

Leader's Statement – County Council, 8 October 2024

Mr Chairman, Members, here we are back together again for the first time since early July with the intervening months having seen some fundamental changes within this organisation, with our new Chief Executive settling in and getting familiar with the people, the place, and the idiosyncrasies of Surrey...

Welcome to your first Full Council meeting Terence. We're delighted to have you with us, and I can already sense the positive impact you are having even after just seven weeks in the role.

I'd also like to take the opportunity to welcome our new Executive Director for Adults, Wellbeing and Health Partnerships, Claire Edgar who started work yesterday – I'm sure you've wasted no time and are already fully up to speed!

And another important development in the leadership of this council came last week in the announcement that Andy Brown will be joining us next week as our new Executive Director for Finance and Corporate Services, as our S151 Officer and our Deputy Chief Executive – a vital role in challenging times, and I'm delighted we've managed to attract Andy to Surrey.

These changes – the appointment of really experienced officers with excellent track records of delivery - demonstrates Surrey's pull, as a place and as an organisation.

We are a serious, large council, with high ambitions and a strong reputation.

Terence, Claire and Andy – along with our talented wider Leadership Team – will drive this organisation even further forward at pace, help us to continually improve, and ensure that we are delivering the vital services the people of Surrey rightly deserve.

Mr Chairman, there may be change at the top, but there will be continuity in terms of our ambition and our mission as an organisation.

As I've said many times before at this meeting, we are a council that does not shirk a challenge.

We stand up to be counted, we identify where we need to improve, and we roll up our sleeves and get on with it.

We are ambitious, we're focused, innovative, and determined.

It is that attitude that has got this organisation through some huge challenges over the past few years, and it is that attitude that is going to see us through the challenges we currently face – as a council, and as a wider local government sector.

The burning issue we currently face – like every other public sector body – is a financial one.

Local government is facing financial pressures like never before – demand is accelerating and the cost of delivering everything from care packages to pothole repairs is higher than ever, and still rising.

The County Council Network's analysis released last week shows that councils in the UK face a cumulative funding gap of a massive £54 billion pounds over the next five years.

That is a fundamental problem for society in this country, that councils like this one are going to be tasked with solving.

Central government's finances are stretched, and their priorities seem to lie elsewhere, however acute the need is in frontline service delivery.

It is our responsibility to do everything we possibly can to balance our budget and balance the needs of our residents.

We must – and do – scrutinise every penny of public money that we spend, to ensure that it is delivering the best possible outcomes for the people of Surrey.

We are not a council that does things 'because we've always done things that way' – if we need to change, we do.

If there are better ways to deliver services, we'll do it.

If new challenges appear, we adapt to overcome them.

If outside forces change the climate in which we work, we will recognise that and deal with it.

Mr Chairman, we are having to do that right now.

The financial pressures are real, and there is no magic wand or government top-up on its way to close the budget gaps councils are facing up and down the country.

We must stand up and face the reality head on – as we always do.

I have every confidence in the people of this organisation, and our new leadership, to adapt, innovate, be decisive, and be bold.

We are in a stronger position financially than many councils, thanks to our transformation and financial management over the last five or six years.

But we are not immune.

We must go again. Be bold in our transformation programmes, and strict with our spending.

But we must not lose sight of what has enabled us to improve as an organisation to this point – ambition, and focus on our guiding principles, supporting those who need us most and ensuring that no one is left behind.

That means that difficult choices will no doubt have to be made across services, things will have to be done differently, or in some cases not done at all, where they are not a priority.

Government will have to support councils in a programme of reform, ultimately providing the investment and incentivisation to drive preventative activity and provide the resources to deliver early support and intervention. No council can do this on their own but if we don't innovate, we will simply be councils reduced to delivering basic statutory services.

Our residents deserve more.

So we will continue to lobby government for flexibility, for greater devolution, for statutory reform across the system and push for fiscal devolution. More of that in a minute.

For our own part we'll embrace technology, we'll drive out inefficiency, we'll operate as one council with collective responsibility for our budget, and our objectives.

The public trust us with their money. We must be extremely careful with it and ensure every penny is spent appropriately.

We have a responsibility to be sustainable, and ultimately still be here delivering services long into the future.

I know that we can do this while still improving as an organisation, and still improving outcomes for residents.

We've done it before, and we'll do it again.

Because we have good people with bright minds and the right attitude, officers and Members dedicated to public service and a belief in Surrey.

That bold thinking and ambition must not be confined to this organisation however.

We must encourage others to be bold, and to look outwardly for opportunities to be more effective and efficient, together.

A great example of that approach came just last month with the signing of our Civic Agreement with the county's three leading universities – The University of Surrey, Royal Holloway University of London, and the University of the Creative Arts.

By pooling resources and expertise, and working together towards shared goals and a collective vision for Surrey, we can better address local needs, drive innovation, and create a more resilient county fit for the future.

Mr Chairman, this is place leadership.

This is drawing on all the local expertise, knowledge, passion, and resources to collectively drive better outcomes for our residents, and indeed our businesses here in Surrey.

We can and must do more.

We've now had an indication from the current government that our County Deal agreement will be endorsed and delivered, cementing Surrey's geography and recognising our prominent role in driving growth and opportunity here.

This is good news, but I sincerely hope there is more to come in terms of devolution from central government.

I have had very constructive discussions with our District and Borough partners, and with government officials through both Surrey and the County Councils Network, and I'm encouraged that there is a collective will to deliver more powers and opportunities through further devolution measures.

I will of course remain totally engaged and committed to that agenda on behalf of this council, and the people of Surrey working with our District and Borough colleagues.

I now want to say something about SEND and those children with additional needs.

I know that there are families that believe this council has let them down. We have and for that I apologise, as I have done on a number of occasions in this public forum.

I do not and will not defend the indefensible.

But it is only fair that there is also recognition of the progress we have made on our improvement journey. The independent joint area review found many examples of good practise but that there was inconsistency in the way we were delivering some of those services and experiences to families and children.

However, the Department for Education and OFSTED endorsed our recovery plan, the plan that we are currently working through and against which we report progress to the DfE and to our Select Committee.

I'm not going to run through all of those improvements, but the starting point was to clear the backlog of assessments and by investing some millions of pounds to do that, we are now averaging 67% completion on time against a national benchmark of 50%.

Of course, we will keep working to hit 100% but there needs to be recognition that there other partners who also need to step up to deliver an education, health and care plan.

We are also investing £240 million in our SEND capital programme, creating nearly 6,000 specialist school places across the county. This is in addition to the DfE's commitment to build four new specialist free schools.

Around 260 specialist school places were made available by this authority last month at the start of the new academic year.

Creating hundreds more places in specialist units in mainstream schools and a capital programme of hundreds of millions to build specialist schools is well underway but whilst we have to relentlessly drive improvements in local delivery, we know that the rising costs of specialist placements and home to school transport is an issue facing every single upper tier authority in this country.

That is why there is cross party support through the LGA and County Councils Network for reform of the system, reform that will be challenging but essential if we are to improve outcomes for children, something the current system often fails to do.

So yes, we absolutely need to improve our communications with parents and families, yes, we absolutely need to get this right first time, every time and yes, we must

absolutely focus on giving all children the very best start in life and whatever support is appropriate to meet their needs.

And that requires all of us, Members, officers, MPs, Government Ministers to work collectively, to work with each other to deliver the best service we can deliver and that is my ask.

There isn't any single person that speaks in this space that doesn't want the very best for our children and galvanising that energy and knowledge to look at what we as a whole society need to do, should be, and must be what drives the conversations.

Let's focus on solutions, solutions that reflect a very different country from that post-war - when much of the legislation back dates to, very different from 2014 when the last set of major reforms were enacted, and very different post COVID.

Here at Surrey, we will continue to do all that we can as an administration and as a council to get this right, whilst engaging in the national conversations as nothing could be more important than the health, the well-being and the happiness of our children as they progress into adulthood.

Another area that is showing continued progress, and we are focusing much of our transformation efforts on, is Adult Social Care.

This is our biggest area of spend as a council, and a statutory responsibility we take extremely seriously.

We have recently been visited by the Care Quality Commission for more external scrutiny. That inspection process went well – again we welcome that challenge – and we look forward to receiving their report very soon.

Whatever the outcome of that inspection, we will not stop improving.

But Mr Chairman, I wanted to end on a positive note.

Four years ago next month, this administration embarked on a mission to deliver ambitious, meaningful improvements in communities right across Surrey.

Investing in improvements that were rooted in community action – things that local people wanted and needed, things that would deliver benefits to the whole community, and that would leave a legacy in Surrey's towns and villages.

Through Your Fund Surrey, we asked communities to think big. To join up and join in and working together we will Make it Happen.

And Make it Happen we have -

- Swimming pools.
- Tree planting.
- Community cafes, shops and gardens.
- Football, cricket, rugby, gymnastics, and other sports facilities.
- New village halls.
- Inclusive playgrounds.
- Scout huts.
- Wildlife centres.
- Creative arts facilities.

Your Fund Surrey HAS delivered.

We've given local communities over £20m across 45 different projects. All having a demonstrable and long-term impact on people's health and wellbeing, and quality of life.

Surrey's communities are thriving and that is something we should be incredibly proud of.

Mr Chairman, this council is delivering for the people of Surrey.

We should be proud of how far we've come, and we must use that as motivation to go further, and at pace.

There is more to do and more to improve, we know that.

There are big challenges to overcome, and tough decisions to make.

There is a new government with a new agenda.

There are world events outside of our control but nevertheless impact on our residents.

But those are not new challenges.

These are challenges that this council, this county and local government takes in its stride.

And we will.

Nothing should distract us from delivering our ambition that no one in this county will be left behind.

Thank you.