

Leader's Statement – Annual County Council, 24 May 2022

Madam Chair, Members, I am struggling to remember a time that I've addressed this Council when we haven't been living in a time of unprecedented global upheaval.

Whether it be national political turmoil, the impacts of Brexit, a global pandemic, lockdowns, a war in Europe or now, a cost-of-living crisis across the country that is impacting so many of our residents in a very real way.

Many of these global issues can initially seem remote but their impact on our lives quickly becomes very real, particularly the recent aftershocks of COVID and Russia's invasion of Ukraine leading to people in this county facing massive increases in their day-to-day costs and pulling many into quite scary economic hardship.

It is this knock-on effect from one destabilising event to another that demonstrates why we must take a fundamental, long-term view in our policy making and ambitions for Surrey, to protect our residents and ensure this county thrives whatever challenges are thrown at us.

It is why we plan ahead.

Why we are striving to build resilience and strength in our communities.

Why we focus now on Climate Change to protect our future.

Why we're working to deliver the skills and infrastructure that will be needed for future economic growth.

And why we are addressing the wider determinants of health and wellbeing to ensure our residents can live longer, more independent, and healthier lives.

So that when these shocks happen to our very way of life - some foreseen some not - the people and institutions of Surrey can be ready and resilient to them.

We demonstrated this during COVID, with our transformation programmes having delivered financial strength to guide the County Council and the county itself, through the pandemic and support our most vulnerable residents.

It is this resilience that will make Surrey continue to be the wonderful place it is to live and to do business and will deliver our ambition that no one here will be left behind.

But Madam Chair, we all recognise that as well as those foundations - that future vision and security - people are in real need right now.

Many people won't be used to being in need.

Many will be struggling for the first time in their lives.

And many will be more than 'struggling' - tipping over the edge and unsure where to turn.

It is all of these people that we, as a County Council, are here for right now.

As I made clear when presenting Surrey County Council's budget in February, our primary focus is to support those residents who need us most.

Children's Services and Adult Social Care – there for people with complex needs, disabilities, young people in care, those fleeing domestic abuse, people needing mental health support, people growing older and needing more help, people coming out of hospital with longer term needs, people with dementia, and parents needing extra support with young children.

Surrey Fire & Rescue Service – working tirelessly day and night to keep residents and businesses safe.

Our Environment Teams – improving access to Surrey’s wonderful countryside so the benefits can be felt by all.

Our libraries – helping people access services, connect with one another, learn new skills, and get online.

We’re building schools, more modern care accommodation, community hubs, and improving our children’s homes.

We’re investing in communities across the county through Your Fund Surrey – helping deliver the specific things local areas need, that will leave lasting benefits for the whole community.

Our Highways Teams – out there making it safer to get around, encouraging more people to get on a bike, improving public transport and keeping Surrey moving.

Surrey – we’re here for you.

And that includes help for those who are struggling financially right now.

We work shoulder to shoulder with some amazing community groups and charities in Surrey, to ensure that those in need can access the support available.

Some of that work might seem small but can have a big impact, such as our work with Binti around period dignity and access to free sanitary products – a project that has been running for a year now and has helped women across the county through our library donation and collection points.

We have also dedicated more money for Surrey Crisis Fund, administered by this Council, with grants for people at points of real crisis – helping them pay for things many of us rely on, fridges to keep food fresh, energy bills to keep their children warm, urgent repairs or goods.

We have increased our match funding grants to the Community Foundation for Surrey who do brilliant work supporting charities on the frontline providing positive solutions to the many challenges within our communities.

We wholeheartedly support the amazing work of *I Choose Freedom* - formerly Reigate and Banstead Women's Aid - that I was honoured to be at the new launch of last week.

The four refuges it operates in Surrey, for women and children fleeing severe domestic abuse, are so important and I'm glad that the council has been a key partner to help them in that work, giving them accommodation and space to support some of our most vulnerable residents.

We've launched our new online Health and Welfare Hub to provide residents with financial, health and general welfare information. And our Community Helpline for residents who would rather talk through their situation, or if they can't find exactly what they are looking for on the hub.

I've been to the helpline centre in our Weybridge office myself and met with the wonderful team who provide information, advice, and signposting to organisations who can help.

It's not just one call and it's over – they take time to listen and do call backs. They really do help people.

One person called the helpline who had suffered domestic abuse and moved out of their house. They were financially struggling and understandably emotional. The team took their time to talk with them – indeed English was not their first language - and referred them to the Surrey Crisis Fund who could help them with furniture for their new home. They also put them in touch with Citizens Advice for wrap around care.

Another person referred to us via the Job Centre hadn't eaten for 5 days – we managed to get them in touch with Surrey Crisis Fund for real, practical help.

We know how vital it is that residents can get the right information at the right time for their needs, and we're here to help and support you.

Madam Chair, we know that the cost of living is biting, and biting hard.

If reports are to be believed the Chancellor will increase support further where he can, and we'll continue to lobby government on behalf of Surrey residents.

We're pulling every lever we have to make sure we can support residents, and we continue with our work to tackle the root causes of poverty, to make sure our communities thrive, and our county is resilient.

We have set out our commitment that Surrey County Council will strive to make sure that no one is left behind. Now, or in the future.

Madam Chair, another very real way this Council is working to support vulnerable people right now is by welcoming many Ukrainians who have been forced to flee their country following the unspeakable violence inflicted on them and their homeland.

So far over 1,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Surrey. These people – many women and young families – have had their lives turned upside down and been through an ordeal more harrowing than we can possibly imagine.

I am so proud of the people of Surrey for stepping up and welcoming these people into our county, demonstrating solidarity and compassion.

Our Adults and Children's Safeguarding Teams have been working hard to make sure people are safe and cared for, District and Borough Council Officers have been

ensuring appropriate accommodation and support is provided, health partners have been helping arrivals access healthcare, our Schools' Teams have been getting children into schools, and central government are providing visa data so we can plan.

The system is working together, and that partnership is essential to ensure those people coming here to escape the horror of war can settle safely and happily. There are still glitches and delays, but we are working hard with government and with our partners to welcome these families into our communities and I am sure you would want to join me in saying a big thank you to all involved in that important work.

Madam Chair next month is Communities Month, and everything I've spoken about so far demonstrates the importance of strong and powerful communities.

Coming together when times are tough, rallying around those in need, joining up and joining in, stepping up to the plate, making it happen.

We value this here in Surrey, we have wonderful communities, and we must celebrate them.

I believe our local communities should have more say in what impacts them and more avenues to make meaningful change in their local area.

This is why we're getting out more into communities, talking to residents to understand their priorities and reforming outdated bureaucratic processes to listen to more people and make positive change happen faster.

This is also why we remain committed to getting a County Deal for Surrey. The government's Levelling Up Bill is promising, and it demonstrates a commitment to this devolution of power to local areas.

Residents can engage with local government, and influence local decision makers, in a much more meaningful way than central government.

As the County Council we play an active role in our local communities in many different ways, just some of which I've already outlined today.

We know we have more to do, but we also know we can do so much more alongside local people and all tiers of local government, if we can secure more freedoms and flexibilities devolved from Westminster. That will enable us to drive change and progress in a way that is right for Surrey, and right for our communities. I know that this Council, its Members and Officers will not be complacent, we will not sit on the sidelines, but we will continue to work hard for our residents, listening to them and to our partners, acting, supporting, encouraging and above all delivering.

Madam Chair later in this agenda we will be approving amendments to the councils constitution to reflect the changes to the joint and local committees. I'm sure members will agree that our new highways contractor has hit the ground running as we tackle the damage to our roads more often than not caused by utility companies laying or repairing their services. So I am very pleased that our contractors have confirmed they have capacity to accelerate our capital programme of repairing roads and pavements and we will therefore be increasing our spend over the next 2 years by a further £50 million. I also listened to your feedback at the recent member seminar and have therefore agreed to double each member allocation from £50 to £100k for the next 2 years so you can start to tackle your priorities in your division.

Finally, Madam Chair, as well as celebrating our communities, the next few weeks also give us the opportunity to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee, paying tribute to our monarch's quite remarkable 70 years on the throne.

We may think we've seen a lot over the last few years, but she has stood at the head of this country through huge challenges, historic events, massive social change, cultural shifts and

moments of despair and joy, all the while being an inspiration to many.

I know communities across Surrey are planning what will be joyous celebrations, with street parties and a huge number of events planned.

Let's support and celebrate those wonderful communities, that fantastic spirit amongst our residents, which is so important to our strength as a place but lets also take a moment to reflect on those less fortunate and remind ourselves that we are here for all of our residents and it is our responsibility and indeed our duty, to do all that we can to ensure that no one is left behind.

Madam Chair I wish everybody an enjoyable bank holiday weekend.