

Leader's Statement – County Council, 9 July 2024

Mr Chairman, Members,

No one can deny that we are entering a new phase of political leadership in this country.

One that may be of a different political colour to the administration of this council, but a new government that I congratulate and am hopeful of working constructively with for the benefit of Surrey residents.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to congratulate our successful Surrey County Councillors Rebecca Paul, the newly elected Member of Parliament for Reigate, and Will Forster, the newly elected Member of Parliament for Woking, as well as the other Surrey MPs – some new, some returning - who I am sure will be working hard on behalf of our residents over the coming parliament. It's not surprising that this county has produced a multitude of Ministers, Secretaries of State, Foreign Secretaries and Chancellors, and we now have a local Surrey boy as Prime Minister. What a county!

The new government campaigned on an agenda of change, and I trust that it has entered office with its eyes, and its mind, open.

Open to all of the strong avenues of growth and progress that this country holds – whatever the political make-up.

Surrey is one such place.

We are a county that delivers great benefit to the UK – financially, environmentally, socially – and if it's growth they want to deliver, Surrey is the place the new government should champion.

We will continue to innovate to help tackle the challenges our society faces, and we stand ready to grasp any opportunity to deliver better outcomes for our people.

Mr Chairman, national and global politics, over recent weeks, months and perhaps years, has demonstrated one very clear thing – instability simply does not deliver those better outcomes.

I am proud that in this council, our strategic direction and leadership is strong.

Our progress is demonstrable.

Our vision is clear.

We will continue to improve, continue to ensure we're fit for the future, continue to look up and embrace challenge and opportunity head on.

We will stick to our purpose and our ambition that no one in Surrey deserves to be left behind.

I hope the new government will recognise the strength of counties like Surrey, and not just the metro Mayors, and will work with us to tackle the fundamental challenges local government, local communities, and local people are facing.

Some of those challenges are stark and require engagement from the new government urgently.

I want to touch briefly on those issues that need to be at the top of the in-tray for new government Ministers as they get their feet under the table, issues that I lobbied heavily the previous government on.

Firstly, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

I know we have again seen frustrated and understandably angry parents and carers here at Woodhatch today.

They are angry because the system is not working.

They are angry because they feel injustice at having to fight to give their children the opportunities they feel they deserve.

They are angry because they care about their children's future.

The system doesn't work for children, and it doesn't work for schools or councils either.

While reforms expanding eligibility for Education Health and Care plans were made with the best of intentions some years ago, it has led to a huge increase in unfunded demand – the number of EHCPs has more than doubled nationally since 2015 - with an over reliance on specialist school provision.

The cost to councils has also doubled to over £10bn this year, leading to deficits across the country of over £3bn.

This is clearly not sustainable and is clearly not working.

Mr Chairman, we must see the new government address this challenge immediately.

In Surrey we can be part of the solution.

We have invested a huge amount of money to address legitimate frustrations from Surrey parents and carers.

We have developed a deep understanding of the systemic issues that need to be fixed, and we have established better practices ourselves to go some way to improving experiences.

However, we know this is not enough.

Councils like us cannot fix this alone, and we need government to take this opportunity to fundamentally grip this issue - enabling a more inclusive school system, more SEND support in schools, and more levers for councils to pull to shape provision in our local area.

Mr Chairman, another core issue that needs solving is the charging system for Adult Social Care – the biggest single area of spend for us as a council.

We support reform of the charging system to make it fairer for people in need - without hard working people having to give up their life savings and assets too fund care.

However, both the workforce challenge and cost implications for councils under current proposals, must be resolved properly and realistically.

In its current form, the changes suggested – whilst noble in their aims – are simply not deliverable.

This government must further delay any implementation and take stock.

Any reform in this area must be fully funded, a fairer distribution formula must be established, and it must be piloted through trailblazer councils, with proper support provided.

Again, here in Surrey we want to be part of the solution to this complex issue.

We urge the new government to engage with it, face up to the challenge, and work with councils like us to create a better system for everyone.

A further area of huge, unsustainable spend, is high-cost placements for children in care.

Young people in need of social care – in need of a safe and loving home – are some of the most vulnerable people we have a responsibility for as a council.

It's a responsibility we take with the upmost seriousness.

Being a corporate parent to these young people is in many ways the epitome of public service.

Preventing them being left behind is our guiding mission as an organisation – as an administration, as Councillors, as Officers, as compassionate human beings.

The number of children referred to Children's Services has spiked post-pandemic.

Consequently, more children are in local authority care than ever before, and it is one of the biggest areas of overspend for county councils like us.

It has therefore never been more urgent to ensure Children's Services are financially sustainable and deliver the best possible outcomes that can be achieved for our children.

The new government must keep momentum with the strategy for children's social care set out by the previous administration.

Take it further with appropriate funding, better regulation of the market, so our public duty is not taken advantage of, and a system that enables us to more effectively deliver the services that protect children and give young people the best possible start in life.

Mr Chairman, another area that I sincerely hope the government picks up and keeps progressing is that of devolution.

We have made strides – perhaps not huge strides, but certainly significant ones – in the argument for more power to be devolved from Westminster to local areas.

Local councils and communities know our areas better than central government can.

We know what's needed, what works and what doesn't.

We know our people, what they want, and where the greatest need lies.

We know the specific challenges we must face up to, and the opportunities we are equipped to grasp.

The previous government understood this, and through the Levelling Up White Paper, moved in the right direction with a framework that enabled more effective collaboration between county and district authorities, and ultimately a clearer path to devolving more powers to local areas.

By recognising the importance of whole county geographies as the building blocks for devolution outside our major cities, it celebrated counties like Surrey and embraced our potential to provide growth and opportunity.

I strongly urge the new government to build on this.

Keep moving forward and keep momentum.

Keep expanding the scope of powers for devolution, and the funding levers available.

Use devolution – and use counties like Surrey - to help address local government funding challenges, strategic planning, house building, and boosting growth and opportunity for the whole country.

Mr Chairman, there is no place for naivety or partisan political ideology at this moment in time.

The challenges this country has been through over the last few years – pandemic, war in Europe, global inflation – have been monumental.

On entering office, this new government has inherited an extremely precarious situation with finances stretched and the challenges I've outlined above coming to a head.

Local government is at the coalface.

There are fundamental questions to be addressed about what we should be – and can be – delivering.

Any upcoming Spending Review must provide sustainable, long-term funding and solutions for councils.

Don't rely on short-sighted sticking plasters or burdensome restricted bidding processes.

We can be a huge help to the new government, provided they engage with us, and understand these issues.

Here in Surrey, we are part of the solution.

We are already taking action to be fit for the future.

We are determined and clear in our ambition for the people of Surrey.

And we will not let up in our endeavour – hopefully with the new government as an active and constructive partner. Thank you.