

Leader's Statement – County Council, 21 March 2023

Madam Chair, Members, I think it's safe to describe this meeting as our first of springtime despite the ever-changeable weather, and I look forward to coming out of a challenging winter period with a fresh outlook and energy for the months ahead.

I know how hard the winter has been for lots of people, with inflation across the board impacting people's household budgets, causing a lot of stress and some very difficult choices.

Those challenges won't go away overnight, and we will continue to be here to support those in need as we head into warmer months.

Madam Chair, the Chancellor's budget last week showed that we have cause for optimism in the country's economic outlook, with any downturn not as bad as feared, markets stabilised and inflation showing signs of coming under control.

It will be a relief to many that the energy support is continuing and that wholesale energy prices have reduced, easing a burden on many families.

Here in Surrey, and across local government, we welcome more money for potholes and an expansion of free childcare, as well as the anticipated transfer of Local Enterprise Partnership responsibilities to councils.

This will further empower our local economic strategy, as we push ahead alongside Surrey businesses and education providers in developing the skills and workforce for the future.

It is clear that this government is recognising the importance of strong local government, and we'll continue to work with them to bring benefits to the wider sector, but most importantly to the county of Surrey.

Madam Chair, Members, as I regularly point out, this council is an ambitious one.

We have clear priorities and challenge ourselves all the time to be better.

We have a vision and guiding principles, and we have developed the right culture to help us get there.

However, I know that talk is cheap.

I can stand here and say we want to do *this*, or we have a strategy to achieve *that*.

But what matters is what we deliver out in our communities.

What we are actually doing, or have already done over the last few years, to improve the lives of people in Surrey.

How exactly this council is making Surrey a better place.

Well members, we *are* delivering. And we should be proud of what we've delivered.

Just this month, plans for a brand-new school for children with additional needs and disabilities in Dorking received planning permission.

And the Department for Education have agreed to fund another specialist free school in the north of Surrey.

These will be excellent, modern buildings with first class facilities, to give young people a great start in life.

This is another huge boost for parents, alongside the 700 additional school places for children with additional needs that we've already delivered over the last three years.

With 200 more places available from September, this huge increase in provision tackles a very real problem of children with additional needs, often having to travel far outside their own communities to school.

Our action and delivery on this issue is helping these often-vulnerable children go to school much closer to their homes, improving their wellbeing, life chances and the lives of their parents.

We're also delivering real life improvements for adults with additional and complex needs, and those growing old and in need of extra support.

We're building new, modern, state-of-the-art accommodation here in Surrey.

We are transforming how care is delivered, focusing on what each person really needs – where their strengths lie and how we can keep people active and in their community for as long as possible, rather than the traditional residential care home model.

725 new extra care homes – brilliant places, specifically designed to help older people to live independently, with their own front door, in the community, with companionship and support.

And an increase in Supported Independent Living accommodation for adults with learning difficulties and those with mental health needs – again, modern places for

people to live, with the right level of support to boost independence, and improve the quality of life and life chances for some of our most vulnerable residents.

This is hugely important.

This council is investing in improving people's lives – people who need us most.

The biggest part of our budget is spent on adult social care. It's not something that all residents see – and many will even be unaware that their local council is responsible for this type of care. But addressing health inequalities requires a genuine partnership approach. We continue to work closely with Surrey Heartlands and Frimley ICSs as well as the VCSE to find better ways of delivering improved health outcomes for our residents, and I particularly look forward to the publication of the Hewitt Review in the next couple of weeks when I'm confident that the recommendations will accelerate the focus on that partnership working.

But we're serious about using all the technology, innovation, and expertise available in this area to deliver the best possible care when people need it.

This innovation and forward thinking is essential if we're to make sure Surrey is a place fit for the future.

Soon we'll announce a nationally leading roll out of electric vehicle infrastructure, with the UK's biggest single contract for EV charge points.

Thousands of new charge points for Surrey residents – to enable an electric vehicle revolution starting here in this great county.

Our ambitious move in this area demonstrates both our commitment to a greener future, and also our understanding of the barriers residents face when wanting to do their bit for the environment.

Well, this council is removing those barriers in a very real way.

Surrey will be *THE* place to switch to electric.

Further evidence of our commitment to rethinking transport – and actually helping residents to change the way they travel – is our on-demand bus service.

Again, this council has delivered a pioneering service that is benefiting residents in their everyday lives *AND* helping us tackle the climate emergency.

You only have to read that great local media outlet – the Surrey Live website – to see the impact of our electric, accessible, Mole Valley connect service.

As they put it:

‘A **lifesaver** on-demand bus service is taking passengers door-to-door for shopping, medical appointments, language classes and more.’

Madam Chair this is what local government should be all about – real, useful solutions to improve people’s lives, and deliver long-lasting positive change.

Thousands of journeys across one district, reducing car use, connecting communities, helping people socialise and access services, cleaning up our air and saving the planet.

I’m confident all members here will echo the thoughts of residents Beryl and Alison Wood who described the service as ‘wonderful’.

We're rapidly expanding the bus service across the whole of Mole Valley and into Waverley and Guildford, and I'm determined that we will roll this service out even further over the next 12 months across Surrey.

More delivery. More lives improved. More cars off our roads.

And for those people who are still using their car – quite a few according to our recent inboxes – we are doing the basics and getting those potholes fixed and roads resurfaced.

A continual and never-ending challenge with utility companies constantly working on our highways.

I know how annoying it is for car users and cyclists alike, especially at this time of year with potholes appearing and worsening overnight.

It's dangerous as well as unsightly.

We've stepped up, with over double our normal number of teams out on our 3000 miles of roads.

They are not superhuman, and there is a finite number of them, but they have accelerated their work, clearing any backlog and completing over one and a half thousand repairs every week – that is even more than the number reported to us.

I think the Chancellor was probably lobbied by every councillor in the country on this issue as well as Peter Martin the former deputy leader here, ahead of his budget – after all potholes don't just occur in Surrey – and thankfully he has provided some additional money to help tackle the problem.

But here in Surrey, we allocated extra resource months ago. And even more in our capital budget for roads maintenance last year, this year, next year and every year of a conservative administration.

I know potholes will keep appearing, and residents will keep complaining – understandably.

We can't resurface every road as quickly as we'd like, but members we are delivering.

We are fixing our roads.

Madam Chair, we're also planting trees.

As pledged, we're pushing ahead with our ambitious target of 1.2m by 2030.

Surrey is the most wooded county in the country – something we're hugely proud of, and an accolade we are determined to keep.

The 125,266 trees we've planted so far not only help us keep that title, but they make our county healthier, improving the air Surrey residents are breathing and the environment we are living in.

This tree planting is accelerating further and faster – even doing our bit here at Woodhatch.

Something else that residents will start to notice over the coming months is our re-wilding project for roadside verges and roundabouts across the county, now we manage these spaces directly.

More wildflowers, more insects, improving biodiversity and absorbing more carbon from the air.

This council is making Surrey a better – and greener – place.

One project that probably encapsulates the level of our ambition best is Your Fund Surrey – delivery of grant funding directly to communities.

Tens of millions of pounds dedicated to improving the places in which people live.

Projects funded and already complete include the wonderful family garden in Claygate, the 3G pitch for South Park Sports Association here in Reigate, the Limpsfield Way Cycle and Walking Trail, Weybridge's Men's Shed, and the new community picnic area in Tatsfield Village Green.

With millions more committed to successful applications all across the county, including a community shop, playgrounds, community centres, recreation ground improvements, a community swimming pool, and more sports clubs, the legacy of this project is being felt far and wide. I encourage all members to work closely with their communities to identify suitable schemes, schemes that can be transformational for local residents.

Real, tangible delivery, benefiting communities, making Surrey's towns and villages even better places to live.

Madam Chair, we're also directly supporting those in serious financial need across our county.

The last year has been extremely tough for many people, with rising costs squeezing household budgets and tipping more people into difficulty.

Councils are here, in many ways, to redistribute wealth. Using council tax to deliver services that prioritise those most in need.

Things like adult social care and children's services provide a lifeline to our most vulnerable residents.

But we also provide immediate help to those people who are facing a financial crisis, through our Surrey Crisis Fund.

In the last 12 months we've received more than 4,000 applications, approving 72% of them.

We have paid out £323,000 to help people buy food, toiletries and pay utility bills, and a further £425,000 on white goods and furniture to more than 800 households in emergency need.

This is a sobering example of the level of need in Surrey.

But we are here, delivering in real terms, for those families most in need. We've stabilised the council's finances, we've transformed our service delivery in many areas though I fully appreciate there is still more to do, particularly for families that have children with additional needs and we are seeing improved inspection outcomes. We continue to build strong foundations, foundations that have seen this council deliver for our residents during covid and foundations that will see this council deliver on its ambition that no one in this county will be left behind.

Madam Chair, all of this...

All of this investment, improvement, innovation.

It all delivers towards our four key priorities.

It helps deliver a greener future, stronger communities, a growing economy and better health outcomes.

Pulled together, all of it helps us in reaching our ambition that no one is left behind in Surrey.

We're working closer with our communities and our partners.

We're forward thinking and ambitious.

We're clear and transparent about what we're trying to do.

We are focused on delivering for the people of Surrey.

Madam Chair, when things go wrong, we'll fix them.

When things could be done better, we'll do it.

We'll keep at it. We'll keep improving. We'll keep delivering.

Because this council's leadership, and this council's workforce, are committed to making Surrey a better place.