

## **MJ Awards 2020 Submission – Corporate Director of the Year**

I would like to nominate Leigh Whitehouse, Executive Director of Resources at Surrey County Council, for consideration for the award of Corporate Director of the Year in the 2020 MJ Awards.

In 2018/19, Surrey County Council was facing a cliff edge financially and some really difficult decisions had to be taken to stabilise the council's position immediately. Leigh joined the council in September 2018 as Interim Executive Director of Finance, from the London Borough of Bexley where he had been Interim Director of Finance and Corporate Services for just over a year. Prior to that he was Kingston Council's Director of Finance for more than seven years as well as a non-executive director of Achieving for Children for more than three years, the arm's length organisation set up to deliver children's services both for Kingston and neighbouring Richmond. So, no stranger to tough gigs.

Joining Surrey at this critical time and when the development of our revised financial plans was at a crucial stage, he immediately set about overhauling the council's finances.

This was at a time when Surrey was in the headlines for the wrong reasons, with an unsustainable budget and a highly critical external review by CIPFA of our financial management.

Our financial challenge was well-publicised and the organisation was propping up its budget with use of reserves in a fundamentally unsustainable way. Finance was working in a siloed way, seen as very separate. With a relatively new-ish senior leadership team under Chief Executive Joanna Killian, Surrey needed to turn the ship around – fast.

A huge corporate restructuring programme was initiated, and keeping staff spirits up during this period was tough. Staff turnover was an issue and there was a race on to fill critical posts, particularly in some failing services. A bad Ofsted compounded the difficulties, and morale, in Children's Services.

Recognising that finances were key, under Leigh's helmsmanship, Surrey initiated its own Finance Improvement Programme (FIP). Created as a direct response to this challenge, it has transformed the Finance service, delivering a balanced budget, ambitious plans and a service which is a key enabler.

This turnaround has been achieved by finance professionals acting as business partners to the organisation with an emphasis on engagement, insight and joint problem-solving; and supporting this with investment in people, their skills and behaviours through our Finance Academy.

The emphasis was on learning from others and challenging our approaches and so Surrey set up an External Assurance Panel to provide an external perspective on our development journey.

Under Leigh's leadership, this has delivered a change in the way we work and is fundamentally more than a change in people's job titles. Surrey is now striving to ensure we can better support the delivery of organisational priorities by ensuring we have a good understanding of service issues, share goals and work collaboratively to find solutions to problems.

Co-designed with services, the Finance Academy is a vital part of the wider Finance Improvement Programme. It is a different approach to financial management, learning & development and aims to strengthen the financial management capabilities across the organisation. It's an investment in people.

The Finance Academy aims to be a one-stop shop for financial management skills, and a single space for sharing finance and budget related learning and sharing good practice.

Underpinning the message that finance is everybody's responsibility has been key in enabling Surrey to turn its finances around. Under Leigh's tutelage, there has been a focus on continual improvement and no complacency. In May 2019 he became the Council's Executive Director for Resources and over the past two years has been at the heart of this transformation and influential in managing this process. During this extremely busy period, he also picked up the Brexit baton for a while, at the same time overseeing the council's EU Exit planning and processes.

Delivering this unprecedented, large scale efficiency programme, to get the organisation's finances on a stable footing, required a root and branch review of the entire operation of the Council, delivered quickly and with a clear purpose. Leigh's calm demeanour, coupled with a wealth of expertise (and some witty blogs) enabled him to inspire the wider team to fix the troublesome issues.

A forensic examination of back office functionality, service delivery, contract management and procurement and fees and charges was undertaken, and a more streamlined, agile and efficient workforce was developed through the staffing restructures.

To ensure that the council could still deliver the best possible outcomes for residents, and that the organisation was fit for the future, an ambitious Transformation programme was established to deliver services more efficiently, in a way that was sustainable in the modern world. This work is well underway, and will continue long into the future to ensure we are a sustainable, and ultimately successful organisation.

The transformation programme stretches across all aspects of the council's work, addressing both immediate and future financial and performance challenges. It has enabled Surrey to fundamentally reform the function, form and focus of the organisation.

Leigh's leadership has been instrumental in putting us in the enviable position that we have now stabilised the finances of the council and have a much stronger sense of good financial management embedded across the organisation. We achieved this by prioritising demand for those residents who need it the most, by changing how we deliver our services, restructuring our workforce, being more efficient in our back office processes, and in our

procurement and contract management, launching our transformation programme and levelling up our fees and charges.

Fast forward another 16 months or so, and the picture looks even more encouraging – not that we are saying we can afford to rest on our laurels. For any council, agreeing a budget is one of the most important milestones of the year. And this year's budget feels even more significant for Surrey and our residents.

Ahead of budget setting, Surrey County Council ran a public survey to understand residents' priorities for how their money is spent.

The responses showed an appreciation for council services that looked after the most vulnerable in society and called for further investment in highways and transport. The 2020/21 budget and capital programme reflects this.

This budget also represented a significant shift from the defensive short-term outlook that has typified the Council's financial plans for several years, replacing it with a proactive, investment led approach to delivering for Surrey residents and to achieving medium-term sustainability. This shift is most evident in our proposed Capital Programme and the ambition laid out within it.

The increased investment is not a reflection of any expectations that our medium-term funding perspective will be materially easier, but instead a recognition that investment in the right infrastructure can help keep the ongoing costs of service delivery sustainable and within available resources, as well as delivering the transformational change set out in the Council's 2030 Vision.

Council Tax will rise by 1.99%, helping to increase the Council's capital programme ambition by around £700m of new investment over the next five years. In addition, the 2% Adult Social Care 'precept' introduced by Government, will be taken up to help support our vulnerable adults and those in need of care.

Having already faced and overcome significant financial challenges over the past couple of years, when some very tough choices had to be made, including the decision not to use reserves to subsidise our expenditure, it now feels like we are on much surer footing.

We already spend £1m a day on social care funding, looking after the vulnerable, so taking care of the books has never been more important. It has been down the hard work and focus of our dedicated staff, particularly those involved on the finance side led by Leigh, that has enabled us to deliver these huge efficiencies. We are now on target to secure around £200m in efficiencies by the end of this year, creating a solid foundation on which to build a prosperous and exciting future for Surrey and Leigh has been an integral part of achieving this.

We have an ambitious five-year capital investment programme which will also deliver a range of vital infrastructure, asset and housing schemes, including around £84m in

resources for our Greener Futures plan, £270m to protect over 30,000 homes and businesses from flooding, £92m on improving and maintaining our 3,000-mile road network, and a £100m Community Investment Fund to regenerate high streets and invest in local communities.

It includes nearly £1bn to help us continue to deliver the vital services the residents of Surrey rely on, and doubles our capital programme of investment to £1.4bn over the next five years that will enable us to start delivering our ambitious projects, making journeys around the county smoother, protecting homes and businesses, increasing education and care capacity and supporting our local economy.

This budget focuses on tackling Surrey's inequality, supporting independence, working in partnership, embracing Surrey's diversity, creating a greener future, supporting our local economy, delivering a more joined up health and social care system and leading a digital revolution in the County.

## **SURREY'S FIVE-YEAR INVESTMENT PLAN.** We are making Surrey a place fit for the future. This includes investment in...

### **HIGHWAYS**

We are increasing our investment in our 3,000 miles of road and pavements, spending **£92m** on improving and maintaining Surrey's highway network



### **GREENER FUTURES**

We are developing proposals to invest around **£84m** in projects to protect the environment and help tackle the Climate Emergency, including a Solar Farm, Ultra Low Emission vehicles and electrification of transport services including buses and school transport.



### **EXTRA CARE**

We are investing **£7m** in the first phase of a programme to deliver 725 specially adapted homes for elderly residents, to increase independence and reduce hospital admittance.



### **SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES**

We are investing **£31m** to provide 883 additional places for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, including a new SEND school in Woking.



### **COMMUNITY INVESTMENT FUND**

We are providing a **£100m** fund to regenerate high streets and invest in local communities, working with residents, businesses and partners like the Districts and Boroughs.



### **SURREY FLOOD ALLEVIATION SCHEME**

We are investing **£270m** to protect over 30,000 homes and businesses from the risk of flooding – enhancing the environment, attracting investment and keeping residents safe.



### **SCHOOLS**

We are investing a further **£71m** to provide additional school places and improve school facilities across the County



Leigh has been instrumental in helping us to plan to deliver on all these projects. Now the hard work is beginning to pay off.

Ofsted and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire and Rescue Services have recognised this progress recently in our Children's Services and Fire service, and we're determined to keep raising the bar across all our services.

A huge amount of work has gone into this budget - from the finance team but also across all service areas - to ensure they are designed to help us deliver the [key priorities of our organisation strategy](#) for the next five years.

Alongside the finance workstreams, Leigh also is also responsible for a large contingent of the IT & Digital programmes which underpin the council's *Moving Closer to Residents* (MCTR) programme. Ever since Surrey Leader Tim Oliver announced a ground-breaking decision to shift the council's HQ back into the county of Surrey, in April 2018, work has continued apace to provide staff with the mobile devices and technology they need to carry out their jobs in a more agile fashion.

The move, which will involve closing County Hall, the council's existing civic heart in Kingston upon Thames and moving it to Woking, will place services at the centre of communities. This transformational shift to the way Surrey does business means the majority of council staff will be agile workers, focussing on quality outputs and the results, with the ability to work anywhere, anyhow, anytime.

A large proportion of the council's Contact Centre and other staff have now been issued with new devices, which will enable the majority to work more flexibly than before. The remainder of the existing County Hall 1600-odd workforce are expected to follow suit from the end of 2020.

Over the next three years or so, the council expects the vast majority of the council's non venue-based staff (we have 10,000 staff in total) to have fully transformed the way they work, bringing about greater efficiencies, better partnership working and better outcomes for our residents.

I believe that Leigh, in his Corporate Director role has put the council firmly on the path to that goal, with ambitious financial restructuring, complemented by a continuing grip on the fiscal reins, and dovetailed with an ambitious roll-out of mobile devices which will further future-proof our council. Just as critically, everyone who works with Leigh would tell you that he is the epitome of collegiality and professionalism. He is supremely well-respected by members and officers alike and demonstrates the values and behaviours we believe in as a council with every single interaction.

Joanna Killian, Chief Executive of Surrey County Council

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