

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL  
NEWSLETTER FROM KEN GULATI

5.8.2020

**Libraries**

Banstead library reopened on the 3rd of August in the second tranche of library openings in the County. Initially there will be a very limited service of click and collect reserved items at the door and returning of items without public access to the building . However on the 17th of August this will move to the public being admitted to the building , limited browsing facilities , and a computer service.

**Roads and Footpaths**

You will have noticed that a number of local roads have been resurfaced or surfaced dressed in the last few weeks ahead of expectations. This is a result of a deliberate decision to bring forward as many roadworks as possible during the emergency when there will be less traffic disruption than would usually be expected.

Garretts Lane resurfacing is almost concluded but will be extended to 17 August as the statutory undertakers have not quite finished their work on the ironworks.

I am pleased to say that the footpath from Chipstead Road to Wood Lane, which has become very overgrown, will be restored shortly with funding that I have been able to make available although that will have exhausted the current pool of funds at my disposal for these purposes.

**County Hall**

Although the search for a new Surrey heart has been temporarily suspended work is still proceeding to make County Hall in Kingston ready for disposal. Normally about 500 staff work there everyday with about 1500 staff based there. The plans to overhaul the way in which SCC functions (Transitioning) drawn up in the Summer of 2018 had any event visaged many of the staff based at County Hall working remotely for most of the time. The current emergency has led to many more working from home so that at the present time there is only a skeleton staff at County Hall . Those who need an office base are being placed around the County at other SCC owned buildings . Social services and adult social care staff are working in centres near to the area of their operations such as Redhill, Woking and Guildford . Others, with a wider focus may be based in Woking .The Canon building in Reigate has been acquired in part to house the Priory school but in part as offices for staff out of Kingston. It is hoped that by the end of the year SCC will be in a position to dispose of County Hall even though no new Surrey heart has yet been located. It is anticipated that at that point County Hall will be sold as soon as the commercial issues are resolved.

Committee and council meetings have all been taking place remotely since the current emergency in March and a full council meeting took place remotely on the 7th of July. This has all seemed to work successfully. It is quite clear that even after the ending of the current emergency measures the world is not likely to go back wholly to previous ways of working. The transition to using modern

technology have been greatly accelerated. It seems unlikely that most small meetings will revert to a physical mode. However I think some of the bigger meetings are likely to resume on a face to face basis as there are some factors that cannot be replicated virtually with a large gathering. I have always maintained that, whilst virtual meetings are convenient some of the time, democracy depends on personal contact. It is in the corridors and canteens that ideas ferment and undercurrents grow until they break surface with support that has been engendered by informal contacts. The current situation whereby none of the members have any particular occasion to meet personally and the public have no place to go to voice their clamour seem to me to in the long run to be inimical to the Democratic process.

### **Local Government Reform**

The government is pressing ahead with its intention to reform local government, the current structure of which has been in place since 1973. They do not see a future for a two tier structure above parish and town councils. They are focussed on unitary authorities and possibly locally elected mayors. Following reform the intention is to devolve greater powers to the local level. The prize in view is a saving in Surrey of between £40m - £135m. to the council taxpayer

The Secretary of State is seeking informal proposals from SCC by the end of the summer and will take a view as to whether these are workable with a view to general local consultation in the autumn. If approved the implementation would likely take place next year.

The options seem to boil down to a single county authority or two or three. The population of Surrey is 1.1m people and the government view is that an authority of less than 400,000 would not be economical. They have indicated no upper limit. The arguments are that a single authority could be too remote from its electorate and might be unwieldy in terms of the numbers of councillors. However it would be financially the more efficient and better able to absorb increased powers. More than one authority could be closer to their electorates but would multiply the machinery and therefore the costs. Three authorities would have the same advantages and disadvantages in greater proportions.

The government have asked for SCC's informal view by the end of September and they will then formulate a white paper for consultation locally with a view to legislation early in the new year.