

Leader's Statement – County Council (Budget Meeting), 6 February 2024

Mr Chairman, Members, welcome to the first full Council meeting of 2024, and with it one of the most important items we discuss all year – our budget for the forthcoming 12 months, and beyond.

As I've said many times here, we take our duty and responsibility to the people of Surrey extremely seriously.

We are making decisions with our residents' council tax – a significant proportion of people's household budgets – and with it, providing services they rely on every day, to improve their lives and stay safe and well.

Ensuring we do that responsibly - setting a balanced budget, focusing on the right priorities, ensuring our foundations are strong for the future and our services are sustainable – is one of the most important duties we have.

As I will set out in a moment, this budget does just that.

Let's not pretend otherwise, times for local government at the moment are tough.

And there is no doubt that things are going to get tougher.

Although inflation is slowing and interest rates are plateauing, costs have soared across the sector – in many areas well beyond the rate of that high inflation we've seen over the last 12 months.

Our costs are rising much faster than our income, and it would be impossible and irresponsible to attempt to pass all of that on to our council taxpayers.

I very much welcome the recent, additional allocation of extra funding to councils through the Local Government Funding Settlement – something that I personally lobbied hard to achieve. That additional money has now been confirmed at £11million pounds and I would like to personally thank Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove and the Prime Minister for their help and support in securing that funding.

It will certainly help, and we will direct that extra funding to prevention measures and support for children with additional needs and disabilities.

But it is not enough, and we will continue to work constructively with the government to push for more sustainable, longer-term funding certainty for local government and where appropriate reform to outdated legislation.

As well as cost, demand is also increasing at an alarming rate, and with growing complexity.

In many areas of Adult Social Care and Children's Care, our provision of services is non-negotiable, and we must support people to live their lives safely and with the right level of care and support.

More than 70% of our entire budget is spent on these areas – more than £2m every single day spent on what is a relatively small proportion of our population, but it is those people who need us most.

And we will not leave those people behind.

But we know that our more visible services, like road maintenance, libraries, countryside management, and community recycling centres, are the ones experienced by the most people.

Lots of what we do – particularly across Surrey Fire & Rescue Service, Trading Standards, and Environmental Services – is about keeping people safe and preventing or responding to serious incidents.

We will not ignore these responsibilities either.

In fact, we're increasing investment in our Highways and Environment Services, following a task and finish review undertaken by Cabinet earlier in the year that identified areas that would benefit residents the most.

That will see service improvements including refreshing road lines, additional investment in gully cleaning, area stewards, and grass-cutting – things we know matter to our local communities, increasing pride in where we live, as well as safety on our roads.

This budget also includes significant investment in supporting and enhancing bus services across Surrey, with the introduction of a half price travel scheme and expansion of our digital demand-responsive buses, which have proved hugely popular, reducing car journeys, making travel easier and improving access to essential services, particularly in our more rural communities.

Our libraries are some of the most visited in the country and improving all the time, with Super Access enabling more people to use them, for more hours of the day.

We are investing in our countryside sites to increase access to that natural asset we're so lucky to have.

We are managing the county's waste responsibly, with comparatively high levels of recycling and all our CRCs providing a vital service for residents.

We are investing as much as we can afford in maintaining and improving Surrey's 3000 miles of roads and pavements, street lighting, and bridges.

Our Fire and Rescue Service are working night and day to keep people safe, investing in the latest technology and equipment to respond to emergencies effectively, and working alongside residents and businesses to improve safety and stop those emergencies happening in the first place.

We are actively supporting arts and culture across Surrey, recognising the huge benefits of the creative sector on people's lives.

We are registering births, deaths, and marriages across the county.

We're responsible for over a billion pounds a year using that money to have a positive impact on each and every resident, from cradle to grave and to make Surrey a better place.

Mr Chairman, our capital investment programme is focused on getting the right building blocks in place to ensure demand can be met more effectively and sustainably in the years ahead:

More modern forms of care accommodation and supported independent living schemes will enable elderly people and those with additional needs to live within the community for longer, increasing resilience and reducing reliance on expensive and often less effective institutionalised residential care.

Our programme of building more modern children's homes, to give those young people in care the best possible start in life, increasing their life chances, and health and

wellbeing, so they are better able to forge a successful, stable, more independent life when leaving the care system.

Building better schools – providing the best possible learning environment, with modern settings and technology, enabling young people in Surrey to develop the life skills that will help them flourish in the world.

Funding community-led projects through Your Fund Surrey, which benefit local communities by increasing participation, connections and mutual support – helping communities help themselves to thrive.

Investing in Surrey's transport infrastructure and town centres, to enable easier, cleaner travel around our county, reducing emissions, improving air quality, health and wellbeing, and fundamentally tackling the climate emergency.

This investment speaks to our forward-thinking – investing in the foundations of a modern preventative service, fit for the future.

If local government is to survive, and indeed thrive, we must think differently again.

We have to re-energise our transformation work – a mindset that has been hugely effective for us over the last few years.

Looking to the future.

Embracing change.

Applying best practice.

Thinking boldly and innovatively.

Delivering our services in different ways, to deliver better outcomes more efficiently.

We're already progressing with several transformation projects to do just that.

From our Fire & Rescue Service Improvement Plan, to redesigning how we provide Children's Health and Care services alongside Surrey Heartlands.

From mental health to environment, infrastructure and growth.

We are redesigning how we provide services, how we organise ourselves, how we operate.

We are setting out a renewed focus on customer service, ensuring our residents can engage with the council positively, understand the services they need, and access them more seamlessly.

We will understand our communities better, through improved insights and intelligence, more consistent methods of engagement, all leading to more effective policy making.

This is a continuation of the journey we have been navigating for the last six years, something we have proved that we can do even in the face of huge challenge - and do it effectively.

This budget presented today outlines in stark terms the challenges we face, but also how we intend to tackle them.

By strengthening our foundations, ensuring we are fit for the future and that our residents and our communities are supported to thrive.

I note a late attempted amendment from the opposition, following months of engagement with at least 25 separate opportunities, via Scrutiny Committees and meetings, to input constructively into our budget setting process. Mr Chairman, it is bewildering that this submission comes one working day before this meeting.

I will speak to the amendment in due course, but I will make the same point as I have done for the last 5 budget meetings, that any suggestions or recommendations need to be discussed with the Executive Directors and taken through the Select Committee process for their comment and support.

I will also be speaking against the further resident tax they are proposing. We have many philanthropic residents in this county that willingly give of their time and money, and it is not for this council to tell them what to do.

This is a solid, balanced budget, in the face of unprecedented pressure and challenge faced by local government in this country.

But Surrey leads the way in responsible financial management.

So, Mr Chairman, we look ahead.

To a year that promises more challenges, more opportunities, more uncertainty, but the potential for fresh starts and new ideas.

We will no doubt see a general election in 2024 and will look forward to continuing to work constructively with any new government that is formed, especially as we forge ahead with a County Deal and the opportunities that can bring.

Here in Surrey, we do not simply ask for handouts, or look to Westminster to solve our problems.

We roll up our sleeves and work hard to develop the right solutions for our communities, and in turn we are part of the solution for the country.

We are determined to keep moving forward, to both get the basics right now – and right first time – and also to have the foresight to invest in Surrey’s future, making decisions now that will benefit future generations.

That is what this budget will do, and I am proud to present it today for approval.

But I must also recognise that this will be our Chief Executive Joanna Killian’s final council meeting here at Surrey, as she departs to take on the challenge of leading on behalf of the entire sector, as Chief Executive of the Local Government Association.

Joanna arrived at Surrey six years ago, when the council was very different to the organisation it is today.

Not only were our headquarters located outside the county, in an old, not-fit-for-purpose building, but our financial position was close to the brink, many of our services were weak, the council was bloated and ultimately inefficient.

With the wider circumstances at the time, and over the years that followed – political instability, uncertainty, ever-tightening public finances, a global pandemic and lockdowns – it is clear to see the organisation we have become under Joanna’s guidance.

The fact that the LGA looked to Surrey for its new Chief Executive – and, I am told, had to use its considerable powers of persuasion – demonstrates the high regard in which this council is now held by the wider sector.

We are industry-leading, a bastion of best practice, fuelled by high ambition and forward thinking.

That is in no small part down to Joanna’s expert leadership – alongside her top team and the many dedicated officers we have in the organisation.

I have no doubt whatsoever that the LGA will be greatly improved for Joanna's presence, but I'm also confident that the trusted, stable, ambitious organisation she leaves behind will continue to go from strength to strength, thanks largely down to the solid foundations we now have in place.

We say goodbye to Joanna with a heavy heart, but also immense pride and gratitude.

I personally will miss her wise and constructive counsel, and I know I speak for all of us here when I say we will also miss you as a true friend and companion. I would ask all Members to show their appreciation for all that she has done these past 6 years for this council and for the residents of Surrey.

While we recruit a permanent successor to Joanna – someone with a strong track record, and with energy and ambition to match our own – we plan for Leigh Whitehouse to take on the Chief Executive role on an interim basis.

We know Leigh well, and I am certainly confident that he will pick up the baton and continue the momentum we currently have.

And, in turn, the ever-capable Anna D'Alessandro will take on the duties of the 151 Officer while Leigh is stepping up.

We know what we need to do.

We will stick to that plan.

And we will do it.

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