

Leader's Statement – County Council, 11 July 2023

Mr Chair, Members, welcome to the final Council meeting before our summer recess.

While the meetings might be pausing, the sun might be shining and the tennis is on the television, our work goes on, and the work of Council staff goes on - to improve the lives of the people of Surrey.

I want to touch on that work today – that intense effort that goes on day-in, day-out from this organisation.

As we've demonstrated over the last few years, Surrey is an ambitious, forward-looking Council.

We are constantly looking to innovative new ideas, new ways to deliver better outcomes for our residents, new technology, new opportunities, new ways to collaborate.

It is only with this mentality that we can deal with the serious and sustained pressure that local government is under.

As we saw coming many months ago, huge challenges are upon us.

In many ways these challenges are greater and more varied than we expected, and that has meant that service delivery has not always kept up pace with the changing landscape and demands.

But our work, our vision and taking our responsibilities seriously, has enabled us to stand strong.

We have given ourselves the room to adapt, and work in such a way that helps us overcome these challenges.

The impacts of climate change that we are already experiencing, the war in Ukraine, rapid inflation, the cost-of-living pressures, increasing demand on services, the after-effects of the Covid pandemic – all of these issues, all coming together at the same time are contributing to noticeable and very visible pressures on services.

From our roads to our classrooms, from our countryside to our high streets. Our society is changing and adapting.

We have to adapt too.

It's not easy, it's not straightforward, and the solutions are not always within reach.

But as a Council, we are focussed.

We are committed.

We are working hard.

I personally, as Leader of this council, I am fully focussed on the priorities our residents want us to address.

One of these most important priorities is supporting children and young people who really need extra support as they grow and learn – particularly those young people with additional needs and disabilities.

For parents and carers, this is all-consuming.

As a parent myself I get it.

There is nothing more important than your child's wellbeing, and I completely accept how passionate and frustrated parents and carers can be with the system when they are seeking advice and support.

Applications from parents for Education, Health and Care Plans – EHCPs – are through the roof.

This is a symptom of many factors, and it is not unique to Surrey.

The system around EHCPs is frankly not good enough – it's a national issue, and a very complex issue – but here in Surrey we take our responsibilities very seriously and I am personally committed to improving the situation.

We need to get the assessment process moving quicker, clear any backlog and ensure parents have the confidence that their child will be supported in the most appropriate way.

In many instances, this will not require an EHCP, and for those children the current support in school has to be there, and it has to be of a high standard.

We are creating more SEN places in both mainstream and special schools across the county, hundreds more already delivered over the last couple of years and hundreds more to come, with committed funding and sites identified.

We are also investing in additional staff to tackle this.

It is not always about throwing more money at the problem – in professions like Educational Psychologists, who are needed to undertake assessments, there are simply not enough qualified in the country – but where we can, we will do everything to get these professionals to Surrey, to help us improve the system for parents.

It is not a simple situation to fix – there are many different layers, different stakeholders, different funding streams and solutions.

But we're lobbying government around policy and funding, we're working with schools to provide the right support and communication with parents, and we're constantly reviewing and adapting our own processes to make the system work better.

I accept it's not good enough right now, but please believe me when I tell you that we're totally focussed on making it better in Surrey, and I will continue to engage with officers, parents, and carers as we do that.

Another area where we have undertaken a rapid review and put in place a clear plan for improvement is around Surrey's street scene – our roads, highways verges, and localised flooding – as well as our management of tree felling and planting.

These are things that our residents understandably care deeply about.

We want people to have pride in their neighbourhoods - where they live, our environment, and the roads they travel on every day.

We want people to be able to move around our towns and our county safely and comfortably.

Over the last couple of months Officers from our Highways and Countryside Teams, along with Cabinet Members and Senior Leaders in the organisation have worked tirelessly on these issues, to review service delivery, policies, communications, and put in place both immediate actions where possible and a series of recommendations that will result in noticeable improvements for residents.

Hundreds of discarded signs have been cleared, pothole backlogs have been dramatically reduced, more grass cuts have been added to the schedule and a surge in additional line painting is underway.

We've identified a wide range of further costed interventions, which will be scrutinised and taken forward through the proper channels.

Again, many external factors have seriously impacted these areas and how quickly and severely issues arise.

The weather has been a perfect storm for pothole development – a record breaking hot summer followed by a very wet and cold winter means more cracks, more water, more ice that combines to break up our road surfaces.

It has also played its part in the maintenance of grass verges – something that this Council has only just taken over management of - with a wet and sunny spring leading to rapid growth of long grass. Unfortunately, we are still having to work through which areas of verges and green spaces are the responsibility of the County Council and which remain with the District and Boroughs as this has become blurred over the years but that will be resolved over the coming weeks.

While we welcome the biodiversity of letting our verges rewild, this has to be balanced by giving road users the ability to see across junctions, as well as the attractiveness of our highways.

Those verges that have been designated appropriate for rewilding should now be clearly signposted, helping residents understand the benefits for their local area.

While many other grass verges are now in the process of receiving their second cut of the summer.

The impact of the weather on our most visible assets is compounded by the huge increase in cost when it comes to maintenance.

Inflation has impacted all aspects of all of our lives – everything is costing more and the things we deliver in local government are no different.

Over the last year, the money we have simply buys less.

But money is not the only answer.

We have reviewed every element of service delivery to make sure we are adapting to the challenges we face, to deliver the best possible service for our residents.

That's our mindset as a Council.

We are ferociously committed to making Surrey the best place it can be.

Whether that's looking after children who need extra help, or making sure our towns and villages are places to be proud of.

We are ambitious, we are creative, we are dedicated to public service.

In local government, challenges come at us all the time, from many different angles and in many different guises.

At the LGA Conference last week I talked to many Councillors and Senior Officers from across the country – from counties, Districts, London Boroughs, Unitaries, Mayoral Combined Authorities.

We all face huge challenges, with new ones emerging.

It is how you approach those challenges that makes the difference.

When you have the responsibility for delivering vital services, on the frontline, you cannot shirk that responsibility. You cannot be complacent, or half-hearted.

You must be prepared and be prepared to act.

Five years ago, many of the challenges this council faced had not been fundamentally and robustly addressed.

We recognised that and transformed our mindset, our culture and how we deliver.

Thanks to that transformation, we've come a long way and made great strides as an organisation.

We are seen as leaders in many areas of our work – our finances are robust thanks to sound judgement and leadership, we are delivering major infrastructure improvements, we're more actively supporting local community projects, we're modernising care and building new children's homes.

We have delivered and we will continue to deliver.

But challenges keep coming, and we never rest.

There is no let-up in local government, there is no time to waste when you're here to serve the public.

We can, and must improve, in everything we do.

When problems emerge, we interrogate why and relentlessly work to fix them.

When things don't go right, we listen, learn, and adapt.

This is a Council full of great people, doing some great work every single day trying to make sure Surrey is the best place it can be, for everyone.

And that no one is left behind.

I know that at times we fall short of that ambition but what is important is that we recognise where those shortcomings exist, that it strengthens our resolve and that we put in place a robust plan to get it right first time, every time.

This is not a Council that puts its head in the sand. It listens, it looks elsewhere for good practice, and it acts.

Indeed, when new opportunities arise, we try to grasp them with both hands. I am hopeful that we will be able to progress a devolution deal for Surrey over the coming months – giving us more control over our adult education budget, which is a key aspect of addressing our skills shortage across the county, more levers to support our businesses that are the life blood of our local economy, as well recognising this historic county of Surrey as the footprint for further devolved powers and funding from this and future governments.

This plays strongly in to our towns and villages initiative as the basis of delivery of improved health outcomes and opportunities along with our partners in health, the third sector, the police, and of course our community groups.

But Members, I also want to pay tribute to the fantastic things we've seen delivered recently by Your Fund Surrey.

We launched that fund a couple of years ago now, and it was always going to take a period of time for projects to come to life.

Now we're really seeing that wonderful scheme truly delivering for our residents.

Claygate Community Pool – opened with the help of an Olympic swimmer no less – will make swimming more accessible to a whole new generation of people, improving health and wellbeing in Claygate for years to come.

Leatherhead and Dorking Gymnastics Club has undergone a huge upgrade with a new gymnasium and sensory room, catering specifically to individuals with disabilities. Again, opening up a whole new world of opportunity to a new group of people.

A brand new pavilion is now open for Pirbright Community Amateur Sports, giving that community a new beating heart with a new environmentally sustainable building with new changing rooms, toilets, kitchen, and a community café.

A new community shop and café in Normandy, which is nearly complete, will bring people together to shop locally, sustainably, and build new friendships and connections that will benefit that community long into the future.

Big new applications are being approved all the time and Members are putting to really good use their £50k fund, boosting culture, sport, environment, wellbeing, health, and inclusivity across the county.

Your Fund Surrey is delivering exactly what we set out to deliver – stronger, thriving communities throughout Surrey.

Mr Chair, I believe this Council is unrecognisable from the Council it was several years ago – it had to be.

As the world changes, we must change with it.

As the challenges grow, we must grow to tackle them.

If the work gets harder, we must work harder to improve.

It is my responsibility as the Leader of this Council, to set the tone of the organisation and it's a responsibility I don't shirk from. I am clear that we must continue to drive harder and faster our transformation agenda and improve the quality of the services we deliver to the benefit of our residents.

We are not and will not be complacent.

We will never stand still.

Members, as we formally part ways over the summer, I hope we can reflect on all of this work that continues throughout the Council.

The shared endeavour between Members and Officers.

The collaboration with our partners, with our residents, and with our communities.

We are all striving for the same goals – for the benefit of Surrey – a strong and vibrant local economy, better health outcomes, equal opportunity, a greener and sustainable future and above all for everyone in this great county to have the support from families and their communities as they start out in life, through their education, their working lives, and as they glide in to retirement.

This Council must be there every step of the way.

And we will be.

Thank you.