

Leader's Statement – County Council, 19 March 2024

Good morning Mr Chairman, Members.

Today's Council Meeting is our first meeting without Joanna Killian leading the organisation as Chief Executive, and the next time we come together will be to ratify the appointment of a new permanent Chief Executive.

It is our final meeting of the financial year 2023/24, with the 2024/25 budget agreed at our last meeting and planning for 2025/26 budget setting already underway, and with the Council AGM to come in May.

We have this week officially entered the pre-election period – not relating to elections here for the County Council, but for many of our District & Borough partners, and the Police & Crime Commissioner in Surrey.

We know there will be a general election at some point in the coming months.

As I will touch on a bit later, we are in the midst of ramping up our improvement programmes within the Council – to build on the heavy lifting work we have done these past years so that our services are fit for what promises to be a challenging future.

However, the change we are operating in today is very different to the change we were operating in six years ago. Surrey was then, where several Councils are today. Financially challenged, struggling to cope with rising demand and no clear long-term post Covid vision.

In that context, the circumstances of this particular organisation today could not be more different.

Surrey County Council is seen as a leading local authority. Our finances are stable. Our services are improving across the board. Our workforce is focused and ambitious for Surrey.

That gives us a solid bedrock to face what is now required – an evolution, to progress even further and faster along the upward trajectory we're on.

While we await the appointment of a new Chief Executive, the Corporate Leadership Team are picking up the baton and offering us further stability, reassurance, and strong leadership.

Our improvement work continues in earnest, our future planning remains on track, our services continue to positively impact residents' lives every single day.

This Council is on track, and while change swirls around us, we know where we want to be, we will not deviate from that course, and we remain guided by our ambition that no one in Surrey should be left behind.

Mr Chairman, since we agreed our budget at our previous Council meeting, our residents have been receiving their council tax bills and information.

For some, this can be one of the only times they interact with us as a Council, and for many it is another burden on already stretched family finances.

We know it's a difficult thing to land with residents – another tax, another bill that they see rising.

And it is this time of year, and the demand for council tax, that brings into sharp focus the importance of making sure that every single public pound is spent appropriately.

Everything we do – every hour of work, every visit made, every contact we have, every project, every job, every service – must be delivered in the most effective and the most efficient way possible.

Our residents must have the confidence that their money is being spent wisely and with the most impact– to make Surrey a better place, and to care for and support those people who need us most.

Alongside those bills issued by District and Borough Councils, our Communications Team, with support from our Finance Team, produced a very clear leaflet, explaining exactly how our residents' council tax is spent, as well as an excellent video showcasing what the County Council does.

I would urge all Members to share those useful resources and take up that collective responsibility to clearly and honestly explain how the Council uses its budget.

Spending public money is a huge responsibility – especially in the current financial climate, and it is a responsibility we must all take extremely seriously.

More than 70% of our entire budget is spent on Adult Social Care and Children's Care – 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 continue to do all that we can to ensure that we do not leave those people behind.

It is the smaller proportion of our budget that is actually spent on our more visible services, like road maintenance, libraries, countryside management, and community recycling centres – the things that are experienced by the most people – as well as

those services that keep us safe like Surrey Fire & Rescue Service, and Trading Standards.

We have to be straight with people. With public finances stretched, there is less money from government, coupled with higher demand for services that are more expensive to deliver.

Local government is expected to do more, with less.

But here in Surrey, we won't shy away from that challenge. We'll tackle it head on.

That involves an honest conversation – with residents, with partners, with ourselves – about the type of organisation we are, and the organisation we want to be in the future.

About our priorities.

About how we organise ourselves – as an organisation, and as a system of partners.

About how we design and deliver services differently – using data more effectively and making the most of new technology and digitisation opportunities.

About the size of our workforce, and ensuring we have the very best people delivering for the very best county in England.

This a challenge we face collectively – everybody involved in delivering public services, in supporting the most vulnerable people in society.

And so, we have a collective responsibility to tackle it, and to ensure that in another six years' time we can again say that we recognised what we needed to do, and we did it successfully.

We have clear priority areas where this improvement is underway – in Children’s Social Care, our service for families with children who have Additional Needs and Disabilities, and Adult Social Care.

Building on progress in delivering better outcomes for residents, and reducing demand through a focus on prevention, early support, and greater independence.

In the case of our Customer Transformation programme - a focus on getting things right first time, responding better and more effectively to the needs of our residents, and really improving that experience when people need us.

We know there is work to do to improve further, and that improvement is the core focus of our transformation work.

Mr Chairman, I just want to focus on some of the progress already being made in services for children with additional needs and disabilities, following the recent findings of the Ofsted and CQC Local Area SEND Inspection published late last year.

Inspectors found that although there is more work to be done, we “have put in place important actions that are starting to make a difference.”

Of particular note, we have made huge and rapid progress on Education, Health, and Care needs assessments, after many families faced long waits and delays due to complex issues within the system.

We have been determined in our action on this matter, recognising the importance to families of having the support they need for young people to thrive.

Our additional investment and work to counteract the national challenges in availability of Educational Psychologists, has allowed us to increase capacity in Surrey, which is

making a big difference to how quickly we can process assessments. Our focus and that of our partners, must now be to deliver those plans in a timely way.

Although there is more to do, this is a significant step in our recovery journey.

To ensure families are kept up to date on progress, we will soon be launching a new termly update for Additional Needs and Disabilities information and events. Anyone can sign up for these updates via the Local Offer website, and I encourage everyone to do so.

Support for these young people and their parents and carers is absolutely central to our ambition that no one is left behind and is reflected in our priorities within our investment programme too.

As part of this, we've recently completed the construction of a new facility specifically for visually impaired pupils at Woking High School.

This is modern, cutting-edge teaching space for 20 visually impaired students, in a net-zero state of the art building and will make a massive impact on the lives of the young people who will use it.

It is the 43rd project under the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, Alternative Provision Capital Programme, which has already provided over 1,180 specialist school places since 2019, and there are 40 more projects in the pipeline to 2026/27.

In addition to this Mr Chairman, we recently announced our pride in opening three brand new purpose-built children's homes in the county - one in Epsom and two on a site in Walton-on-Thames – again as part of our capital investment programme.

This investment is vital to increase residential capacity for young people in care in the county.

Currently, around 70% of Surrey children in residential homes are placed out of county, a figure which is largely due to a lack of available homes for them here in Surrey.

These homes will reduce that proportion of Surrey children living out of county and give more young people in care the choice to stay living in Surrey, close to their communities, where it is appropriate for their needs and circumstances.

A great deal of care and consideration has gone into the build, location, and design of these homes, with modern, green technology and efficiency, ensuring they are suitable and sustainable for the long-term.

These are great examples of our ambitious investment programme – also agreed at our last Council meeting – delivering a real impact for residents, helping us reach our no one left behind ambition, and transforming how we deliver services.

Mr Chairman, a positive development for Surrey since our last meeting came in the announcement of Surrey's County Deal by the Chancellor as part of the Spring Budget early this month.

This is an important step in delivering true devolution of powers from Westminster to local communities, recognising the ability of local government, working closer to residents, and knowing how to provide the best conditions for our local areas to thrive.

It also demonstrates the strength of this Council, being one of a select few that have achieved a County Deal.

I had the pleasure of attending Political Cabinet at 10 Downing Street last week, as this government really does want to hear the voice of local authorities.

I spoke on behalf of the sector and had very productive conversations about the key issues and pressures facing local government. I will be having specific follow up meetings with the relevant Secretaries of State in the coming weeks.

I know that, given the right support, in the right way, local government can lead the way in tackling some of this country's biggest challenges.

And that, Members, is something on which I'm sure we can all agree.

Ultimately, this County Deal— albeit with limited additional powers at this stage - is one of those opportunities for the Council to act with greater influence, independence, and flexibility to make a difference in our wonderful county. It also gives us the opportunity to work more closely with the other tiers of local government who face their own challenges, playing to our respective strengths for the benefit of our residents.

One of the crucial changes will mean Surrey County Council will be taking on a leadership role of our vibrant economy - meaning for the first time we will be able to deliver a cogent economic strategy for the whole of the county.

Integration of powers, held previously by LEAs, is already underway - we thank colleagues at Enterprise M3 and Coast to Capital for their support on this.

Integration will be complete by April, bringing a range of benefits for businesses and residents.

Setting a single economic vision for the county, ensuring Surrey-wide solutions are developed to support local economic growth.

A new Surrey business brand and website will make it easier for our 110,000 businesses to know where to access the right information, advice, and guidance.

The creation of a Surrey Growth Hub service will provide better support for business, and targeted interventions for high-growth local businesses.

Our Surrey Careers Hub, launched in September and already engaging with more than 97% of the county's secondary schools, colleges, and educational providers, will continue to grow.

Future government funding to support local growth will now be focused on the whole of Surrey, instead of it being spread across larger regional areas.

We are working with partners across Surrey, public and private sector, education providers, and District and Borough colleagues in developing this exciting new opportunity to strengthen our business community and ultimately a growing, sustainable local economy.

Mr Chairman, before I finish, I must note that this week is Social Work week – an opportunity to recognise the importance of one of our key services and celebrate some of our most important front-line staff.

Social Workers dedicate their time to supporting our most vulnerable residents - young and old, and all ages in between. They are the embodiment of our ambition that no one is left behind, and I want to pay tribute to each and every Surrey Social Worker and thank them for the vital work they do every single day.

Of course, we'd like more of them, and I would ask all of us to share in celebrating that profession – not only this week, but every week – to promote the benefits of that career and encourage people to consider that path.

Mr Chairman, Members, we continue to live through a period of change, but our foundations are strong, and our ambitions are clear.

We signal the end of a financial year that has been full of progress and improvement, and although I am quite sure the coming year will have its challenges, we look forward to the next phase of the development of this Council with renewed energy and vigour.

Thank you.