

## **Leader's Statement – County Council, 8 December 2020**

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Mr Chairman, Members, we come together, still virtually, still in the grip of a pandemic that began almost ten months ago, but with light visible at the end of the tunnel.

Without question this year has been a year like no other.

It has undoubtedly been challenging for everyone in different ways – restrictions on our freedoms, fundamental changes to our normal way of life, a lack of social contact.

For some it has been even more challenging, facing financial uncertainty, job insecurity, serious health problems and, of course, and the loss of friends and family.

The impact will be long lasting, and we have a big role to play in helping people, communities, and the County recover.

Throughout the multitude of challenges this year has thrown at us, Surrey has come together.

Our local communities have stepped up and shown remarkable generosity and care for their neighbours and those less fortunate.

Partners across Surrey have come together as the Local Resilience Forum to guide the county through these uncharted waters.

The County Council, the police, health services, Surrey Fire & Rescue, the districts and boroughs, the voluntary, community and faith sector, universities and schools, and thousands and thousands of volunteers.

Surrey's Public Health team has shown remarkable leadership right from the moment we had the first UK contracted case in February, through to being identified as one of the national leaders ahead of the Test and Trace rollout, and now to that daily scrutiny of local data to ensure the right decisions are made for our communities here in Surrey.

As a council we are well integrated with our NHS partners in the county and we will stand with them and support them as they embark on the herculean task of mass vaccination roll out.

I look forward to taking up that vaccine myself in due course in the new year, and in the meantime we must all play our part in helping dispel lies, conspiracy theories and misinformation to ensure our communities are protected and we can all return to our normal way of life as soon as possible.

Mr Chairman, I also want to take this opportunity to recognise the work of our staff through this most difficult of years.

As well as the remarkable work undertaken by our NHS colleagues nationally, we must pay tribute to our care workers here in Surrey. They have always had huge dedication to their work, but it has been highlighted this year even more so.

Selfless, caring, exceptionally skilled – these people really are the best of us.

Our key workers across the council have been incredible throughout this pandemic, working throughout lockdowns, redesigning services quickly to make them COVID secure and available to residents, and many volunteering to be redeployed in different roles wherever needed, be it handling calls on the community helpline to packing food boxes or go to our most vulnerable.

I hope they find time this Christmas to - at the very least – to switch off and reflect on the magnificent effort they've put in this year.

Mr Chairman, even though our primary focus throughout 2020 has been responding to this pandemic and protecting our residents, we have pressed ahead as a council in not only continuing to deliver the services our residents rely on but working hard to make sure they are better than ever.

We started this year with ambitious plans for the organisation and for Surrey as a place, and we've continued to pursue those ambitions throughout the year.

That has only been possible because our finances have remained strong thanks to our hard work over the last couple of years. That has meant we have been able to provide the financial bedrock for the Local Resilience Forum, and continue to deliver services to residents, with a balanced budget planned for 2021.

As you have already mentioned Chairman, we are moving the Council offices back into the County having secured an offer for the building and delivering on my pledge when I became leader to get our staff closer to the residents and communities we serve.

We've progressed with our transformation of Children's Services, which OFSTED have confirmed as having substantially improved. Further visits are planned next year which we are looking forward to with fresh impetus, with the arrival of Rachael Wardell as our new Executive Director, who I am sure will lead us to be even better.

We have progressed the Making Surrey Safer plan, bringing Surrey Fire & Rescue Service up to modern standards, working to prevent more incidents and respond to the challenges of today's society. Our first fire engine response times for critical emergencies is averaging 7 minutes and 55 seconds, well within the 10 minute response target.

We have also focussed on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion agenda, particularly with our staff to ensure that we listen to the voices of people who have previously not been heard and putting this at the heart of our policy making.

Another thing I'm particularly proud of this year is the council's Climate Change strategy which we published in the summer, that will guide our work on tackling the climate emergency which I will go into more detail about that shortly. I very much hope that all of our partners, including the District and Borough Councils, will join us in promoting that strategy.

We have continued with our ambitious investment in our residents and our future, acting on the promises we made back in January when we announced our capital investment strategy and are progressing a number of initiatives including:

- **Your Fund Surrey** – with a £100m to strengthen communities and give residents more power and influence
- **Tackling climate change** and green infrastructure to deliver a greener and more sustainable future
- **Schools and SEND provision** by increasing school places, ensuring our children can overcome this year's disruption and get the best possible start in life closer to home, reducing the need to travel long distances.
- **Highways investment** of £114m this year on maintenance and improvements as well as promoting active travel to make getting around the county smoother
- **Flood alleviation** schemes across the County to protect tens of thousands of homes and businesses from further disaster and give future security and peace of mind

- **Extra Care sites** to ensure our elderly residents can keep independence for longer and grow old safely and with dignity.

Our ambitions for Surrey as a place have not dimmed. We're looking to the future and continuing that transformation as we head into 2021.

As I've already mentioned Mr Chairman, our collective hard work and dedication over the last two years to get our finances in order, mean we have been able to cope with the challenges that have come this year and are well placed going into an uncertain future.

A few years ago, a major unforeseen issue such as COVID may well have pushed Surrey to the brink, but thanks to the transformation undertaken in this organisation, we can continue to provide services and a better future for our residents.

Our ambitious programme of investing in our communities will continue, and has become even more important in ensuring they can thrive over the coming years of recovery.

I believe our residents can trust Surrey County Council to guide the county through these challenging times and deliver a brighter future.

We are now in our budget setting period. The draft budget went to Cabinet in November and we are asking residents for their thoughts and priorities via a survey, to engage them in the process and be wholly transparent as to how their money is spent.

We will continue to transform our services to ensure every efficiency can be made and every service is delivering the very best value for money.

It will be essential to continue that sound financial management in an uncertain, but undoubtedly challenging, medium term future as the country gets to grips with the longer-term effects of COVID and its economic impact and whilst we will need to increase council tax to fund our services, we will ensure that the increase is at the minimum level we require and well below the 5% we would be allowed to levy. This is not the time to add even more financial pressure on our residents.

As it has always has been, the majority of our spending goes on protecting our most vulnerable residents, working to improve their quality of life and reduce inequality.

We spend more than £1m every single day on Adult Social Care and over £0.5m a day on Children's Services.

Most of our residents won't necessarily experience these services, but it is our duty to ensure our most vulnerable are looked after and we will continue to do that, while pressing government on sustainable ways to deliver that care.

Of course, we will continue to fund day to day spending on highways and transport, libraries, schools, waste disposal, community protection including the fire service, as well as the important governance and so-called 'back office' functions that help ensure services are delivered.

The work of the council over the coming year will be guided by our four key pillars of focus that every part of the organisation will be working to achieve.

These are:

### **Growing a sustainable economy so everyone can benefit**

This focus is particularly critical as our county recovers from COVID.

Surrey's Community Impact Assessment report highlights how the economic impact has been felt most acutely in those areas with a higher reliance on certain industries, such as aviation.

The number of people claiming Universal Credit or Job Seeker's Allowance has increased by over 300% in some areas of Surrey.

We must support people and businesses across Surrey to grow again, and re-prioritise infrastructure plans to adapt to changing needs and demands.

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

We are an ambitious organisation, for an ambitious county. We are making Surrey a county that is fit for the future.

The second priority area is:

### **Tackling health inequality**

As already touched upon, we have a close and positive relationship with our NHS partners, particularly through Surrey Heartlands. We will continue our driving ambition to reduce health inequalities, particularly in life expectancy, and make sure nobody is left behind.

We can do this by accelerating health and social care integration, to reduce demand on services while improving health outcomes for residents as well as supporting a strong economy.

We must also increase our focus on addressing mental health. This year has brought into sharp focus the fragility of mental health for many more of our residents, and this is a key area of work for our Health & Wellbeing Board. We will build on the foundations of the recent mental health summit that the county convened and establish a mental health improvement board to ensure that we engage all partners in driving our prevention and early intervention agenda.

The third priority area is:

### **Enabling a greener future**

This year we have published our Climate Change Strategy and our Tree Strategy side by side.

We are serious about tackling the Climate Emergency and our action over the last year in this area speaks for itself.

We acted quickly during the summer to harness the increase in active travel, making it safer and easier for people to walk or cycle in our town centres, and have recently been allocated even more funding to develop active travel schemes further.

Our infrastructure projects such as Farnham Town Centre are focussed on improving air quality and reducing polluting congestion.

We have begun our programme of replacing every single one of Surrey's streetlights in environmentally friendly LEDs.

And just last month we agreed a huge, almost £50m investment in ultra-low emission buses to help get people around this county in a clean and efficient way.

We are absolutely investing in a greener future.

Finally, Mr Chairman, but no less importantly, we are:

**Engaging with our communities**

This is something that I've been talking about since I had the privilege to become to become Leader of this council and has progressed further and faster in the last few months.

We want to reinvigorate our relationship with residents and make this part of the council's culture, build on the incredible partnership work we have seen at first hand during the pandemic and support our communities to tackle local issues, while making it easier for everyone to play an active role in the decisions that will shape Surrey's future

We've already started this in earnest.

It is really important that our residents have a clear and easily accessible route to influence policy making and decisions that affect them, beyond local government elections every four years.

Let's work together, strengthen our communities and create a better place to live.

Mr Chairman, I know that we have a brighter future ahead of us. We will overcome COVID, we will rise to the challenge of recovery and we will continue to make Surrey the best place to live, to work and to grow a business.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all.

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