

Leader's Statement – County Council, 13 December 2022

Good morning Madam Chair, Members.

We come together for the final time of 2022, with the weather colder, Christmas just around the corner and many people looking forward to a festive break with friends and family.

It is an important time of year to take stock, reflect on the past year and look forward with a sense of renewed energy and fresh perspective to what 2023 can bring.

However, for some this can be an emotional time of year, reflecting on those who they can't be with, or feeling an increased sense of isolation and loneliness.

This year those feelings may well be exacerbated by the very real struggles we are facing as a society, and indeed as a global population.

We know that for many, Christmas brings pressure to spend money they don't have, and those financial pressures will be even more acute this year as inflation has eaten away at the money in people's pockets.

For some, this has pushed them into real financial hardship with serious implications for their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

It is that group of people that our efforts as a council has been directed towards this year.

By now you are all well aware of our ambition in Surrey – that no one is left behind – and that ambition has never been more relevant or important as it has been over the last few months.

We have really focused all our resource, all our skill and determination, all our power locally in making sure that those in real difficulty are supported in every way possible.

While I wish that it were not needed, I am very proud of the work we have undertaken to provide financial support, a listening ear, essential advice, warm places to be, companionship, and reassurance.

Much of that is offered by our dedicated staff, by you as local Members, and by our partners who we bring together and work closely with as part of the Surrey system.

We know that we can't offer a silver bullet and fix things in an instant, and that the support on offer is often a crutch to help people through a difficult time rather than a long-term solution. But we have worked tirelessly to step up and step in when really needed and I thank all our staff and partners for those efforts.

A proper solution must be achieved though. Our society is unequal, and it is not right that some people here don't see the benefits of all that Surrey has to offer.

We recognise this and are determined to address the root causes of that inequality.

That is what our No One Left Behind ambition is all about – getting the right structures and support in place to fundamentally tackle inequality, so that in the longer-term crisis support is not needed and everyone in Surrey can access the advantages and opportunities to give them a better quality of life.

We are not there yet – we don't pretend to be – but we have made some good progress over the last year.

Our Children's Service are out of intervention and recognised as making progress by Ofsted, in order to give children and young people the best start in life, whatever their background. But that progress remains fragile in some areas as we saw with the recent issues surrounding the Home to School Travel Assistance Programme, which reinforces the need to continually review our processes in terms of effectiveness, consistency, and fairness.

We have launched Surrey's Skills Plan, bringing together businesses and education providers to make sure Surrey people have the skills to get good jobs and power a strong local economy.

Surrey's Health and Wellbeing strategy is in place, and our public service reform agenda is making progress, already beginning to tackle the root causes of ill-health, with closer integration between the NHS, Public Health, and Social Care to achieve more joined up solutions.

Surrey Fire and Rescue Service has also improved and judged by HM Inspectorate to be 'much more effective and efficient at keeping people safe'.

We have progressed our green agenda, with Surrey County Council recognised as a leader in the sector in delivering our net-zero ambitions.

We are protecting and enhancing our natural environment – carrying out important conservation and restoration work, increasing biodiversity, planting trees, educating the next generation, working with farmers, other councils, and partners like the Surrey Wildlife Trust to make sure more people can access Surrey’s wonderful countryside and the benefits that go with it.

We’ve invested £13m in Active Travel Schemes – more cycle lanes and safer walking routes – with much more to come next year.

We’ve built two new, modern Children’s Homes.

We’ve delivered 280 additional school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

We’ve approved plans and will soon be building 368 modern homes for elderly people, enabling them to live independently for longer.

We’re the first council in the UK to tackle period poverty, in partnership with Binti.

40,000 free places at holiday camps for young people in need.

Millions in grants to local charities.

Nearly £3m invested to directly help people suffering multiple disadvantages through our Changing Futures programme.

Madam Chair, Members, there is much more to do, but we **are** changing futures – changing the future life chances and opportunities of people across Surrey, all through that driving ambition that no one here should be left behind.

Just last week I had the opportunity to hear some incredibly uplifting stories about the work of the wonderful people we have here at Surrey County Council, sharing that ambition, and dedicating their working lives to public service.

Surrey’s workforce is fundamental in making the county such a great place to live and work.

The services we deliver as an organisation are relied upon by very many people, from all walks of life, at all ages and in every corner of Surrey.

I'm incredibly proud of our staff, who work every day to serve the public and make people's lives better. We are bonded by that idea of public service, and however challenging our roles can be we are united in that mission.

That commitment to help those in need is shared across our communities in Surrey.

We are without doubt one of the most welcoming and compassionate places in the country and nothing demonstrates that more than the many stories of Ukrainians hosted here by generous residents. It is good that we have been able to top up the payments to those host families and indeed I must also pay tribute to the Surrey Fire and Rescue Team who have made a number of trips to Ukraine to provide equipment, training, and support. Real practical things that are making a genuine difference.

We have welcomed nearly 3,000 Ukrainian nationals fleeing Putin's horrific war, across 1,500 Surrey homes, the second highest in the 152 areas of the UK.

Whether it's the Covid pandemic, a war in Europe, or helping each other keep warm – our communities step up to the plate time after time.

And we are proud of being an active partner with them.

When we come together across Surrey, and within our towns and villages, we really can make things happen.

You see Members, that is one of our most important roles as an organisation – bringing people, groups, and organisations together, bringing the right skills and influence to the table, to learn from each other, to react quickly and to drive positive change.

As an upper tier local authority, we are in a position of privilege and great responsibility in Surrey, and we are clear in our determination to use that for the benefit of all.

That is never more important than in the face of severe systemic and societal challenges, as we have faced over recent years, and we continue to face as we go into a new year.

Inflation and the cost of living will undoubtedly continue to be a very real issue for us and our residents and business throughout 2023, with potentially longer-term impacts.

There remains global uncertainty around the war in Ukraine, supply chains, inflation, and wider geo-politics.

While our influence on those issues is limited to say the least, our influence at home is great, and we must continue to face these challenges head on, on behalf of Surrey.

We have local challenges too – ones that we have discussed in depth as a full council and through our robust Select Committee system.

As I have said many times, we do not shirk these challenges. We do not stick our head in the sand.

We redouble our efforts, we learn lessons and we grow stronger.

We will continue to work proactively and collaboratively with our District and Borough partners, on everything from waste management to community engagement, from refugees to warm hubs. I recognise that we need to do more together as local government and I will make every effort in 2023 to work even more closely with the Leaders of the District and Boroughs for the benefit of our residents.

We will continue to play a strong role within the Local Resilience Forum, keeping Surrey resilient and ready to step up in any emergency, like the recent water outages, with our teams out on the ground supporting vulnerable people.

We will continue to work hand in hand with our voluntary sector partners, with financial support to fantastic organisations like Community Foundation for Surrey and Citizens Advice Bureau, and valuable insight and collaboration with groups like Surrey Ethnic Minority Forum and Surrey Coalition of Disabled People. We can not deliver our ambitions without the help and support of the VCSE, and we must recognise the enormous contribution they make to the lives of our residents.

We will continue the progress we're making with health integration with our NHS partners, tackling health inequality, and joining up health and social care as best we can to relieve pressures on hospital beds and ensure people can be cared for at home.

On this issue in particular, the government is listening.

I have spoken with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and am working closely with Patricia Hewitt in her review of the Health and Social Care system, ensuring that not just Surrey's voice is heard, but also that of the whole of local government.

The Chancellor's Autumn Statement also demonstrated the government's understanding of local government issues, pausing the Adult Social Care reforms and offering additional funding that undoubtedly will at least help councils short term financial position.

Moving into the new year, it's essential that influence of local government is strengthened further and here in Surrey we will continue to work with government, and other councils, in finding solutions for those longer-term challenges we face as a sector.

I remain confident in the government's devolution agenda and continue to discuss with partners our collective ambition for a county deal for Surrey – giving local government more powers and autonomy to benefit the whole of Surrey.

As I said earlier, we have a huge responsibility as the County Council and it's something we take very seriously. With further devolution – that I expect would be welcomed by all Members here – we can really deliver faster on those ambitions of a stronger local economy, a greener future, thriving communities and reduced health inequality.

Madam Chair, yes, we have huge challenges to face, and a great responsibility to our people, but Surrey has so much going for it.

We must harness that and ensure everyone can benefit.

There is a great Surrey Story waiting to be unleashed and I'm confident that we can keep momentum in 2023 in making our county an even better place for everyone.

Members as we enter the Christmas break, and in the festive spirit, I want to thank you all for your constructive and productive dialogue over the last year.

We will continue to seek to work collaboratively, across the political spectrum as much as possible, and although there have been many challenges in 2022, your input and dedication to your local communities has been invaluable.

Addressing the cost of living, showing our support for Ukraine, dealing with the pandemic – we are strong when we work together towards those common goals.

I know we share a desire to serve the people of Surrey and work for what we genuinely think is best for the County.

Armed with the right funding, the right powers and genuine local flexibility, our great county of Surrey will continue to rise to the challenge and continue to deliver for our communities.

Merry Christmas.

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