

Leader's Statement – County Council, 10 October 2023

Mr Chairman, Members, welcome to October's full Council meeting – the first since the summer months, with the new academic year well underway and the hubris of the party conferences behind us, at least for the time being.

I want to talk through some of the work that has been continuing over what has been an extremely busy summer for us, but first let me touch on what we've just watched.

I can see that many of you were touched by our new fostering recruitment video – as indeed was I.

A couple of weeks ago I attended a launch event for this video campaign, alongside foster carers and young people who had experienced the benefit of fostering in their own lives.

The message was clear – foster families have a huge positive impact on the lives and life chances of children in care, but we need more.

With over a thousand Surrey children in care, and under 400 foster families, it is clear that we do not have enough foster carers in the county.

At the event, I was honoured to meet a young lady called Fiaa.

Her story is truly inspirational and with our help through the foster care system, Fiaa is now a successful music artist and even due to appear on TV's Children in Need later this year.

I am proud that we have been able to support Fiaa but, the honest truth is, we need to be doing more. And we can all help.

We must explain the benefits of fostering to our residents and indeed the pleasure that families tell me they get from seeing children in their care flourish. As you heard in the video – it could be any of us.

So please take that message out into your communities, speak openly and passionately about fostering, encourage people to consider stepping forward – we know that word of mouth is our most successful recruitment tool.

The fostering team can provide you with any information and marketing material you might need and you can also share their content on social media.

So, what else has happened. Well, I'm delighted that we've expanded our revolutionary on-demand bus service, Surrey Connect, from Mole Valley now across Tandridge, Farnham, Cranleigh, West Guildford, and Longcross – putting the infrastructure and solutions in place to help people get around Surrey in a more environmentally friendly way. We will continue that rollout across the county in 2024.

To help people even further with public transport, we've introduced a new half price travelcard for young people, and secured funding from government to improve and protect bus services across Surrey – adding to already committed funding to make our buses cleaner, more reliable and easier to use.

I am absolutely committed to getting sustainable travel infrastructure in place, instead of resorting to punitive fines or ultimatums, which seems to be the way of the Mayor of London.

More community projects have been funded, opened and – quite literally, launched - through Your Fund Surrey, including the Kingston Maritime Volunteer Service boat on the Thames, keeping people safe and reassured on the river.

Kenyngton Manor Park's new playground will be opening soon, nearly £100,000 agreed for a disability challengers playground in Stoke Park in Guildford, and a small fund grant for Tandridge Access Group for new mobility gates in Limpsfield, with more applications coming into the Your Fund Surrey team all the time.

A major development for Surrey's local economy came in August, when the government announced that Upper Tier Councils will take on the functions and responsibilities of Local Enterprise Partnerships – something we've called for and have set about preparing for.

We are committed to delivering a strong and sustainable local economy, and now this Council will have responsibility for representing our businesses, strategic economic planning, and delivering government programmes to boost the regional economy.

Both of our LEPs - Coast to Capital and Enterprise M3 - have accomplished a lot of good work since being established in 2011.

At the start of September, as an early part of this process, we took on responsibility for the Careers Hub service. We're delighted to be working with all the county's secondary schools, special schools, and colleges with the aim of ensuring every young person can find their best next step.

The service will formally launch at the first ever Festival of Skills on November 23rd at Sandown Racecourse.

This work is key to growing a sustainable economy, fit for the future, here in Surrey.

Mr Chairman, last month we received the latest inspection report from His Majesty's Inspectorate into our Fire and Rescue Service.

While I'm pleased to see inspectors recognise that we are heading in the right direction and note a marked improvement in our culture, there are other elements that need further progress.

I know that progress is already being made, and we are in good hands with our Chief Fire Officer Dan Quin committed to that work. We will meet that challenge – like all we face – head on.

Our action plan is going back to inspectors this week, and our Service Improvement Plan will be shared with Select Committee in December.

In the meantime, our fire service officers will continue to work 24/7 to protect the people of Surrey.

However, further challenge has come to local government – and in particular in areas of Surrey – over recent months, with severe financial pressure bearing down on some of our District and Borough councils.

As the County Council, we are very much part of an important ecosystem of public and community organisations across the county, that work together for the benefit of Surrey.

If one or more of those organisations struggle, it impacts us all and we must work together as far as possible to protect and serve the people of Surrey.

However, Members, I must be very clear – while the County Council has a solid and robust budget position, thanks to many years of hard work and bold thinking, we face pressures like everywhere else.

We cannot, and will not, simply pick up the funding or running of services for which we have no responsibility, resources or capability.

We cannot, I'm afraid, be the white knight across the county, riding to the rescue if and when funding for community services delivered by others is withdrawn or reduced.

We must be a responsible organisation, and that often means tough conversations, and difficult decisions, but we must deliver the services we're here to deliver, and protect our own long-term future, for the benefit of Surrey residents.

Mr Chairman, as I've said, this Council's finances are in good shape.

Our transformation over the last few years has given us a solid base and is helping us weather the storms encircling local government and indeed the global economy.

But things are not easy.

Everything we do has become more expensive. Demand for services is increasing. Other organisations are struggling. Public finances are stretched.

We must face up to these challenges, as we have done consistently, to set balanced budgets and fulfil our responsibilities.

But we cannot keep approaching these challenges in the same way.

We cannot salami slice services. We cannot simply cut costs. We cannot just be reactive.

We cannot stop delivering. We cannot stand still.

We must draw on the innovative thinking, the ambition, the energy that has led our successful transformation programmes and look to the future with a renewed sense of purpose.

We must act now to prepare for upcoming challenges. We must use our relative position of strength to drive a robust programme of change and transformation, building a different kind of Council, an organisation fit for the ever-changing future.

I genuinely believe that as a Council we are moving forwards, but those drivers of sustained progress need to be regularly reviewed and refreshed.

So, over the summer I have been working closely with our Chief Executive and the team to take a fresh look at how we are delivering our four key areas of –

- Building a sustainable economy
- Improving health outcomes
- Delivering a greener future and
- Creating thriving communities

That work has involved a root and branch review of all the delivery and improvement programmes and projects that are happening every day here at Surrey County Council.

What is clear, is that some things have to stop, at least in the short term, whilst we focus on those big programmes that will move the dial on delivery of improved services and outcomes for our residents. And we need to build a sustainable budget for the next five years on the working assumption that no government is going to have the wherewithal to throw billions of more funding at local government.

We would be naïve in the extreme if we were to sit back and wait to be bailed out. We need to take responsibility of how we use the public's money effectively and efficiently and we will.

We will look at the way support services are organised and delivered within the County Council.

We will accelerate projects that will deliver a truly integrated Health and Social Care System, including quicker and safer discharge from hospital.

We will continue to look to strengthen our relationship with the District and Boroughs at a time when they are facing budget pressures resulting in the reduction in spend on non-statutory services.

We will engage with the voluntary and charitable sector and be open and honest about who this Council will be working with to deliver our collective ambition that no one is left behind.

We will actively engage with key stakeholders and organisations that can help us build on a more preventative and early intervention approach to Children Services.

We will create a new customer service offering, putting residents front and centre so they can more easily flag up issues of concern and have those issues resolved more speedily.

We will continue to actively engage with residents as we drive forward our transformation plans seeking feedback and input wherever appropriate.

Members, if we are to be a Council that really delivers on its ambitions for our residents, it is imperative that we continually assess how we are doing things, that we look outside this organisation for examples of best practice, that we continue to embed a culture across the whole organisation of pride in delivering excellent quality services.

The foundations of change were laid 5 years ago, starting with our finances, and it was that willingness to adapt and refocus that helped us through the pandemic. But the world looks different now with different ambitions, different concerns, and different ways of working and we need to reinforce and re invoke that “can do” spirit.

We have come out of that dark tunnel of Covid into the sunlight and we must look to the future with optimism but also increase the pace at which we drive excellent practice in a robust, deliverable and sustainable way across all directorates.

We can do this.

We will do this.

We are doing this.

I don't want this Council having to react to crisis, but to be strong enough to ward off that crisis before it comes.

We should have the vision and the insights to see problems of the future and work to prevent them. We should understand the evolving world, including the opportunities it brings, and ensure we are best equipped to embrace it.

This is what our residents would expect. They are at the heart of all that we do, and we must ensure that we can deliver the best public service for them, now and long into the future.

Our children and young people will need us throughout their lives – let's make sure we're there to deliver from cradle to grave.

So, Mr Chairman, it's been a busy summer, and we are in the midst of a busy autumn, and I'm afraid to say winter is fast approaching.

We know that winter brings with it increasing concern for residents, as the heating has to go back on, the nights draw in and the sense of increasing cost pressures grow for people as they go about their lives.

Last year we published and distributed a directory of support to our residents, highlighting the help available as energy bills escalated and the cost of living rocketed.

We know that people found it useful, and this year we have compiled an expanded version, highlighting an even broader range of useful Council – and partner services.

It will be making its way through letterboxes early next month, and I sincerely hope residents – particularly those who don't access our digital channels – find it a useful guide to help them in their everyday lives.

We are all here in this room with the common purpose of supporting our residents and making their lives better.

As the seasons change, let us all keep working together to make sure we deliver that, and continue working towards that ultimate ambition that no one in Surrey is left behind.

Thank you.

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