

Leader's Statement – Annual County Council, 23 May 2023

Chair, Members, I'd like to welcome you to the Council's Annual General Meeting, an opportunity to reflect and refresh, following some key milestones and usher in the new financial and democratic year ahead.

Firstly, it would only be right for me to add a personal note of gratitude and appreciation to Helyn Clack.

Your term as Chair of this council has certainly been like no other – the death of the Queen, proclamations, the Coronation, steering the council through new environments and ways of working, grappling with new technology(!) – you've seen a lot in such a short time but your handling and execution of all your duties, throughout every challenge, has been exemplary.

Thank you, Helyn. You have a special place in the history of this council, you'll be missed as Chair but your efforts will always be appreciated.

And welcome Mr Chair, I hope that your time as Chair is a little more stable, but I'm sure that you will rise to every challenge as your predecessor has done.

I look forward to working with you, and good luck in keeping us all in check.

I'd also like to recognise the contribution of Nick Darby as he stands down as Leader of the Residents Associations and Independent Group, and as Leader of the opposition, here at Surrey.

As he himself said, we may not always agree on matters of policy and delivery, but I do recognise that we carry out our roles with a genuine desire to make Surrey a better place and to deliver for our residents and communities.

You have carried out that important role as opposition Leader with respect and constructive endeavour, and that is very much appreciated.

Catherine Powell – I know you will pick up the baton from Nick with equal determination and directness, and I look forward to working constructively together to ultimately benefit the lives of our residents, as we have done these past 2 years in Farnham.

I should also say a very well done to all those twin hatters here who retained their District or Borough seat in the recent elections, and also a mention to all those political campaigners from all parties who truly care about local democracy, giving people a say, and articulating the importance of councils and the work of Councillors across the board.

I look forward to working more closely with the administrations across Surrey's Districts and Boroughs, for the benefit of our residents – we are undoubtedly stronger when we work together.

Alongside the elections, was another great tradition and ceremony that ushered in change – the Coronation of King Charles the third.

Whatever one's thoughts on the monarchy, it was a spectacular event, and inspired millions of people to come together, celebrate their local community – their street, their

town, local Guides and Scouts groups, faith communities, all the things that make this such a great country.

Surrey again proved its community spirit, with bunting and street parties seen across the county, and that togetherness is something we should be very proud of.

Mr Chair, as the sun begins to shine a little more consistently, it's clear we're coming into the summer months, and putting behind us what has felt like a long, tough winter, which has left us with a legacy of issues.

The lasting and ongoing high rates of inflation continues to have an impact on the cost of living, and for many people across Surrey that is really taking its toll.

More people are in danger of being left behind – and warmer weather is not going to solve that problem.

The collective power of local government, other public bodies, the voluntary sector, and strong communities across Surrey has had a hugely positive impact in recent months.

Offering advice, companionship, warmth, financial support, and practical help that has benefited the lives of very many people in Surrey.

I want to reassure you, Members, and all those people who rely on us, that we will stay mobilised, continue that work and continue to be there for those who need us most.

But rising costs is not limited to household budgets – inflation has had a huge impact on our own budget and is ultimately making everything we do more expensive.

While our transformation work over the last few years has made us more resilient to these pressures, on a practical delivery level we have to be clear - in many areas like construction and maintenance it means our budget does not go as far.

There are recruitment challenges, supply chain issues and particular areas of hyper-inflation that impacts service delivery.

When you combine that inflationary pressure with the other obvious legacy of these past winter months – the persistent rainfall and repeated freeze and thaw cycles that have severely impacted our highways – we are facing a perfect storm in particular on the quality of our roads.

This is not just a Surrey phenomenon, it is nationwide. But it's a problem we have to grip.

It is now clear that the usual stepping up of our peak response will not suffice this year.

We've trebled the teams out working on the highway and the number defects being repaired is at record highs.

But we recognise that the pressure on our road system and highways teams is too great, and our highways are not in a good state.

Surrey's roads are essential to business and trade – not just locally but for the economy of the United Kingdom, with over 240km of key Strategic Road Network

which acts as a key route for national and international markets with our proximity to London and major airports.

Our roads carry 35% more traffic than the national average.

Our residents rely on safe and open roads to access education, employment, health appointments, leisure activity, and simply to see family and friends.

I more than share residents' frustrations with potholes – I drive on our roads regularly – and I know how infuriating it is to see holes appear, defects get worse, and patched repairs fail.

This year the combination of inflationary impacts and intense pothole-causing weather - alongside the usual problems of heavy use, and shoddy 'emergency' works by utility companies - have made the situation far, far worse than normal.

To that end, I can tell you all now that we have mobilised the organisation around addressing these pressures setting up core Task and Finish Groups and a rapid response system to ensure that these most pressing issues for residents can be and will be addressed. I encourage all Members in this chamber to email me with a list of outstanding issues in their divisions so we can feed them into the work of the Cabinet and officer groups.

But we must be clear – there is not always a simple and timely solution.

As Members are aware this council has topped up the money we receive from government from the roads funding formula by tens of millions over the past 4 years and I have already pledged that we will continue to do so during the rest of this council

cycle. Rest assured you will see that additional funding front and centre of the MTFS as we work through next year's budget setting.

However, we have to be realistic with residents though, that even if money were no object, there are very practical restrictions on our ability to fix every road.

Closing great sections of our highways all at once would bring the county to a standstill and seriously harm people's ability to move around, not to mention the impact on trade and business.

Our contractors too, have a finite number of skilled workers and machinery to put to work at any one time.

Our powers over utility companies digging up our roads and patching up poorly, are too limited.

However, we are determined not to look for excuses or to carry on as normal when the problems are clear.

We will remove all the obstacles within our power – and lobby alongside other authorities for further intervention from government particularly for more capital funding and greater powers to control utility companies. We will also demand stronger powers to stop people parking across our pavements which causes both danger and inconvenience to pedestrians, as I saw extensively in Stanwell when I visited the Leader of the Labour groups division last Friday. Thank you Robert for showing me around and highlighting the particular issues your residents have raised, including the potential impact of the extension of ULEZ.

We will increase resource where it will prove practical and effective.

We will examine every intervention we can make.

We will be transparent and clear with residents.

We will hold ourselves to account.

This year is unprecedented, but we are determined to grip this, and I will ensure that all Members are regularly updated on progress so that we can reassure residents and keep this county moving.

The other area of real focus for these Task and Finish Groups will be around our duty to our natural environment – namely tree preservation, nature recovery and biodiversity, drainage, and preventing localised flooding.

Again, external forces have combined to devastating impact in this area.

Not only has the weather increased water levels and pressure on our drainage systems, but also increased instances of disease like Ash Dieback, that is causing more trees across Surrey to become unsafe. We cannot compromise on public safety and if a tree has Ash Dieback, it can become weak and fall, and we have to ensure people can enjoy our green spaces safely.

Whilst our increased work to remove those trees is essential to keep the public and surrounding areas safe, we must also be very clearly focused on our mission around increasing biodiversity, preserving wildlife, and enhancing our green spaces.

In urban areas too, there may be times we have to remove trees for other practical and safety reasons – sight lines, access, high street improvements for example – but that public realm greenery must always be replaced and enhanced wherever possible.

We must be clear with residents that where we have to remove trees, we do so carefully, and we plant many more as well as improving the condition and biodiversity

of our existing woodlands. We commit to minimising tree felling where at all possible, ensuring the best mitigations are put in place, working with arboriculture experts and ecological groups, and keeping local partners and residents properly informed where work has to happen.

It should be noted that we remain committed – and on track – with our ambition to plant 1.2 million trees in Surrey by 2030.

Indeed, we and our partners have planted nearly 400,000 over the last three years.

We are the most wooded county in the country and that is an accolade we are very proud of and want to keep.

I also recognise that maintenance of verges is an area that needs further review. We want to expand across the county the blue heart scheme that has been so successful in Mole Valley and Tandridge by encouraging residents to enjoy the benefits of biodiversity with wild flowers flourishing along the sides of our roads but of course not where that compromises safety.

Equally, we appreciate that letting grass grow too long in our more urban areas can cause other issues when it is cut and free to blow around, potentially blocking drains. We are looking to increase the number of cuts particularly in the urban areas whilst supporting biodiversity wherever appropriate.

We will also put more resource in to collecting signage which often looks as if it has been abandoned when road works are complete.

So, in all these areas we have mobilised specific Task and Finish groups to review our existing policies over the next 4 weeks and where appropriate to recommend

amendments for the Select Committee to review so that everything we can possibly do in this area, will be progressed to improve the experience of residents.

We know the power of our wonderful green spaces and countryside – benefiting people’s mental and physical health, and we are constantly looking at ways to not only enhance those spaces but also support people to access to them.

We are blessed here in Surrey, and we will do everything we can to ensure everyone can reap the benefits of living in such a place.

Mr Chair, as Members we hear from residents all the time, about issues that mean a lot to them, frustrations that sometimes we can fix, and sometimes are beyond our control as a council.

Over recent years this council has become more responsive, and dynamic in dealing with those issues, working with partners to make changes where needed, and lobbying when powers to make a difference lie elsewhere. But I will always put my hands up when we have failed to meet our residents’ reasonable expectations. There comes a point when external factors grow to such a level that we need to re-focus, mobilise more resource, and grip them as high priority issues.

We led the way during Covid in that sense and are playing a key role in addressing cost of living pressures. And of course, we do need to remember that 45% of our 1 billion budget is committed to supporting our elderly and vulnerable residents, and a further 250 million we need to help those children who have additional needs or who are dependent on us as a county authority to look after them. That’s 700m of residents Council Tax that is needed to discharge our statutory duties.

We have the expertise – and more importantly, the will – to solve these problems and improve the situation for our residents.

Our residents know their places and communities often better than we do, their priorities need to be our priorities and the towns and villages initiative will ensure that local government and the local health system in partnership with the voluntary and charitable sector, can and will genuinely focus on responding to the needs of the individual resident and their local community.

And where action needs to be taken, we must take them with us.

We know we don't always get it right, and we know that it's impossible to please everyone.

But without that true understanding and collaboration, we cannot properly deliver on our residents' priorities.

Members when issues arise that are negatively impacting our residents' lives, we will work constructively and responsively to fix things.

That is our mindset as an organisation – ambitious, but pragmatic and practical – with a shared sense of purpose to make Surrey a better place. That is why we are elected and that is what we must all strive to achieve day in day out.

Thank you.