some time to settle, and we will continue to look to improve the practicalities and experience for staff.

But there is no doubting our workforce's enthusiasm and passion for what they do.

We're cracking on in delivering for the people of Surrey.

Our Climate Change Delivery Plan is in place, our budget has identified hundreds of millions of pounds to help deliver it, and work is underway with partners, with schools and residents to make sure we are a net-zero Council by 2030, and a net-zero County by 2050.

More trees are being planted – hundreds handed out to residents at libraries this month – and more electric vehicle charging points are going live all the time.

Investment is secured and committed for electric and hydrogen buses, there has been huge engagement in our local cycling and walking plans, with more cycle routes going in and our roads being made safer for active travel with more traffic enforcement cameras being rolled out.

We will press ahead in tackling the Climate Emergency, I know many Members here are equally passionate in this endeavour, and we will hold ourselves to account as we do it.

We all have a role to play.

Madam Chair, another key area of delivery that is picking up momentum is Your Fund Surrey.

Now into its second year, there are tens of millions of pounds worth of projects logged on the system, with applications underway at various stages, and our excellent project team working through to support them.

This is a Fund designed to harness the positive visions from our communities, to help deliver their ambitions both big and small, to include more residents, to generate conversations and improve wellbeing for every local area and every group in Surrey.

We have had to find the right balance of being prudent and responsible with public money, while stimulating big ideas and making the process as simple as possible within that responsibility.

We're just over one year in, and funding has already been granted to several projects that are going to make a real difference in their communities. However, I do acknowledge that members want to see funding being released for many more schemes and now that we are up and running we will be picking up pace.

I know all members will be looking to support their communities in finding suitable opportunities to make their local area a better place, and having been out to visit some of these projects myself, it is wonderful to see the energy and positivity from communities who are actually making it happen.

Plenty of other projects and improvements are underway too.

With funding approved last year for the River Thames Scheme, detailed design has begun, and public engagement will start in the next couple of months to share the plans for the biggest flood alleviation scheme this county has ever seen.

Huge progress has been made in Farnham on their town centre masterplan working with local partners and the community.

Similar town centre infrastructure improvements are making good progress in Weybridge alongside our NHS partners, with plans to be presented to the public in May.

Spades are in the ground on further modern accommodation for adults and children with complex needs who need tailored support.

More Special Educational Needs places are being provided – on top of the extra already delivered – to make sure children can go to school near to where they live.

Our new highways contract begins in a matter of days, and residents will see even more road improvements – Members, those potholes are being fixed and our roads and being made safer.

Madam Chair, as I've outlined, this Council is making huge progress.

For some years we've talked about transformation, doing things differently and wanting to be the very best we can be for the residents of Surrey.

Over the last few weeks, there is proof that we really are delivering.

We have our eyes wide open – we know we need to continue – but there is no doubt whatsoever that this organisation, our leadership, and our staff, are all heading in the right direction.

We will keep going, we will accelerate, and we will do everything in our power to ensure that no one is left behind. That is our vision, that is our ambition, and that is what we will deliver. Thank you.

This page is intentionally left blank