

Leader's Statement – Annual County Council, 21 May 2024

Mr Chairman, Members, this meeting comes at a time when this council is at a point of renewal, a brief period of some changes that will rejuvenate us on our journey of improvement, that we have been embarking on for the last six years.

I look forward to welcoming our new Chief Executive Terence Herbert when he arrives later this summer, and he is already playing an important role in how we shape the rest of the Leadership Team here as we look to add to the outstanding talent we have at the top of the organisation.

Terence brings with him valuable experience in successfully tackling many of the challenges local government is currently facing, and first-hand knowledge of how we can continue our improvement and development as a council that truly serves its residents.

I must also give thanks to Leigh Whitehouse, for whom this will be his final council meeting here at Surrey before he departs to take on the Chief Executive role at West Sussex.

There is no doubt that Leigh has played an instrumental part in the improvement of this organisation, helping establish a sound financial footing to give us the stability and foundations to deliver real progress.

Over the last few years, we have faced monumental challenges, and the external financial pressure has been intense. Without Leigh's work and sound judgement, it would have been extremely difficult to navigate through those challenges as successfully as we have.

I wish Leigh all the very best in his next challenge and I'm sure our paths will cross as he goes about that work just next door.

Following Leigh's departure and ahead of Terence's arrival, Michael Coughlin has agreed to act as Head of Paid Service.

Michael is vastly experienced, has been our Deputy Chief Executive previously, and knows this organisation inside and out. I'm grateful to him for stepping up and keeping us firmly on track over the next few weeks.

This morning, Leigh sent out a note to all Members and staff to announce that after more than four years as a key Executive Director here at Surrey, and most recently Executive Director for Environment, Infrastructure and Growth, Katie Stewart will be leaving us in the summer to take up a new post as Executive Director at City of London corporation.

Katie has been with us since March 2020, leading the Council's Emergency Response to the pandemic alongside her 'day job' and an energetic champion for staff in her different roles and I am sure you will all join me in congratulating her on her new post and wishing her well for the future.

I also set out in that note details of the revised CLT structure including an interim Executive Director of Highways who will provide additional strategic capacity and give us the enhanced delivery focus it requires over the coming months.

I recognise that the appointment of a new Chief Executive – as well as other changes to our Corporate Leadership Team that are in process – can be unsettling, but we have a clear vision, and a clear plan, that we are cracking on with and delivering.

Our foundations are now solid. This is not comparable to the last time this council saw such changes to its top team back in 2018.

As we face challenges like every other council, we are in the best possible shape to overcome them.

The building blocks we've put in place over the last six years are bearing fruit, our improvement is measurable and clear, we are delivering day-in day-out, and we are focused on our collective vision.

We ARE building a stronger, sustainable economy in Surrey.

We ARE developing stronger, thriving, empowered communities.

We ARE progressing our vision for a greener future in line with our targets.

We ARE putting practical measures in place, alongside our partners, to tackle health inequality within the county.

And we are totally committed to our ambition that no one in Surrey is left behind.

As Leader, as Cabinet, as the political administration of this council and indeed I hope all Members, are unwavering in that direction of travel, and that ambition.

Any change to the Directors, Executive Directors, even Chief Executive, will not alter that focus – that north star.

It may bring new ideas and new approaches in how we get there but our destination remains the same.

And our commitment to delivering for the people of Surrey remains steadfast.

Every single day.

We started this journey towards the back of the pack, struggling if we're honest, with a lot to fix and a lot of catching up to do.

We have now progressed steadily and consistently, around obstacles and through turbulent surroundings, and we are now rightly recognised as a leading authority.

We're having a brief pitstop to re-fuel, re-fresh and revitalise – and the driver might be changing – but we're ready to continue the journey in the best shape possible, to kick on to successfully reach our ambition.

Mr Chairman, our progress is clear.

Just last week we received our latest report from an Ofsted focused visit to Children's Services, which noted that 'progress for children is evident in the improved quality and timeliness of assessments, the increased timeliness of visits to children, and a more consistent application of thresholds'.

Our comprehensive improvement programme in this area is delivering, and children and families are having better experiences, more positive relationships with social workers, and ultimately will see outcomes that demonstrably improve their lives.

We know there is more to do but it is evident that we are on the right track, and we will not let up in that improvement journey.

I'm proud of our staff, and our leadership, who work extremely hard and put children and families at the heart of everything we do.

This is just one area of our comprehensive transformation – our continuous improvement as a council.

We are focused on improving and modernising how we deliver our services – the things that people rely on in life, that we have a responsibility to provide.

We cannot do things in the same way as we always have, and over the last six years we've been adapting, adopting best practice, innovating, finding ways to be more effective and use new skills and technology that can revolutionise how we deliver services - continuous improvement.

Our current areas of focus in this space include improving the system and experiences of families with children who have additional needs and disabilities, and as I just outlined, we are seeing progress in this area already thanks to focused investment and a clear plan.

Our Fire & Rescue Service is improving, with His Majesty's Inspectorate recently discharging the sole area of concern following a robust improvement plan being put into action.

We are also currently consulting on the Community Risk Management Plan, using robust evidence, data and technology, planning and structuring our resource so we are able to most effectively keep the people of Surrey safe long into the future.

And of course, we are on track to deliver our decarbonisation programme for Surrey County Council by 2030 with the recent approval of a new training facility for Surrey

Fire and Rescue which will significantly reduce our carbon emissions, as well as the relocation from Quadrant Court to Victoria Gate in Woking later this year.

Another important area of focus is the transformation of Adult Social Care – how we manage the high, and growing demand within an ever-changing care market.

And how we deliver the very best appropriate accommodation and technology to support people's strengths to live independently for longer.

This type of prevention is at the heart of this work, and at the heart of our ambition.

We must enable and empower our communities and our residents to thrive – and to be resilient.

We must be proactive - as an organisation, and as a system of partners in Surrey across health, the voluntary sector, and other public service delivery.

By making our communities stronger, by supporting people early and by helping people help themselves, we can help prevent people getting to crisis point, reduce demand on our services, and live healthier lives with better opportunities and experiences.

And we must do this particularly for people and in communities that need us the most – to level up our county and ensure nobody is left behind.

With our multi disciplined 'team around the community' model in our Adults, Wellbeing and Health Partnerships directorate, we are working with our partners to do just that – building strong support infrastructures around our towns and villages alongside our key stakeholder partners, the District and Boroughs, the Police, the VCSE, businesses, and of course the health system.

Another key focus of our improvement that cuts across everything we do is our customer service.

We want our residents to have a positive experience of engaging with us and our services – every single time.

We want to improve the customer journey, make it better and smarter, so people don't need to keep coming back to us.

We want to make it as easy as possible for people to do what they need to do, to find the information they need to find, to reach the solution they need to reach.

Our work in this space is huge, and it will impact every area to truly make sure we get it right for our residents.

This transformation work will help us be an organisation that is fit for the future.

We have done it before – we are still doing it – and we will keep doing it.

The world is changing, demand for services is increasing, new challenges are emerging, and budgets are being stretched.

We have to be proactive in getting ourselves in the best shape to cope, and to thrive.

We have to see those challenges and tackle them head on, rather than react too late.

We have to continuously improve – and we are.

Another tangible area of that improvement is our highways.

We know that the state of our roads continues to be a source of frustration for our residents.

The increasingly wet weather really impacts our roads – which are some of the busiest in the country – and the road network across every area of the UK is feeling battered at the moment.

We are focused on doing everything within our power to improve the quality of our road network.

We know it's our most visible universal service – vital for everyone and hugely frustrating when it's not working, not safe or in poor condition.

Mr Chairman, we are delivering on this.

Right now, we have 112 surface dressing schemes about to start, we've invested over £8m to deliver real improvements on 85 miles of our busiest areas of the network.

And this is just one aspect of our enhanced maintenance programme for roads and pavements which will see us deliver a further £300m worth of vital improvements by 2028.

We're working hard to reduce the impact caused by works on our network – being innovative in the way we use new materials to reduce the time spent on site, as well as planning further ahead to coordinate with other works providers.

Utility companies' emergency demands in Surrey are amongst the top 5 highest in the UK, and we know this is causing disruption and further impacts on the quality of our highways network.

We will continue to hold utility companies to account. We want essential works to be completed quicker, better traffic management, better coordination, and better resident

communications to ensure they play their part to manage the significant congestion on the network caused by their works.

I will not let up on this until it's improved, and with Jonathan Hulley appointed as an additional Deputy Cabinet Member, he will take responsibility for driving through the recommendations from the Task and Finish Group.

We're also scaling up our own communications with residents about our highways, providing clear, informative on-the-ground signage and local, bespoke weekly updates, and improving how we respond to their enquiries.

Mr Chairman, last week I had the pleasure of attending the official launch of Business Surrey, the County Council's new business facing brand and business support service - a platform which is key to delivering our strategic priority to support the sustainable growth of our economy.

I was joined by the Chancellor of Exchequer and local MP Jeremy Hunt, along with representatives from businesses and public sector partners from across the county.

The event reinforced what many of you know - Surrey has a fantastic economic story to tell.

More than 100,000 businesses here, a great location, a highly skilled workforce and world-leading R&D, creating an economy which contributes more than £50 billion a year to UK plc.

Business Surrey is focused on taking that further, using our new powers inherited from Local Enterprise Partnerships to provide free support to businesses across the whole of Surrey for the first time.

By going live with such a service within weeks of LEP powers being transferred across to the County Council, Surrey is well ahead of the national curve.

I'm pleased to say thousands of people have already engaged with Business Surrey since the website went live last month.

And I look forward to updating you on progress in the months to come.

More progress. More improvement. Making Surrey a better place.

Mr Chairman, Surrey is a great county, full of great people.

We have a huge responsibility as a council to help people go about their day to day lives, supporting those who need us most from cradle to grave, to keep improving people's life chances, and make sure Surrey remains the very best place to live, work, and do business, long into the future.

Our plan is working. We are delivering.

There is of course more to do, further to go, and we must keep up the momentum behind our improvement plans.

We may be seeing a change in our Corporate Leadership Team, but we will not change course, we will not lose sight of our ambition that no one in this county is left behind.

We are a strong local authority – robust in the face of challenge and unwavering in our commitment and ambition – we are cracking on, we are delivering, and we will not stop.

Thank you.