

Leader's Statement – County Council, 16 March 2021

Mr Chairman, this is the final council meeting and final council speech of this electoral cycle.

As all Members are only too aware, we have an election in May, which gives our residents the opportunity to reflect on the work carried out by this administration, the progress we have made together, and the direction of travel in which we are heading.

And ultimately, decide whether we continue that journey.

I, for one, welcome that chance to take stock and assess, because I'm immensely proud of this organisation that I – and we as elected Members – lead, and the progress we have made and continue to make together.

Mr Chairman, I will take some time to reflect on that in a moment, but first I wanted to focus on the significance of this next week in the calendar.

A week from today – 23 March – signifies exactly one year since the UK first went into lockdown in response to COVID-19 although in Surrey we were responding earlier than March, with the first UK-contracted case in Haslemere.

This week also marks a year since our Chief Executive Joanna Killian declared a major incident and immediately put into place the structures of the Local Resilience Forum to formally coordinate the response across Surrey.

We have not stepped back from that major incident in the whole 12 months.

Next Tuesday will be a poignant day, reflecting on the many people who have very sadly died as a result of this pandemic – the emotional impact on families right across Surrey, loved ones lost, families unable to see each other, businesses lost, individuals scarred by isolation, our fundamental freedoms and way of life disrupted like never before.

We will be marking this date as an organisation, with an event of reflection for staff to come together – still virtually – to share memories of the year that has passed and pay tributes to those that we have lost.

It is an important moment for us to take stock.

It is also important to again recognise the incredible work that has been undertaken by us as a council, alongside other partners of the Local Resilience Forum, to keep people safe, to support our vulnerable residents and to help our communities through this challenging time.

I couldn't be more proud of the work that the people of this organisation have carried out over the last year.

Whether it has been staff manning our community helpline, sourcing and delivering PPE, sorting food boxes, helping provide extra refuge space for families fleeing a violent lockdown, advising schools how to open safely, delivering various COVID testing streams, warning and informing our residents, keeping services running, moving some services to virtual, helping to manage increased deaths sensitively, or providing more support to care homes.

Our people have been adaptable, willing, skilled, and dedicated.

It has been harrowing at times, tiring, difficult, and certainly out of our comfort zone, but we should be so proud of every single person who has contributed to this effort.

Mr Chairman, Members – I'm sure you will want to join me in saying a huge 'Thank You'.

Last week we celebrated International Women's Day – an incredibly important occasion not only to celebrate women and gender equality but to take a step back and ensure we are doing everything possible to pursue further equality – embracing diversity of all forms, in everything we do.

At Cabinet in February, we reported on our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan and Policy Statement.

It confirms that we, as a council, will take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

We must also recognise that other forms of bias are more covert. To tackle these, myself and my Cabinet colleagues have attended unconscious bias and race discrimination training – useful in demonstrating how unconscious biases can affect the daily experiences of all of us across the council.

We will take this forward in all our future decision making and structures.

I am serious about this issue, which is fundamental to our guiding principle in Surrey that no-one is left behind.

While we recognise International Women's Day, I want to pay particular tribute to two incredibly strong, inspiring women that have helped drive Surrey forward over recent years.

The first is Mary Lewis – our Cabinet Member for Children's Services who is – to my great sadness – standing down at this forthcoming election.

Mary is both compassionate and incredibly strong willed – which has made her the perfect person to lead this county's Children's Services during huge challenge and transformation.

It is very easy to try and make cheap political shots about historical failures of this service – some Members present may want to catch up a little bit on the very real progress we have made - but it is much more difficult to grab hold of that challenge and tackle it head on.

But Mary has done just that, working tirelessly alongside the late Dave Hill and now Rachael Wardell and the service, to deliver what Ofsted has described as 'substantial and sustainable improvements'.

It is a shame she won't be in post when the full inspection team return later this year and deliver their official verdict and what we are confident will be an improved rating.

The improvement in that service is there for all to see – there is some way to go, it has been difficult at times but we are confident we know what we need to do and indeed will do over the coming months.

But Mary has helped get us into a much better place than we were a couple of years ago.

She has been an incredible servant to this County, particularly our young people, and she leaves a hugely positive legacy.

Mary, you will be missed – not least for your sharp wit and never being shy in keeping me in check.

The second woman who I want to pay tribute to is Joanna Killian, who has been our Chief Executive now for three years and has driven forward the most remarkable transformation at Surrey County Council.

As I've said previously, if COVID had hit three or four years ago, it may well have pushed Surrey County Council to the brink. Indeed, we only need to look around to see other local authorities who are struggling financially.

But not here. Not now.

From 2014/15 to 2017/18 every budget used reserves to plug the gaps – for the last three years we have set a balanced budget and begun to start building those reserves back up.

Tough choices have been made – they have had to be - but overwhelmingly that stable financial picture has come about through clear vision, innovation, and bravery to do things differently which has made our services better, not just more efficient.

We have also become a forward-thinking organisation – fiercely ambitious to make Surrey a place fit for the future.

The financial stability that we have overseen over the last few years – led by Joanna and the team she has put in place – and supported by this Council, has been the bedrock to enable us to start delivering this vision.

This is not just rhetoric. This is making a real difference to the lives of our residents:

- More school places
- More in-County places for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- Substantial and sustainable improvement in Children's Services
- On track for a net-zero-carbon council by 2030
- Council offices finally back in the County for the first time in 50 years
- Hundreds more supported living homes so older people can keep their independence for longer
- The biggest investment in flood defence and alleviation this County has ever seen
- £100m Fund for Surrey's local communities to deliver projects they want and need
- A modern, agile fire service working to prevent fires happening in the first place
- Vulnerable children supported with Free School Meals, technology and activities through lockdown and school holidays
- Surrey's Growth Board laying the foundations for a buoyant local economy
- New electric busses
- Planting trees
- Replacing streetlights with LEDs
- Teaching more children to ride a bike
- Massive investment in big infrastructure projects that will revolutionise our town centres and our highways
- New training to frontline care staff

- More social workers recruited
- A top-class library service
- 94% of schools rated good or outstanding
- A new foster caring model giving greater support to carers
- Greater long-term investment in our roads and pavements
- More power to local communities and residents

These are not just empty promises – this is real action, real progress, real achievement.

I have been Leader of this council now for two and half years. I take responsibility for the direction of travel – you can agree with it or not - but I'm glad our residents can now have their say.

I will always stand up and be counted – when things go wrong, and when things go well - I will always be honest with our residents.

I will not stand here and say one thing, and then say another when the situation suits.

Whether we're in an election campaign or not, I'd encourage the other political Leaders present to stay true to what they know and be straight with residents about the progress this organisation has unquestionably made over the last three years.

It is progress that all of us should be proud of.

Mr Chairman, I'd like to say thank you to you too, for the important role you have played over the last couple of years – representing this council and this county during the most difficult of times

So Members, as we set off on the election trail lets be honest with our residents; lets recognise the areas where we have seen improvements and progress, lets acknowledge the areas where there is more to do and lets reassure our residents that we are an authority that does care about them and are making genuine attempts to make their lives better. Above all lets not distance ourselves from acknowledging our individual role on that journey as all 81 Members of this council have played their part in transforming the council for the benefit of our residents.

No one can pretend that this is an easy challenge but equally no one can or should pretend that we aren't meeting that challenge. It will be for the new council to set the tone for the next 4 years but for my own part I hope it stays true to the principles that have been guiding us; to have a county of equal opportunity, of equal access to healthcare systems, where we address the issues that affect life expectancy but above all that we genuinely mean it when we say that we must ensure no one in this county is left behind.

Thank you, Mr Chairman.