

Surrey Green Party, Consultation Response.

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Introduction

These Surrey County Council cuts are primarily driven by its reduction in contribution from central government – as the government has made tax cuts elsewhere. However, there are also better choices that Surrey could make itself. We argue both that:

- the government should better prioritise the services provided by local government (more so than the small increase of £9m in Surrey following the local government settlement in December); and
- that Surrey County Council should find better ways to balance its budget. This could include a shift to unitary councils and not making cuts on one hand, whilst spending over a £billion in properties across the UK. Instead of short-term cuts to services, the council should invest for the longer term.

Our response for each of the 5 consultations is included below, before providing overall conclusions.

A. Children Centres

We do not support the plans to close 37 children centres across Surrey. Most of Surrey's children centres are co-located inside schools which provide good links between schools and children care. They are also well spread out giving good local accessibility.

For example, the plans to close Earlswood and Dovers Green Children Centres would mean that there are no children centres between Redhill and Horley. Increasing the distance to travel to children centres will likely reduce their use, and the services they provide. This would turn a local, universal service to one with reduced outreach and capacity. Targeting our most vulnerable children (including those with SEND) and providing universal access across Surrey are not mutually exclusive.

Reducing the number of children centres will reduce the space available to provide the current services. The scale of staffing reductions proposed is not detailed in the consultation. The actual reduction in services provided is also not detailed. The true impact of the proposed changes is not set out. The consultation is also counter intuitive and confusing. This renders it inadequate.

The consultation on children centres does not specifically mention the role of children centres in supporting young children with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). This is a crucial role that is currently provided by these centres. It should not be reduced as a result of this consultation.

Children centres are often used (free of charge) by health visitors and for health outreach into the community. This is a valuable resource. It is appropriate that the centres continue to act as community hubs in this way.

The extension of children centres 'early-help' for 0-5's to support children up to age 11 is welcomed. However, in parallel to this consultation the number of youth workers employed by the council (operating from youth centres) has halved. This has reduced the youth programme in many areas of

Surrey to a skeleton service. The best way to improve the early help from 0-11 would be to provide continuity between the existing children centres and remaining youth services (restoring these to a decent service level – noting the knock-on benefits in community, health and wellbeing that effective youth and community centres provide).

The early help strategy presented as part of this consultation proposes a targeted offer. Surrey needs to improve its support to its most vulnerable children *whilst still providing the universal access that children centres provide*.

Older children are currently housed in separate centres – called youth centres. It makes sense for the pre-school role of a children’s centre to be co-located in a school whilst a youth centre is ideally *not* located in a school itself. We do not support the combining (in effect) of pre-school focus of ‘children centres’ and youth clubs.

B. Concessionary Bus Travel

This support for those with disability to use Surrey’s bus services should not be withdrawn or reduced. The council should encourage the use of public transport, not reduce it, especially for our most vulnerable residents. As disabled people are disproportionately affected by austerity and most likely to have a lower income, this change will have an impact on equality. This is not reflected in the equality impact assessment completed.

Both the proposal to stop free travel before 9.30am for persons with disability and the proposed removal of the companion pass would have a negative impact.

The number of groups consulted should include those who present with specific disabilities – such as those with sight impairment and epilepsy.

Making this cut would create a difference between the level of support provided in Surrey with that provided in London. Large parts of Surrey are commuting areas to London, so it would be logical to maintain parity with the support to those with disability provided in the capital.

If this cut is implemented it could have an impact on the health and wellbeing of those affected. If it means that some Surrey residents are no longer able to work, then this would require central government paying out more in benefits. These incentives for our residents to work are crucial. In the past this subsidy was, at least in effect, paid for by central government. The money was then transferred as a grant to the county council (as with other local authorities across the UK) and then not ring-fenced but included in the level of central government support, which has now been completely taken away. Instead of reflecting this loss of government support, with a removal of council service being provided the council should engage with the government to continue funding councils at a reasonable level, to avoid such impacts.

C. Libraries and Cultural Services

How does library and culture services achieve £4m of cuts?

The scope for the Council’s forthcoming Asset and Place Strategy (approved by the Surrey County Council cabinet in October 2018) suggests that the county aims to operate from around 4-5 larger town hubs and circa 20 smaller satellite hubs (with at least one in each district and borough) by 2025.

Currently Surrey has 52 libraries including ten 'community partnered' libraries. The consultation suggests that in future libraries will be co-located with other services and highlights the success of doing this in Merstham (tripling of library use).

Co-location or library closures – unclear:

- The principle of co-location is supported. Co-location of voluntary and community and faith sector (VCF), sub-letting space from the council, could be a better way to support these services and improve their security (e.g. rather than the council paying for them to continue paying higher private sector rents).
- The wider 'strategy' set out in the consultation is unclear. Does co-location mean a reduction in the number of libraries in line with the stated aspiration of 24 or 25 hubs? If so this could represent a halving in the number of libraries. **This would not be supported.** To remain a universally accessible service across Surrey the number of libraries should not be reduced. A locally accessible library service is preferred to a reduced number of libraries open more hours (which would create a post-code lottery – with better services in bigger centres, and less accessible library services in other parts of Surrey).

Volunteering approach:

- The consultation talks about a strategy of replacing qualified librarians with volunteers. **This is not supported.** However, location of libraries in community hubs could increase volunteering opportunities in libraries alongside trained librarians, which could be positive. Whether volunteers are additional or would result in redundancies, and/or the *extent* to which this is proposed is unclear. Again, the consultation is asking for general views, but not sharing details of what is actually proposed.
- Overall, it is important that the volunteering in place of public sector workers does not displace volunteering that fulfils other vital community activities. The council should not be competing with the volunteer, community and faith (VCF) sector for volunteers, but supporting this sector to increase social capital and strengthen communities.

Conclusion

The notion of a 'big society' was first coined by David Cameron. Many suggested that it was just a cover for cuts, for austerity. The notion of co-locating council services with community activities is supported and could help create a 'big society'. But it should not be a centralisation (de-localisation) of services and used to replace public sector workers with volunteers.

The council should continue to provide the current number of libraries and librarians. Co-location of these with other county and local council, youth centres and subsidised space for VCF sector is supported.

D. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy

There is currently a long waiting list, especially in some parts of Surrey (including Redhill and Frimley areas) for those (e.g. on the autism spectrum) with applications for EHCP. Two recent cases in Redhill involved parents waiting **over a year** for the process to be completed. This is unacceptable. This requires more resource to ensure that the process is timely, to make sure the support required by SEND children is provided.

The proposal to reduce the use of NMI school places for SEND outside of Surrey, is supported, as long as this means that Surrey County Council are planning to increase provision of school places in Surrey instead (as opposed to simply reducing the level of SEND provision). When there was a shortage of central government funding to provide the required mainstream school places in Surrey over the last few years Surrey County Council invested money to ensure these school places were provided. However, the same level of support for SEND children was not provided (hence the particularly high use of NMI and out-of-county provision for Surrey children, compared to those elsewhere). The same level of funding to increase the provision for SEND children at mainstream (and specialist) Surrey schools should now be provided. This should be the case for SEND needs at all ages of the school spectrum, including nursery/children centres (noting separate consultation), primary school places, secondary school places, and post-16 education provision.

The provision for SEND pupils not currently attending a school (for whatever reason) should also be sustained.

Reducing the need for NMI places outside of Surrey should mean more SEND children are accommodated closer to home.

The aims of this consultation are supported on the basis that:

- This represents increased investment in new SEND places in Surrey
- That this reduces the distance that SEND children need to travel to go to school.

This should save money both in terms of the high cost of NMI provision (including outside of Surrey) and the high cost of individual transport, often long distances, to these schools.

E. Community Recycling Centres (CRCs)

Comments on consultation options:

- 1.1 The consultation says that this is something that we “need” to do – and then no real options considered. Reducing the number of CRCs from 15 to either 11 or 9 will likely reduce, rather than increase recycling rates. This is not supported.
 - 1.2 The options do not give much hope for those living near 4 of the CRCs. These are proposed to be closed in each of the 4 options. There is no good option for those who use these 4 centres.
 - 1.3 There is a legal requirement that all CRCs should be reasonably accessible. The closure of recycling centres proposed will reduce accessibility for those near the 4-6 centres proposed to be closed. This will turn a universal service across the county, to one with more significant differences in travel time to/from recycling centres across the county.
 - 1.4 The consultation does not have either an equality impact assessment or assessment on its environmental impact (e.g. recycling and reuse, fly-tipping). These should be carried out before any further steps are taken.
 - 1.5 The consultation is vague. The amount of money that would be saved by shutting each of the 6 CRCs considered for closure should be set out, together with the savings and impacts of the other measures proposed.
 - 1.6 The government has just released a new waste and resource strategy for England. This should provide options for positive alternatives, rather than closing community recycling centres.
- 2. Go for a Better Option - save money by investing-to-save in raising reuse and recycling more instead.*

- 2.1 Aim for 75% recycling now. Surrey's waste plan will be consulted on from 14th January and aims that Surrey reaches a recycling rate of 75%, increasing by 1% each year. Yet Surrey County Council's recycling rates have just reduced, following the reduction in operating hours and introduction of charges at the CRCs.
- 2.2 The recycling rates at each CRC should be raised (and benchmarked with UK best practice) with a target to be 'best-in-class'. The cost benefit of this could be calculated instead of looking at short-sighted plans for closure.
- 2.3 Deliver savings by elevating recycling rates and recycling income instead across Surrey. If the Surrey-wide planned cooperation of the county with district and borough councils for recycling collection was to separate recycling more and introduce more bring sites for glass bottles its revenue could be significantly increased (see Reigate and Banstead comparative recycling income from separating out paper).
- 3 Propose CRCs as local reuse and recycling centres. Instead of closing these CRCs they could have a shift to encouraging more reuse (all linked to the Surrey Reuse Network, not just on-site sale of items at larger CRCs) and recycling. So they are known as the RRCs (reuse and recycling centres). The recycling rate at these centres is higher than the dry mix recycling rate at doorsteps, so could encourage higher recycling (by better separation of waste) for regular household waste collections too. Existing sites should not be sold off.

3. Investigate other initiatives too.

These could include:

- 3.1 Instead of closing CRCs, consider the option of additional, more reuse-focused community run recycling centres (such as in Newmarket). Running these as not-for-profit community ventures rather than SCC/Suez to draw a profit will likely increase the range of items diverted from recycling and disposal (not just 'cherry-picking' higher value items) and could also link to charities that provide reuse for those on benefits/in need (e.g. Surrey furniture reuse charities, Stripey Stork - <http://www.stripeystork.org.uk/>).
- 3.2 Increasing the number of small unmanned bring sites could also be used as 'mini-unmanned' CRCs to improve accessibility of recycling facilities.
- 3.3 Costs of fly-tipping as well as recycling should be shared between the county and the district and borough councils so any knock-on fly-tipping impact from the county council's decisions (such as this one, to close CRCs) is not borne by the local councils instead.
- 3.4 The idea of extending charging to timber could backfire and should be carefully reviewed. Increasing separation of timber into different classes of timber instead would increase what can be reused, and locally recycled should be considered instead. This could link to the community wood recycling network, and potentially also offer a service to the commercial sector.
- 3.5 Use Surrey County Council's strategy and action plan to become Single-Use Plastic free to focus on a culture of reduce, reuse, recycle. Culture change, alongside imaginative invest-to-save measures could really shift waste management from being a cost to reuse/recycling centres being about repurposing and sharing better what we already have locally.
- 3.6 Establish a 'residual waste research' facility at a CRC to improve recycling rates, working with the government. Items that are persistently not recycled, or thrown away should be designed-out, through improved manufacturing, and better legislation. This could include single use plastic but focus on other items as well. This could assist in the government improving waste strategy and performance across the UK.

Conclusion: From property deals to investing in better services and stronger communities

Surrey is proposing £250m of cuts to its (revenue – annual spending) budget over the next year – at the same time as continuing its property strategy of buying up to £1 billion of real estate across the UK (aiming to deliver a further £15m/year from 2020 to 2030 – and its £1.2 billion joint venture deal to sell off sites Surrey County Council own itself). Surrey is shifting its property ownership from sites that provide services to a property portfolio.

Instead, the council could have a more ambitious plan for investment in Surrey.

- **1. Investing in what we own – not selling it and buying property across the UK instead.** Surrey should invest in better care homes (for older people, those with SEND needs, for looked after children), day care centres, and invest (as required) to provide the SEND places in mainstream schools we need. Surrey County Council will be more able to deliver a strong and inspiring 2030 vision for Surrey. We can develop our assets in Surrey to better deliver our services, better support the voluntary and community sector, and build stronger communities. Investing in what we own, and working in partnership with others, should reduce our budget needs.
- **2. This means more community-hubs, not less.** The council's asset and place strategy proposal suggests it wants to co-locate services in community hubs but have a total of 25. There are currently 15 community recycling centres, 52 libraries, 58 children centres and many youth centres across Surrey. These should be innovated and transformed, to make what we already have better, not closed and amalgamated.
- **3. And we should invest-to-save in our future.** Invest-to-save should not be limited to the services we provide – but should provide more than just a return on income invested. Surrey should invest in renewable energy and energy efficiency of Surrey's public sector buildings, lead in providing electric charging points and explore innovative ways to extend public transport. This would help Surrey lead in helping communities be more sustainable. Investing in a materials recycling plant (that separates out dry recyclables) in Surrey would mean that more of the money from recycling comes back to the council, and residents.
- **Prevention is better than cure.** In the same way that fixing a pothole avoids the (far greater) cost of road resurfacing, Surrey should invest-to-save in public health (such as with a long-term health bond), invest more in early-help (children centres, youth services) and invest in quality care that keeps our most vulnerable out of hospital. Reducing budgets in ways that reduce our basic frontline provision of services will harm the interests of Surrey residents. The role of the County Council should be to help and support its residents in the long term and these consultations do not deliver that aim.