

Leader's Statement – County Council, 11 October 2022

Madam Chair, Members, a lot has changed since the last time we met here almost three months ago.

We have a new Prime Minister, with a fresh agenda for the country.

We have a new Monarch.

The temperature has dropped, and winter is coming.

As an organisation we have achieved a great deal over the last few weeks, but we have also been faced with crises and challenges that have tested our services to the limit.

We haven't always got it right, but we will always hold up our hands and look to help people as quickly as possible when things go wrong.

I will touch on that more a bit later on, and I'm sure other Members will want to discuss in more detail later in the meeting.

One very sad moment in recent weeks has been the death of our dear friend and colleague Alison Todd, formally Griffiths.

Alison was a valued member of our team, and universally popular across the Council and with Members. She always wore her heart on her sleeve; she was fiercely passionate about where she came from and the people she represented in Sunbury and Ashford Common.

She will be a huge loss to the Council, and to everyone who knew her.

My thoughts remain with her husband Phil, her four children, and her five grandchildren, who all loved Alison dearly.

Madam Chair, this is also our first full Council meeting since the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

It was a moment that perhaps shifted our collective sense of stability and identity more than we expected it would.

It was something that we had all prepared for, that was in many ways expected, but one that still felt like it took us by surprise.

Queen Elizabeth II had been a constant, consistent, and reassuring figure in all of our lives and someone that we maybe took for granted at times.

Her death, while a sad moment in itself, brought about a sense of togetherness as a nation that we haven't felt for some time.

The images and stories from 'The Queue' were heart-warming. The pomp and ceremony felt uplifting, provoking a renewed sense of pride in our country.

And the dedication and sense of duty demonstrated by all those who had important roles to play in the period of mourning, the proclamation, and the funeral – including very many people here in Surrey and in this Council – was inspirational.

Our staff – particularly people like Ian Good, Alan Morris, and the Emergency Planning team who guided the county through – yet again stood up and were counted.

Council Officers, from Traffic Management to Communications, worked 24/7 to ensure that all plans went smoothly, that the Queen's funeral cortege passed through Surrey safely, and that the public were kept safe and informed.

They didn't put a foot wrong, and for that we should thank them.

Another seismic change to the country happened just before the Queen's death – a change that all of us have seen before, more than once - and that was the confirmation of a new Prime Minister.

And she quickly appointed a new Chancellor – someone we know well here in Surrey – and a new Cabinet.

It's been a challenging start for them.

As we have done with many governments before, we will monitor policy changes and implications closely, and we will lobby hard to try and get the best outcomes for the people of Surrey.

We continue our conversations with government, and the Civil Service, around a good County Deal for Surrey and the forthcoming Adult Social Care reforms that will potentially have a huge impact on us as a Council, and therefore our residents.

The Prime Minister's in-tray will be dominated by the cost of living crisis facing the country – like many of our inboxes, full of residents understandably concerned by increasing costs, and colder weather on the horizon.

Members, as many of you will be aware, the Council has established a priority workstream to coordinate our response to the cost of living crisis – to ensure that we are able to support our residents, especially those most in need.

We are working hand in hand with partners across the public and voluntary sector in Surrey, with the Local Resilience Forum coordinating welfare efforts and ensuring we're able to react and step-up support in areas where it is most needed.

The Surrey Crisis Fund is continuing to support people in a very practical sense, day in day out, with grants for emergency items such as white goods, fuel, and clothing for those that need that financial lifeline at times of real hardship.

We are in the process of establishing a series of 'warm hubs' across the county, using libraries and other public buildings as places for people to spend time in, meet and work, where they don't need to worry about the heating bill to keep warm and well.

There is specific support for carers, for Veterans, for young families, for lower earners, for small business owners, and real practical advice for all of us about how to reduce our bills.

We must make sure that people are aware of the help available and can access it – help from the Council, from Government, and from the charity sector.

To that end, residents will soon receive a directory of support, delivered through their door, outlining many of the support services and advice available to help.

This will be supported by a wider communications campaign, with a strong focus on promoting our contact centre helpline and welfare hub online.

We are also mindful of the impact of this crisis on people's mental health, and the knock-on effect on general well-being.

This is going to be a hugely stressful time for a great many people across Surrey, and that pressure can manifest itself in many different ways.

There is help available – tips and steps people can take to help their mental wellbeing, people to talk to and crisis support.

But we all have a role to play out in our communities, rallying around, encouraging those networks of support that came to the fore through the covid pandemic, in particular to help the more vulnerable members of society.

We have wonderful community groups, charities, and local associations across Surrey, and they are vital at times like this. We will support them in whatever way we can, and we as Members are an important part in that link between the Council and the communities we serve.

To that end, we are establishing more flexible ways for Members to fund community initiatives where they are needed – big and small, and the Cabinet Member for Communities will set out more detail this morning, but be assured this administration will always put our residents' interests first.

Ultimately, we all want to unlock that perennial problem of funding, to enable our communities to flourish and thrive.

We have listened, and residents should know that where there is a positive initiative, an opportunity to improve a public space, a willing community group wanting to make a difference, then we will make it happen.

Madam Chair, the cost of living crisis, and the global economic turmoil largely brought about by Putin's senseless war in Ukraine, is also having a big impact on the Council as an organisation.

Demand on services is increasing, costs in our supply chains are going up, our energy costs, our infrastructure costs, and the costs of borrowing are all rising.

But our finances are in a solid and stable state, thanks to the hard work of the organisation over the last five years.

Having reached that secure position, we were anticipating now being the time we could push our ambition forward and implement innovative change across the Council and across the county.

However, the current economic climate means we will be facing challenges to our financial position.

Thankfully, our stable finances as well as our improved services, put us in the best possible position to weather these storms.

But it does mean that we will almost certainly have to slow down some of our more ambitious agendas and projects and focus on protecting our critical services – to ensure our objective that no one in Surrey is left behind, can be fulfilled.

We must focus on the basics, to protect our most vulnerable residents through this time.

That being said, we remain an ambitious and forward-looking organisation.

A Council that never shirks a challenge and will always strive to be better.

The things that we may need to pause or scale back in the short term are not being abandoned; we just have to be more cautious, staying realistic and practical about how we spend the money we do have. However, the residents group motion later in this meeting to close down Your Fund Surrey, a knee jerk reaction just at the time when we need to be supporting our communities more than ever, is not the way to approach the situation. Of course we need to continue to be prudent in our budgeting, prioritising services to the most vulnerable children and families, but abandoning our residents and communities is not something this Conservative Group or this administration will ever do.

Madam Chair, we should be optimistic in our ability to overcome these challenges. We have a track record of facing up to issues and finding solutions.

As well as improvements in our services over the past few years - like Children's Services and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service - we also have a great deal of experience to call upon in facing adversity in a positive and proactive way, adapting, and overcoming for the benefit of the people who call Surrey their home.

We are not complacent, nor do we have our heads in the sand - we know there is much to do - but we are determined, and we are focused.

We have overcome severe, albeit different, financial challenges before, when we took a lead in protecting Surrey's residents through the Covid Pandemic.

As we stated last year when setting our budget, we've done the hard yards to base camp, ready to scale the mountain.

But the storms ahead have intensified, and we have no choice but to batten down the hatches, hold firm and ride out the coming challenges in the safest, most prudent, way.

Madam Chair, a very real challenge we've faced over the last month or so has been the issue of Home to School Transport assistance.

As many Members here will be all too aware, we faced a tricky combination of increased demand, shortages of drivers, alongside a well overdue change in policy, which led to a backlog affecting some families who were faced with real stress and anxiety in getting their children to school.

This has been a very complex, and difficult situation, and we have to hold our hands up on occasions like this to say that we have let some people down.

However, I know that the Home to School Transport Team have been working day and night alongside our Customer Services Team. to help as many families as they can.

Specific reimbursement has been offered where parents have had to make their own arrangements and applications have been fast tracked and resolved as quickly as possible.

Members, I know – as does our Cabinet Member in this area, and our staff – just how much this worry can affect families, some of whom are already facing challenges every single day.

I commit to you that we will learn lessons from the start of term, we have put mitigations in place, and we are doing everything that we should be doing now to get every child in Surrey to school on time.

Our new policy is the right one – I'm confident in that – as we work to ensure we support those who need us most.

And as we welcome more people into the county, for a variety of reasons, we will put the infrastructure and support in place so that our communities and our services can cope with increased demand and expectation.

Madam Chair, while challenges of varying scale and longevity come our way, Surrey County Council does not and will not shy away.

We don't put our heads in the sand or look to someone else to sort it out.

We are an organisation that puts in the hard yards, takes responsibility, and stands tall. We share a clear determination to make the lives of Surrey residents better.

When we get it wrong, we'll put it right.

When we get it right, we'll keep looking to get better.

Our staff, our leadership, our Members, and our partners, will keep working as one.

We're in this together, with shared values and a sense of duty that has been more evident than ever in recent weeks.

We have a serious job to do over the coming months to protect and support our residents so lets get our heads down and get on with it.

Now is not the time for the feint hearted; we are living through a significant global economic crisis that shows no sign of easing up any time soon.

Madam Chair, Members as Civic Leaders we should and must now more than ever, stand in front of our communities, beside our communities, and right behind our communities.

Thank you.

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