

Leader's Statement – County Council, 13 October 2020

Mr Chairman, we come together again as full council, still meeting virtually and still living and working with COVID-19 having a major impact on our lives.

But in these challenging times I am proud of the work Surrey County Council and its partners have done in leading the County through this crisis.

Our focus is and must be to protect our health services, keep our residents safe, look after our most vulnerable and continue in our mission to make Surrey a better place to live and do business – for everyone.

Although this is a difficult time – not just for Surrey County Council but for everyone, every business, every organisation –so we cannot simply stand still and see what happens.

Our adaptation to the new normal continues. We must be agile and adapt to the changing landscape.

We must also look to future opportunities for this county and make sure we are best placed to take those opportunities.

Mr Chairman, that is what this council is all about – making sure we provide the best conditions for our residents and businesses to thrive.

Our work on how we, as local government, can change to better serve our residents has been well documented over the last couple of months and I will talk about how we plan to take that forward in a moment.

I will also outline the work we're doing, through the Economic Commission and the One Surrey Growth Board, to ensure we can effectively guide the county through the recovery from COVID-19 and chart a path to a prosperous future for our local economy and our business community.

But first Mr Chairman, I want to give a brief but important update on the current public health situation in Surrey.

Since we last convened as full council, the Test and Trace programme has become a regular part of our lives and Surrey County Council has taken a local lead in collating and analysing the data coming back from our communities.

We have been quick to act when and where there have been sharp increases in cases, communicating openly with residents, alerting them to heightened risk and urging extra vigilance.

Overall, that local action and targeted messaging has proved successful – initially in Woking and since in Spelthorne, Runnymede and Elmbridge.

But there is no avoiding the national trend that we're seeing.

COVID is spreading amongst the population, further restrictions have been introduced and we must be prepared for a challenging winter.

I must stress again how important it is that everyone continues to play their part to keep Surrey safe. We all must follow the government guidelines to ensure we protect ourselves and others.

I have every faith in Ruth Hutchinson, our Director of Public Health, and her team, who will continue to act to manage the situation locally.

I also have faith in Surrey's Local Resilience Forum, that stepped up in March and remains in place. It is ably led by Joanna Killian, our County Council Chief Executive, alongside Steve Owen-Hughes Surrey's Chief Fire Officer and Gavin Stephens, Chief Constable of Surrey Police.

Everything winter can throw at us is being prepared for, including extreme weather, flu, EU Exit Transition as well as COVID's second wave.

We have proven throughout this year to date that we will do everything in our power to guide Surrey and our residents through unprecedented challenges. We are standing ready to do so again.

Despite all these external challenges, we must also continue to deliver our vital services for residents, support for our local economy and partners, and deliver on our strategic role for the county.

Mr Chairman, as we have discussed previously, the Government's plan to publish a White Paper this autumn on Local Government Devolution and Recovery was, without doubt, an opportunity for Surrey that we simply had to engage with.

Ministers were very clear about the government's ambitions for local government, including the devolution of greater powers alongside widescale reorganisation to address long standing issues of burdensome bureaucracy, duplication, waste and needless complication.

As other responsible local authorities did, we engaged fully with this agenda – seeing it as an opportunity to be better.

Deliver a better local council for residents. Drive better outcomes for our county. Unleash a better future for Surrey.

While the White Paper and associated reform has yet to be published, undoubtedly through a combination of competing government priorities and the uncertain times we find ourselves in, the work we have undertaken is already proving immensely valuable in improving our services and relationship with residents.

What is most important to me, beyond any structural change or governance, is our residents and giving them more influence over what really matters to them in their local area.

The bedrock of our vision is the creation of local community networks.

We want to deliver power to the people.

These networks will give local people a greater say in the issues that affect them, using local knowledge to influence councillors and officers.

We will continue to develop these exciting plans in anticipation of the detail of the devolution agenda of government and indeed Mr Chairman, we have already moved to this model of doing things as a County Council. We must be proactive and not reactive.

We are working alongside local partners and empowering communities in Surrey through our Community Projects Fund, Libraries transformation, Youth centres transformation, Greener Future Design Challenge and infrastructure projects like The Farnham Masterplan.

We want to go further.

We propose to create up to 30 new Local Community Networks across Surrey, based on natural, distinct communities local people identify with and call home.

Residents will come together with local Members, town and parish councils where they exist, other public services and partners to decide priorities, make decisions and tackle local issues.

The Networks will cover populations between 30,000 and 50,000 residents, much smaller than the district and borough councils, bringing decision-making much closer to local communities.

We will help deliver a strong digital engagement offer, making it simple for local people to communicate and participate online.

And use the latest evidence and insight to better understand local opportunities and challenges, ensuring much more effective partnership working on solving local issues.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Helyn Clack who has been leading the cross-party, cross-council working group on this.

I call on all members – both at County and District and Borough level - to work with us to deliver better local government for our residents.

Streamlining local government also presents an opportunity to deliver massive financial savings that will help us meet the forthcoming financial challenges while protecting services. The recent letter from the Minister for local government confirms that we should continue with the work to find more efficient and effective ways of delivering local government services

Many Districts and Boroughs are under greater strain in part due to lost income which is unlikely to be replaced, so I am very pleased to see that the recent conversations about the structure of local government have brought them together to look at ways that they can share services and reduce costs.

As a County Council we are in better financial shape than we would have been a few years ago – we have our finances in order and set a stable, balanced and progressive budget in February.

Indeed, it was this financial stability that has provided the bedrock to Surrey's response to COVID-19.

While we are not in a critical state as an organisation, there are obvious pressures, compounded by the impact of COVID-19.

Make no mistake – tough decisions are going to have to be made, and the savings that could have come through reorganisation are looking less and less likely.

Mr Chairman, our revised organisation strategy sets out four key areas that will drive the work of this council during the next phase of our work to deliver improved services to our residents.

These ambitions underpinned our outline business case for local government reform in Surrey, and were identified as key areas through residents focus groups.

They are:-

- Growing a sustainable economy so everyone can benefit
- Tackling health inequalities
- Enabling a greener future
- Empowering resilient and connected communities

There is no doubt that the right combination of devolved power and structural reform would put Surrey in an extremely strong position to deliver these priorities.

In fact, I'm confident, with the foundations we have already put in place over the last couple of years, Surrey could be a national leader in all these areas.

We will build on Surrey Heartlands Integrated Care System, drawing on local Community Networks that more closely align with Primary Care Networks

We will continue the work to integrate health and social care, with a more preventative approach

We will use local knowledge alongside data insight to fully understand the health needs of local populations

We will deliver the climate change strategy we set out in the summer, and target investment and resource in the areas that need it most

We will press ahead with tackling congestion and improving air quality by working with residents, local community networks and our business community

We will ensure our strategic planning reflects our environmental ambitions

We will continue to address future skills needs by joining up the work of the skills board with strategic economic planning

We will bring forward a shared Surrey Place Ambition, helping foster that sense of place and bring forward infrastructure investment

We will work to strengthen the local economy, supported by the One Surrey Growth Board

Mr Chairman, it is at this final point that I wish to expand on in more detail.

Our establishment of the Future Economy Surrey Commission almost a year ago signalled our intention to make sure Surrey is a place fit for the future, ready to overcome the challenges we face and take the opportunities that are coming our way.

A lot has changed in a year. But that core ambition remains.

Through work with the University of Surrey, the Commission has now produced a substantial report with recommendations to the One Surrey Growth Board that aims to shape the county's future, through COVID recovery, a challenging global economic outlook and the changing shape of our economy and ways of working.

The report is an excellent basis for us to work with partners and businesses to deliver that brighter future for Surrey.

We have so many world-beating opportunities in Surrey to grow further, building on the Surrey Research Park, 5G innovation centre, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, space and satellite tech, high-tech health, excellent veterinary and life sciences, pharma, and automotive sectors.

If we can deliver the right conditions for our industries to grow – better connectivity, infrastructure, a better place to live and work – the possibilities for our county are endless.

Mr Chairman, we have also been looking at the Surrey identity.

How we can help people better connect with the fantastic assets we have here.

How we can galvanise stakeholders to be champions for this county.

And how we can make Surrey a destination place for both businesses and visitors.

We need to have clear plans for inward investment and tourist propositions; create greater opportunities to compete for investment, talent and resources; better collaboration with businesses and other organisations already based here or aspiring to be based here; we need advocates and ambassadors to let people know just how fantastic this county is and we need to strengthen our lobbying of government for our share of funding, including a growth deal.

We must speak with one voice.

A single voice from local government, health, community safety organisations, businesses, universities and further education colleges - indeed all of those people and organisations that can help make this the best place to live, to work, to visit.

Surrey has much to commend it.

We have idyllic villages, interesting market towns, universities, theme Parks, easy access to London and two international airports, the Surrey hills, the north downs and a long history of innovation.

But it doesn't shout about itself and at times perhaps it's too inward looking and undoubtedly over the years there has been a sense of complacency.

We have a transient and ageing population, hidden areas of deprivation, a very high cost of housing which makes it difficult to attract key workers, and a perception that our County is simply the playground for London.

But our natural assets, strong relationships and beautiful countryside, the lifestyle our county can offer, Surrey's innovation and now the desire to be amongst the best - provide the bedrock for future vibrancy and success.

Mr Chairman, we can sit here as elected members and take the easy option and do nothing.

We can wait to be told by government what they think is best for this county.

We can put our head in the sand and pretend that nothing has changed over the last 50 years and that the way local government operates cannot be improved.

Or we can come out fighting.

We can fight for our residents, we can fight for a better quality of life for everybody, we can fight for equal opportunity and we can fight to ensure that no one is left behind.

That is why I first sought election to local government over 20 years ago and I'm certain that is why many of you did so as well.

I believe that our residents know what is best for them in the places and they live and I believe it is our duty to listen to them and wherever possible to deliver those ambitions.

Our residents want to live in a safe environment, they want access to good local facilities, they want to be able to travel round this county, they want us to be serious about delivering a cleaner greener environment, they want to lead healthy lives and they want to make sure that we stand up for the more vulnerable members of our society.

Surrey County Council and our partners across wider local government and the public sector, are a key part of the Surrey eco-system and that is why Surrey – together - can and will deliver those aspirations.

We must not be complacent, or timid in our ambitions. We must be bold, ready to embrace change and relentless in our mission to deliver better.

Mr Chairman, we will move forward. We will not stand still.

We WILL be an organisation that can lead the way and, even with all the challenges we are facing, I am confident we will succeed for the people of Surrey.