

Leader's Statement – County Council, 12 December 2023

Mr Chairman, Members, welcome to the final Council meeting of 2023, at the end of what has been another relentlessly busy year, full of challenge and opportunity.

As Christmas approaches rapidly, it's important that we reflect on the year just gone, while re-setting and re-energising ahead of the new year.

While it has been a slightly less turbulent year politically - with a steadying of the economic outlook and some progress being made on national objectives – here in Surrey we have maintained our upward momentum and progress as a Council.

While I will touch on those strategic developments – and challenges – shortly, first I must note the more human stories that were celebrated last week at the annual Stars in Surrey Awards in Guildford.

This event, which is becoming a staple feature of Surrey's calendar, is something I always look forward to because it is a real reminder of the incredibly important work we do as a Council and the inspiring people and partnerships we have in our county.

I won't repeat every testimony and anecdote that were celebrated on the evening, but there are a couple of very moving stories and award winners that I wanted to mention.

Firstly, the inspirational Alix Lewer and the Include Choir, who not only won two awards but also performed on stage to open the evening.

Alix brings together people who have 'understanding and speaking difficulties' with the wider community, to reduce isolation and develop shared understanding.

She coordinates over 50 volunteers, with over 100 people taking part in weekly rehearsals and meetings in Epsom and Redhill.

It was evident how much Alix means to the people she works with, breaking down barriers, bringing joy and a sense of purpose to so many lives, it was an honour to witness first hand.

I also want to pay tribute to the winner of the Unsung Hero Award, Gordon Dodd, until recently a member of the targeted engagement team, working with a wide range of young people across various community projects in Surrey.

It was clear from the video testimonies on the night that Gordon was a universally popular man, making a difference to countless young people who needed support, always going above and beyond to help others.

Sadly, Gordon is no longer with us, but it felt fitting that his proud family were present on the night to receive the award on his behalf and hear the impact of the wonderful work he did for many years.

The Stars in Surrey event itself was magnificent – showing off one of Surrey’s brilliant cultural venues at GLive in Guildford, supported fully by generous sponsors, and delivered in-house by our outstanding Internal Communications team, with particular mention to Elliot Small and Emma O’Donnell for their hard work and dedication.

Those human stories - people working at the frontline, often with our most vulnerable residents and making a real difference to the lives of many - are the most important outcome in what we deliver as a Council.

But behind that we need the leadership and strategic vision to enable that work to be the most effective it can be and reach as many people as possible.

We have to stay true to our values as an organisation and keep focused on our shared priorities and our ambition that no one in Surrey is left behind.

As I've said, our progress and improvement as an organisation in these areas has continued this year in earnest.

As Stars in Surrey helped exemplify, our local communities and the voluntary sector across Surrey are so important in enhancing peoples lives and their wellbeing.

Helping to deliver thriving communities, connecting them, and empowering them, has been one of our key priorities for many years, and I feel like this last year has seen much of that groundwork come to fruition.

2023 has been the year that Your Fund Surrey has really taken off, with record numbers of community projects approved, and record numbers delivered.

Everything, from community centres, sports clubs, outdoor spaces, playgrounds and gardens, to men's sheds, patrol boats, theatres, community shops and swimming pools.

Over fifteen and a half million pounds across 125 projects so far.

Your Fund Surrey is delivering exactly what we set out to deliver – real assets designed by, and for, local communities to widen participation and reduce inequality, helping to empower thriving communities all across Surrey.

I couldn't be more proud, and I'm excited to see more projects delivered next year.

Mr Chairman, this has also been a year for real progress in our ambition to strengthen Surrey's local economy and opportunities.

In August, the government announced that Upper Tier authorities, like Surrey, would be handed the powers of the Local Enterprise Partnerships – recognising our influence and ability to help guide the economic growth of our areas.

And just last month, the Chancellor announced a County Deal will be pursued for 'the leafiest and most charming county in the country' – something we've lobbied for some time.

More powers devolved from Westminster to local areas in this way is further recognition of strong local leadership, and faith in local government and communities to deliver what is best in our areas.

I'm pleased that our District and Borough colleagues joined me in welcoming this development, and I look forward to working with all local partners to get the best outcome for our residents.

Here in Surrey, we're wasting no time at all in pushing forward with an ambitious agenda for growing a sustainable economy.

Our Surrey Careers Hub went live in September, meaning for the first time there is co-ordinated support across the whole of the county for our schools and colleges - more than 90 educational establishments are already signed up.

More than 1,300 young people connected with 80 businesses and training providers at the first ever Festival of Skills at Sandown Park racecourse in November.

The Surrey Cyber Security cluster - the first nationally recognised group of its type – continues to grow, and now has 350 members, putting Surrey on the map as a world leader in this emerging sector.

We have signed up as active partners in the CoStar national lab initiative at Royal Holloway, working with Pinewood, BT, and the University of Surrey to create £51 million state-of-the-art facilities to support the county's creative industries.

A satellite studio at Royal Holloway as part of this project, will support more than 200 creative industry businesses, creating 350 jobs and contributing £35 million a year to Surrey's economy.

We have supported a bid for government investment from the University of Surrey and Royal Holloway to develop a Centre for Doctoral Training in the use of AI in digital media. This will turn Surrey into a leading region for this emerging technology.

And Mr Chairman, we have helped secure investment to develop the infrastructure for the games industry across the whole of the county, enhancing the reputation of Guildford - and Surrey as a whole - as 'the Hollywood of Gaming'.

Our commitment and ambition is unwavering - to make Surrey the most dynamic and successful county it possibly can be, with job opportunities for all, a highly skilled population, and a prosperous local economy.

We have also made further strides in our work to tackle the climate emergency and get Surrey to net-zero.

A huge expansion in our on-demand bus service in the summer has seen more people able to get around Surrey without using their cars.

More electric and hydrogen buses are operating in the county.

We've offered young people half price bus journeys.

More cycle paths and connecting routes have been built.

Thousands of young people are taking part in safer active travel training through schools.

Europe's biggest on-street electric vehicle charging point contract was signed by this Council in March.

Hundreds of thousands of trees have been planted.

There is now better access and facilities across Surrey's countryside.

We've delivered more grants for sustainable farming.

More and more solar panels have been installed across the county.

We are decarbonising our own fleet of vehicles, and our buildings.

Mr Chairman, we are delivering on our commitment to reduce emissions across the county, to deliver a greener future for Surrey.

We are also making progress in reducing health inequalities across Surrey, in close partnership with our colleagues in the health service across Surrey's two Integrated Care Systems.

Surrey's Health and Wellbeing Board tracks that progress, and the Integrated Care Partnership is doing a great job pushing it forward.

We know that there are health inequalities in Surrey, where not everyone shares the same advantages.

Our updated Joint Strategic Needs Assessment shines a spotlight on these inequalities so that we can help everyone reach their full potential and set a level playing field.

It is this detailed understanding that allows us to act early and put interventions in place to really improve people's lives.

It demonstrates why it is so important to work together in partnership, with many different things all impacting people's health and wellbeing, such as housing, employment, social care, planning, transport, as well as acute and community health services.

Our partnerships are strong, and some really good, targeted work is underway in neighbourhoods across Surrey.

We'll continue with that work, improve where we can, learning and adapting so that we can reduce those inequalities and help ensure no one is left behind.

Mr Chairman, as I've said countless times before in this chamber, we are a Council that is never complacent.

We want to continually test ourselves, to ensure we are doing the very best we can for Surrey's residents.

We take our responsibility seriously.

This year, we have welcomed further independent external inspections across various services, all of which have noted improvements and that we're heading in the right direction.

In September, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, particularly noted improvements in our Surrey Fire & Rescue Service culture, a key area of focus for our Chief Fire Officer Dan Quin.

While there is still more work to be done in that, and other areas, the action plan and next stage of the Community Risk Management Plan development is in place, laying the foundations to push on further.

I'm confident that the service will keep improving and will continue working to keep Surrey safe.

More recently, Ofsted and the CQC have carried out a detailed Local Area SEND inspection across services coordinated by the Surrey Additional Needs and Disabilities Partnership, which is led by Surrey County Council and Surrey Heartlands and Frimley Integrated Care Boards.

We are all well aware of the challenges faced in this area.

Just yesterday we held a special Cabinet Meeting to interrogate this issue in more detail, ensuring that all partners and, most importantly, the voices of families across Surrey, were heard so we can continue working together constructively.

The challenges around Additional Needs & Disabilities provision are not unique to Surrey, although we feel some more acutely than other areas, with extremely high – and rising – levels of demand, complexity, and cost.

We also know that there have been failures, that some parents rightly feel frustrated and let down by a system that does not always work as it should.

Indeed Members, these issues have been aired in this chamber many times and we have never backed away from the work needed to improve.

We will always stand up and do whatever is in our power to improve the experiences of parents and carers and improve the outcomes for children in Surrey.

The inspection report recognised this work, noting that services for children and young people in Surrey with additional needs and disabilities **are** making progress.

The Partnership has been given the middle rating of three possible outcomes by inspectors, which notes 'inconsistencies' in experiences and outcomes, and makes several clear recommendations for improvement.

Mr Chairman, it should be noted that this report places Surrey above many of its peer authorities in delivering for young people with additional needs.

Yes, experiences are inconsistent, and we all want that progress to be faster.

But the good practice highlighted, and the clear plans and actions being taken, demonstrate that we are gripping this issue in Surrey in the right way.

We know that more effort and more work is required – we will never stand still, never rest, never be complacent – but inspectors clearly see the people of this Council, and our partnership, stepping up and demonstrating that determination to improve the lives of our residents.

Our ambition that no one is left behind is driving this work.

We should be proud of our progress, and I know that we will stay true to that motivation as we go further on that journey in the new year.

Mr Chairman, as I've outlined, this Council continues to move forward, innovate, and improve – that is inbuilt into our mindset.

It is the Surrey Way.

But what is also abundantly clear are the huge challenges that face us every single day.

Those challenges are seeing some other local authorities run out of road and getting into real difficulty, impacting residents' lives in a significant way.

We are strong here in Surrey, we have sound leadership, a motivated workforce, and a track record of innovation and transformation to meet challenge head on.

But we are not complacent.

Things are not easy, and our work is only going to get more difficult.

We will set a balanced budget this year, but the years ahead show more and more pressure.

We have to – and we will – build on the innovative thinking, the ambition, the energy that has led our successful transformation programmes up to this point and look to the future with a renewed sense of purpose.

We will be reinvigorated in our ambition to deliver better, more effective services for our residents, even within a more restricted budget envelope.

And those residents – our customers so to speak – are at the heart of everything we do.

Mr Chairman, that is my ambition, and this Council's ambition, for the new year ahead.

Our transformation and improvement plans will drive forward more radical change, will deliver faster improvement, will embed good practice throughout the organisation and will build on the culture that runs throughout this organisation as a can-do authority.

We will continue to acknowledge areas where we are falling short of the standards, we set ourselves.

We will continue to listen to our residents and respect their feedback.

We will continue to work hard with partners to deliver quality services.

We will continue to drive the necessary change until we get this right.

We will continue in our ambition that no one is left behind.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas and look forward to the new year ahead with determination and purpose.

Thank you.

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