

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL
NEWSLETTER FROM KEN GULATI
19 OCTOBER 2020

COUNTY HALL

1. Surrey County Council have now resolved to move their new Civic Heart to the former Canon building on Cockshott Hill in Reigate. Surrey acquired the freehold of that building during the summer for £48m. I suggested at the time that we might want to use it as our new headquarters but at that time the general opinion was that it was not central enough within Surrey. Other sites having proved disappointing it has now been chosen.
2. The building is delightful. It is set in exceptionally large grounds and has parking for around 450 cars. It was built about 20 years ago in a modern style but there are a number of artistic and other unusual features which make it very special.
3. It is built on three floors in three linked sections all of which are spacious light and airy. There is a very large amount of open spaced office accommodation in one block around a central atrium, so much in fact that Surrey Police and Surrey Fire and Rescue Service will both have a presence - a real plus. The civic parts of the building will be very adequate. There is a large area for a council chamber which is being set up with movable furniture so that it can be used for other purposes from time to time. There is a large lecture theatre and many many meeting rooms both large and small which is the lifeblood of an organisation such as Surrey. I recall that in County Hall I frequently needed to hold small informal meetings with officers but was unable to find an unoccupied room without pre-booking.
4. It is fair to say that there are a number of problems to overcome the chief one of which is that transport from the train-stations is currently difficult. Reigate station is a long walk from the building and Redhill station, which is a more focal point on the rail network, does not have a door-to-door bus service. These matters are being tackled and as the transport authority one would expect SCC to be able to deal with that. Having said that, of course, Reigate is close to the M25 and within easy reach of Gatwick, Heathrow and central London.
5. It is intended to relocate the school currently in Reigate Priory to a new purpose built site in the grounds of the Civic Heart subject to planning.
6. There are a large number of parties interested in purchasing County Hall in Kingston. Currently negotiations are taking place with the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames as to planning matters with a view to maximising the sale price. Of course the sale of County Hall may not necessarily coincide with the move into the new Civic Heart which is intended to take effect on 1st January 2021.

UNIFIED AUTHORITIES

7. The government has announced that owing to the COVID emergency they do not have the facility to process as many authorities as they had intended in the first wave. Consequently they will progress three counties in the coming White Paper and we will be postponed until the next wave.

Surrey have therefore put on hold all consideration of the issue for the time being. As the proposal has not yet gone away however I will summarise the background.

8. The government's stated intention in their election manifesto was to combine the powers and duties of the borough councils and the county councils under the umbrella of single or unified authorities. The intention would be to eliminate the proliferation of administrative costs which it was thought would amount to a saving of between £90M and £150M in Surrey depending upon how it was organised. The government's preference is that the amalgamated authority should manage not less than 600,000 people. Surrey, with a population of 1.2m, was not ruled out as a single entity. Initially the Ministry asked SCC for their thoughts to consider in preparing the White Paper. The White Paper was to be published around about now and at that point public consultation would take place.

9. The essential arguments are that the larger the area covered by the new authority the greater will be the savings on the council tax payers purse but the more distant could that authority then be to its electorate. In addition some matters such as planning need to be dealt with locally. In other counties which have completed the process the democratic deficit problem has been tackled by setting up area boards with delegated powers and a budget. It was thought that in Surrey these could coincide conveniently with the clinical commissioning areas and for us that would have meant an area very roughly covering the old Banstead Urban District Council. The area boards could consist of interested volunteers, elected members, representatives of local organisation, the police and the fire authority. As it happens Surrey is already working under a separate initiative on expanding the functions of the Local Joint Committee to a similar set up.

10. As to how many authorities should cover Surrey the arguments boil down to up to three. Dividing Surrey into two on an east-west basis would produce two very unequal organisations because much of the nerve centre and wealth of Surrey is in the West. Three would entail one in the north-west one in the north-east and one in the south/centre. Each would then have a population of about 400,000. This is below the government's preferred size and would be in danger of losing much of the intended savings.

11. Just as planning would need to be dealt with on a local basis so adult social care and children's services need to continue be managed on a county wide basis. In other areas this has been achieved by hiving off each of those services to a separate quango but experience has been that this has not been a great success.

COVID

12. The process of transformation of Surrey's finances launched two years ago continues although now of course overshadowed as a major objective by the Covid emergency. Whilst Surrey's public health responsibilities have administered a jolt to the budget process we are at the moment not far off course. There is a projected budget deficit of £9M but it is expected that there can be a slight alteration of course at this stage such that the budget should come in in balance.

13. Most of you will of course have heard that Elmbridge (being the Cobham and Esher area) has become a Tier 2 Covid area.

Ken Gulati
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