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Cllr Shaun Macdonald
Leader of the Council

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Cllr Tim Oliver
Leader of Surrey County Council

Date: 31st October 2024

Open letter by email & CC'd to:
Nick Steevens, Interim CEO, SHBC
Terence Herbert, CEO, SCC
Al Pinkerton MP, Surrey Heath

Dear Tim,

Family Support Programme

I'm writing in formal follow up to recent Surrey Leaders discussions about the Family Support Programme transition, which was not the first time concerns had been raised about the pending serious impact on vulnerable families, by myself in good faith for my residents, along with other council leaders across Surrey, with a view to finding a route forward.

Unfortunately, in the current context, I want to officially express my dismay regarding the decision by Surrey County Council (SCC) to cease the Family Support Programme effective from March 2025. As you are aware, Surrey Heath Borough Council delivers the Family Support Programme (FSP) on behalf of both Runnymede and Surrey Heath.

Whilst cessation of the FSP was largely blamed on the potential loss of funding from the Department for Education, it has been apparent for several months that there has been a longstanding intention of SCC to terminate the FSP irrespective. Not only has this approach lacked transparency, it has mirrored the approach taken by SCC in other services, such as verge maintenance and on-street parking enforcement, where changes to services have been made with limited consultation or change management, and without proper regard for the dramatic implications on our residents.

FSP delivery, across both Surrey Heath and Runnymede, has been exemplar, with no issues with performance of the service being highlighted during the quarterly meetings between the FSP lead officer and County colleagues. Delivery of the FSP service at a local level also ensures there is closer links to support services such as benefits and housing teams matched, with strong links to other partner community based organisations. This makes the withdrawal of the service even more confusing, particularly when it has been repeatedly stated by SCC that the work of the FSP teams across Surrey will not be

transferred to County, suggesting that vulnerable families will cease to be supported by experienced, high-performing teams and effectively cast adrift.

Surrey County Council recently introduced a new in-house Intensive Family Support Service (IFSS), which it is maintained directly replicates the roles of the quadrant FSP teams. It would be entirely logical that the families supported by FSP will transfer to the IFSS service from 1st April onwards, however this has been strongly refuted by your officers who, even in recent meetings have not provided clarification over which entity will be supporting our vulnerable families, probably due to SCC's desire to avoid TUPE responsibilities.

Instead your officers have stated that any families that need to be referred to County, in the short term due to FSP capacity issues during transition, should be directed to the Children's Single Point of Access. This suggestion does not provide clarity for those vulnerable families who are in urgent need of support. The impact of the lack of clarity and inevitable change in support pathway during this transition will inevitably cause harm and unnecessary delays in supporting our families and has not been properly considered.

What makes the loss of the FSP more concerning is the absolute lack of engagement with partners around the loss of this incredibly valuable service which impacts some of THE most vulnerable families in our boroughs. Indeed the Early Help Strategic Partnership Board which is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the County Early Help Strategy had no awareness that the FSP programme was being terminated until it was raised by representatives of the District & Borough Councils in the last meeting on 10th September. This is despite the County Director for Family Resilience & Safeguarding, who is responsible for the decision, being Joint Chair of the Strategic Partnership Board. Indeed it was only on 1st October, after substantial pressure from Districts and Boroughs for clarity, that the Chief Executive of SCC finally confirmed that services would be curtailed.

The lack of proper consultation, change management and communication is appalling, as is the premeditated decision to cast vulnerable families adrift without support. I maintain that residents will be horrified that this SCC decision made without consultation, loses the valuable expertise required to support vulnerable residents, who are now left out of sight and out of mind by County decision makers. It also inflicts substantial redundancy costs on other Councils, with a total disregard to the public purse, which has enough holes in it already, without self-inflicting them.

I would urge you to place vulnerable families at the forefront of decision making by working collaboratively with Borough partners to properly manage this transition, and minimise the impact on the public purse, as we face an exodus of skilled staff soon across many areas, placing families in greater jeopardy and lacking the support they so desperately need.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shaun Macdonald', written in a cursive style.

Cllr Shaun Macdonald
Leader of the Council