

CABINET – 27 OCTOBER 2020

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

Public Questions

Question (1): Mr John A Ward

In the light of the confusing and contradictory information emanating from both Surrey CC and the Government over the issue of the potential creation of new Unitary Councils, will the Leader please inform the ratepayers if it is still the Council's policy and intention to proceed with the preparation of a bid for Surrey CC to become a single Surrey Unitary Council by abolition of the 11 Districts & Boroughs, how much has been spent so far in both internal and external costs (whether it continues or not) and an estimate of the future costs of this scheme?

Reply:

As I have said previously and consistently, what is most important, beyond any structural change or governance, is our residents, their priorities and giving them more influence over their own communities. The important work we've done over the last few months will continue to be developed, including giving residents a greater say in the things that matter most to them.

We have received notification from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, that as a consequence of resources across Whitehall and in local government being re-allocated to tackling Covid-19 and on economic recovery, we are not to be invited to submit proposals for devolution and the reform of local government at the present time.

What is important now is that there is an active dialogue between all tiers of local government to look at ways that we can improve the delivery of services to residents and wherever possible remove cost by innovation and transformation without reducing front line services. I hope that the District and Boroughs will share the report they have commissioned from KPMG which sets out a number of steps they can take to reduce costs for example by sharing services either with other District or Boroughs or with the County.

In order to determine the best model of local government for Surrey residents and make sure that any future devolution of power can be secured by our local communities, the Council initially spent £71,000 to undertake a thorough review of alternative scenarios and options. £107,000 has been spent on research and feasibility work to: i) develop a proposal around devolving decisions, responsibilities and resources to Surrey's natural, distinct local communities and more effective community engagement and ii) develop a full Business Case for a single unitary Council. As part of this, £30,000 has been spent on evaluating the financial resilience of local government in Surrey. In order to test residents' views, attitudes and opinions on alternative models of local government for Surrey, a specialist, professional independent research company were commissioned to undertake a statistically representative survey at a cost of £38,000. Much of the information derived from the above work will add significant value to our future work, particularly on local community networks.

Mr Tim Oliver
Leader of the Council
27 October 2020

Question (2): Mr John Oliver

The 'Organisation Strategy 2021 – 2026', under 'People and organisations embrace their environmental responsibilities', states "We will ... Improve access to the countryside, conserve and protect its biodiversity and work towards making it financially sustainable....".

Could you please let me know how much money is being allocated in the SCC budget to 'conserve and protect its biodiversity' as mentioned in the Strategy and would you please state each of the steps that:

- have been, or are being, put in place;
- are planned for introduction; and
- are being considered for introduction,

to implement the policy of making the countryside estate more financially sustainable, including at those sites where an access agreement is in place, and which organisations or individuals is the Council working with in respect of each of the steps mentioned in response to the first part of this question.

Reply:

As part of Surrey's Climate Change Strategy, which commits Surrey to be a carbon neutral county by 2050, the Council has committed to facilitate the planting of 1.2M trees in the next ten years, with an initial budget of £70,000. Trees are effective carbon traps, as well as providing multiple other benefits. The Council will work with partners, residents and community groups in encouraging planting as well as identifying areas of Surrey County Council (SCC) land, such as closed landfill sites, flood plains and low grade farmland where areas of new woodland can be planted. We have also created a fund for urban and highways tree planting.

Surrey's 1.2M tree agenda is part of a wider piece of work that the Council is currently undertaking. We are working alongside partners to develop a Land Management Framework (LMF), which will advise and inform decisions by land owners on how land and natural capital in the county is used, managed and protected. We recognise that our landscapes represent multiple benefits for residents, including health and social benefits associated with access to nature, clean air and benefits relating to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The landscapes and natural capital also provide biodiversity benefits and strengthens our local economy. With numerous possible competing future land uses, the LMF will enable the identification of land parcels most suited to particular interventions.

SCC owns or manages 10,000 acres of countryside land in its countryside estate. Approximately 6,500 acres of this land is owned by the Council and managed for both conservation and recreational purposes and 3,500 acres is managed for access under Access Agreements with private landowners. Between 2002 and 2020 this was all managed by Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT) on SCC's behalf. On March 31st 2020 the Cabinet approved the implementation of a new model for managing this estate which supports its financial sustainability.

Under the new model SWT no longer receive financial support from SCC for carrying out conservation work on the estate but continue to have a lease for areas the council is responsible for conservation and protection of biodiversity. SWT apply for grants to carry out this work and SCC will support this work where possible and appropriate. The property on the estate is now managed by SCC and the rental income is used to finance the majority of the costs of the operational team in the Countryside Service and their work to provide visitor services on the estate. The new model was begun on 1st April 2020 with the legal and contractual changes finalised with SWT on 14th August 2020.

With regards to developing plans to ensure the SCC Countryside Estate is financially sustainable, this is still in early stages and will focus on supporting all residents to access the countryside whatever their background for health, well-being and educational reasons which we see as very essential, especially in view of how important the countryside has been throughout the recent COVID pandemic.

We are also working with our Land and Property Division to devise plans on how we manage our whole estate to provide additional benefits for nature. This work is in its early stages but will look at things like a pollinator action plan. Our biodiversity team is also advising on these plans, so they improve biodiversity both on the SCC estate but also through our services such as highways and flooding, working with partners across Surrey as a whole for example through the River Thames and other Flooding schemes. Initially this investment is mainly staff time but will result in some significant financial investment in natural capital schemes.

Mrs Natalie Bramhall
Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change
27 October 2020

Question (3): Ms Sally Blake

Surrey County Council committed to facilitate the planting of 1.2 million new trees in the county by 2030 as part of its climate change strategy. More than 100,000 new trees need to be planted each year to meet this target. The first of the new trees was planted on 5 October 2019.

Bearing in mind the tree planting season runs from November to March, and the Covid-19 lockdown did not start until 23 March 2020, please can you advise how this project is progressing?

It would be helpful if your answer could include:

1. how many new trees Surrey County Council has facilitated the planting of in the first year
2. how any shortfall will be made up
3. how the project is being monitored and reported on and how the public can find out details of progress

Reply:

The Council has committed to facilitate the planting of 1.2M new trees over the next ten years. Hedgerow planting is also in scope of this programme. During the 19/20 planting season

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approximately 11,000 new trees were planted by the Council and our Borough and District partners, however we are still waiting for some partners, including the Woodland Trust and the Forestry Commission, to provide their tree planting data for Surrey.

In order to increase the number of trees planted we are working to identify suitable sites for woodland planting. Sites that we are considering include closed landfill sites, low grade farmland and areas of wide highway verge, as well as extending existing woodland. We are also incorporating woodland planting within the River Thames Scheme, which is a flood defence scheme which will result in 106 ha of new public open space. The Council is committed that woodland creation will align with the commitments in Surrey's New Tree Strategy, namely that the right tree will be planted in the right place. The Council will not plant trees on our protected landscapes, including heathlands and downlands.

We have also launched a fund for the 20/21 planting season to cover the cost of tree planting in urban areas and along Surrey's highways. We are asking communities to contact their divisional county council members to make site suggestions for where trees can be planted. For more information please contact trees@surreycc.gov.uk

Officers are constantly monitoring where trees are planted in Surrey and we are producing a map of the county which will identify the approximate sites where new trees have been planted. This map will be updated at the end of the current planting season and will be accessible on the Surrey County Council website.

Mrs Natalie Bramhall
Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change
27 October 2020