



Thursday, 11 March 2021

UPDATE ON CULTURAL SERVICES

Purpose of report:

This report provides an update on the Council's cultural services, the response to and impact of COVID-19 on front line services. This report also provides information about future opportunities and direction of cultural services.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 COVID -19 has demonstrated the importance of cultural services as never before. The cultural offer across the county has positively impacted the lives of Surrey residents this year as this report sets out; uplifting, entertaining and engaging so many. This great work will be built on as we come out of lockdown to ensure the diverse cultural offer across Surrey continues to play an important part in every community, bringing people together, supporting the local economy, and helping to improve lives.
- 1.2 The Surrey Arts Service, Heritage Service and the Public Libraries service together are a key part of everyday life across Surrey's communities, with increasing numbers of people engaging with, experiencing and being inspired as part of Surrey's cultural offer. The recent appointment of a new Cabinet Member for communities (including cultural services) demonstrates the council's commitment to connect residents with the diverse range of cultural services that are delivered and commissioned by the council and beyond.
- 1.3 This report provides an overview of each of the key service areas, setting out the innovative ways in which they have and continue to respond to meet the needs of Surrey residents and provide the best possible services during this time. Some examples of the positive feedback received from residents in response to these efforts are included. It's also encouraging that The Department of Media, Culture & Sport and the Arts Council have been complimentary about the County Council's work during the pandemic, and indeed more broadly, and we will continue to collaborate closely with them.

- 1.4 The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably had and continues to have a major impact on delivery of frontline cultural services. This report sets out some of the future challenges but also the opportunities for this suite of services.

2. Surrey Arts Service

2.1 Overview

- 2.1.1 Surrey Arts engages, creates and inspires children and adults through the provision of high-quality music education and participation in arts and creative activities. As the lead partner for the Music Education Hub, Surrey Arts provides music tuition around the county plus the opportunity to participate in ensembles for children of all ages and instrument hire to increase access to music education. From Singing Picnics, through to arts in the environment, artists' Open Studio events and partnership with Surrey-based arts organisations such as the Watts Gallery and Farnham Maltings, the arts are accessible for all.

2.2 COVID-19 impact and response

- 2.2.1 The pandemic and related lockdowns inevitably had an impact on Arts services, with face to face sessions and classes cancelled, events in schools limited and some services, such as the Wardrobe, closed.
- 2.2.2 In response to this, the service began developing new activities appropriate to the situation, and this work is on-going. This has included increasing the use of digital platforms for the delivery of events, promotional material and activities including tutorial videos, concerts, live practical arts sessions for families, masterclasses and Artist studio tours.
- 2.2.3 Key achievements during the period of the pandemic include:
- Quickly setting up, in collaboration with the SCC IT & Digital service, a high quality, safe online provision (Surrey Arts Online Learning - SAOL) within weeks of the first lockdown to help facilitate the delivery of activities, continue supporting students learning, and safeguard income. This also ensured the Arts Council were happy to continue supporting the service through the annual grant they provide to the council.
 - Visits to the Arts Service YouTube channel increased by 900% from 3300 views pre-COVID-19 the previous year to 29,700 by January 2021.

- Our COVID-19 response for working with SEND and Vulnerable students has been recognised and shortlisted for two national Music and Drama education awards.
- 400 teachers from Surrey schools have benefitted from training Surrey Arts has delivered.
- Over 230 pupils attended an online holiday programme (SMASH). The first virtual open day attracted nearly 3000 visitors.
- COVID-19 safe Surrey Open Artist Studio programme delivered with 8500 visitors and £303,500 of artwork sales.

2.3 Feedback from parents and carers

2.3.1 There has been lots of very positive feedback received about the service; comments include:

- “We’ve been really impressed with how well Surrey Arts have adapted to the delivery of online lessons. Our son has really enjoyed his lessons and this time at home has given him lots of opportunity to practice. Thank you all.”
- “Sessions have helped C's progress enormously; she's been able to practice and develop aspects of her playing really well with the guidance and feedback she's received. She's really enthused by playing and motivated throughout the week. It's been really great that this has happened... nothing but praise, zoom has worked well once we got the hang of it. Thanks very much”
- “The music lessons have helped my daughter to continue having a weekly routine and helped her mental wellbeing.”

2.4 Challenges and opportunities

2.4.1 COVID-19 and the resulting national lockdowns and pressures on family finances have inevitably reduced the level of demand and associated income the service would otherwise have expected from classes, hires, events and concerts and events.

2.4.2 Uncertainties remain and the service is developing detailed plans with different scenarios depending on what is permissible in the pandemic going forwards. The service continues to work closely with schools to explore how it can provide opportunities for pupils to access the service, face to face, as much as possible throughout lockdown and as regulations and circumstances change.

- 2.4.3 Looking ahead, the service will continue to work closely with the Arts Council and consider how to further strengthen the arts offer across the county while addressing the impact of lost income.

3. Heritage Service

3.1 Overview

- 3.1.1 Surrey Heritage service based at Surrey History Centre, Woking, provides a high-quality archives and records service for the people of Surrey and others throughout the county and worldwide with an interest in Surrey's past.
- 3.1.2 Housed in the Surrey History Centre, the nationally accredited archive and local studies service holds County Council records since 1889 and documentary evidence for Surrey's history extending back to the 12th century. The information held is crucial for the Council's commitment to democratic accountability and its obligations under the Freedom of Information and Data Protection law.

3.2 COVID-19 impact and response

- 3.2.1 Following the government led closure of the service in March 2020, The Surrey History Centre reopened to the public in July 2020 (three days a week for pre-booked visits only to view pre-ordered items) and since then has been open during times that have allowed in response to government guidance. It is currently closed again to the public, although a skeleton staff is continuing to ensure the holdings are secure and the storage environment maintained, to respond to enquiries, particularly urgent freedom of information (FOI) requests, and to provide a reprographics service.
- 3.2.2 By responding proactively to the situation, the service has been able to increase its online reach and usage. Key achievements during the period of the pandemic include:
- Adding over 37,000 images of the holdings to the online catalogue during lockdown.
 - From the beginning of the pandemic the service has sought to create a permanent record of its impact on Surrey and its residents.
 - Throughout the pandemic the service continues to promote the service through the website and social media, leading to a significant increase in public interaction and engagement.

- The archaeological unit, based at the Heritage Centre, created popular guided audio walks for the public to use, from two of their grant funded projects Witley at War and Woking Palace and its Park.
- Parish registers were also published on FindmyPast at the beginning of 2020 and those images have been viewed 73,223 times, generating additional income for the service.

Facilitating online access to the service holdings. There has seen a significant surge in its online use during the last few months. Downloads of images of their records published on Ancestry have risen from 3,289,517 in 2019 to 4,303,629 in 2020 – a 31% rise. This has generated additional income for the service.

3.3 Comments from residents

3.3.1 During the pandemic, the Heritage Service has received many positive comments from residents when using the service, including:

- “I should just like to thank you very much for the copies of medical records for my mother, who had been in Netherne Hospital. A few facts have now been adjusted for us and it has helped to put our minds at rest as to why she was there. Many thanks for your prompt and efficient attention.”
- “Thank you all for your hard work, I know that one of the main things keeping me sane during these uncertain times has been being able to spend time on my family tree, without all of you wonderful people working behind the scenes this would not be possible x”

3.4 Challenges and opportunities

3.4.1 The Heritage service has faced a significant loss in income by being closed, however the increase of income from our research and digitisation service and royalties from our records which have been published on commercial family history websites, has to a limited extent offset this. Commercial archaeological work has also been restricted although many small-scale projects are able to proceed and are conducted in a COVID-19 secure way.

3.4.2 A recovery plan is in place to enable the History Centre to re-open safely as and when the situation changes. Looking ahead, further work will be completed to ensure we capitalise on the increased digital take up,

tackle reduced income, and continue to develop the service to meet the needs of residents.

4. Public Library Service

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 Surrey Libraries hold a unique place in communities with 141,188 library users using the service and making 2,905,618 visits to Surrey Libraries prior to the start of COVID-19. The service provides universal access to 52 libraries (including 10 community partnered libraries), the digital library service including an online library request and renewal service available 24/7, and a home library service for housebound residents. Libraries offer:

- A comprehensive collection of reading materials, catering for all reading interests and age groups.
- Digital services, including e-books, e-newspapers, e-audio, computer access, online resources and information, free Wi-Fi and mobile apps.
- Events and activities such as reading groups, clubs, story times for under 5s, code clubs, maker days, women's digital club and author visits.

4.2 COVID-19 impact and response

4.2.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant challenge to the Library Service and its operational delivery. The government closed libraries as part of its first lockdown plan with Surrey Libraries closing on 20th March 2020.

4.2.2 The service has risen to the challenge and adapted successfully having been recognised by the government as an essential service in supporting residents learning, digital inclusion and health and wellbeing during this unprecedented time. After starting to reopen from July 26, libraries have remained open, with the service offer adapting in line with government guidance. In lockdowns 2 and 3 and during the higher-level Tier 4 restrictions, libraries have continued to provide a click and collect model for book use, essential PC use for those without internet access and an ever expanding and popular range of digital events and activities.

4.2.3 The government has now designated library workers as key/critical workers because they are providing essential services permitted to be delivered during national restrictions.

4.2.4 The service responded by adapting face to face services and introducing additional measures to support residents to continue to use the library service, such as extended loans and waived over-due charges. By responding quickly and creatively the service has been able to continue to support communities and deliver a number of key achievements through the period of the pandemic. These include:

- Introducing a new “Ready Reads” service where knowledgeable library staff pick a selection of books in a customer’s favourite category that they have selected online or through a phone call to their local library. This service continues to be well used throughout each lockdown and families can use the same form to request up to 5 items for each family member supporting residents to continue using libraries.
- Ensuring, since August 2020, access to public PCs in a COVID-19 secure environment providing a lifeline to residents without internet or computer facilities at home. This service is vital for residents who need to apply for universal credit and look for work if they do not have a computer at home. Despite more limited opening hours in some library locations and reduced availability to allow for social distancing, the service has had 9,220 individual users totalling 32,107 sessions, who have used PCs for 19,578 hours since libraries reopened in July.
- Quickly introducing at the start of the pandemic a wide range of digital events for people of all ages streamed live or at set times on Facebook and it’s You Tube channel. The weekly events programme includes Rhyme-times and Story-times, STEM, (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) activities for children, Lego Club, Wellbeing Videos, Poetry Blog and Craft videos amongst others. We plan to expand this programme further through, for example, our new partnership with the British Library. Together with Facebook, our audience has engaged with us over a million times on either You Tube or Facebook with over 4500 hours of combined viewing for our events and activities.
- Surrey Library Services Twitter engagement (the number of times someone has liked or shared our tweets) has grown exponentially since March, with 61,500 engagements on Twitter compared to 7500 engagements in the same period last year, a 720% increase.
- Expanding digital resources – Surrey Libraries have had a strong digital offer which includes e-Books, e-Newspapers and e-Audio, and other digital resources. These have all seen large increases in

usage during the pandemic. The service has joined nearly 6800 new people to the service online since 1 April 2020. Overall e-Audio demand has increased by 152% with e-Book demand increasing by 201%.

4.3 Comments from residents

- “We are highly appreciative of the Ready Read service, which ensures that our children can still enjoy some varied bedtime reading whilst in lockdown. Thank you so much for the great initiative and service!”
- “It’s a most welcome service to keen readers like me and a real morale booster. So thank you to the organisers as well as the individuals providing the service.”
- “Loving how you’re going the extra mile to provide services at the moment. I felt proud to have a Surrey library card when I received your email yesterday!”
- “Love watching this on Zoom with friends! It made our babies so happy. Thank you xx” was a comment from a customer about library on-line baby rhyme time

4.4 Challenges and opportunities

- 4.4.1 The service continues to review and update its recovery plan and is ready to adapt and re-establish its full offer as and when conditions safely allow.
- 4.4.2 The Library service has a significant annual income target, and this has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Items that are usually sold in libraries such as workbooks and glasses or chargeable services like printing have been severely limited by closing to visitors. There has also been a loss of income from events, activities and room hire.
- 4.4.3 The Library Service is still on track to deliver £800,000 of efficiencies in this financial year as part of its on-going transformation programme. The Library Service Transformation Programme is the subject of a separate report that is also on the agenda for this meeting. It sets out how the positive legacies from the pandemic response will be retained and built on as part of a wider libraries modernisation programme.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The role of culture in enriching our lives, increasing knowledge and helping people to be happier and healthier is well understood. The County Council's cultural offer is strong and has adapted well to respond to the challenge of COVID-19, providing a source of support and wellbeing for so many of our residents.
- 5.2 There are a range of challenges that will continue to require close management most notably recovery plans coming out of COVID and mitigations for income loss. Thinking on this has evolved as restrictions have altered and service impacts have changed accordingly. As services hopefully come out of a third lockdown over the coming months our outline plan includes:
- Building on the use of new technology developed in response to the pandemic to increase service 'reach' at reduced cost.
 - Increasing the delivery of face to face services in a COVID-19 secure way to build back front-line service provision
 - Streamlining services, minimising back office functions and associated costs to focus resources on front line service delivery
 - Exploring new funding opportunities by making best use of new income opportunities through, e.g. new service commissions, funding bids and grants.
- 5.3 The council is committed to continuing to transform these key services to deliver even greater impact going forwards. Importantly, it is recognised that Cultural services will play a key role in COVID recovery. Consideration is currently being given to how best to promote the cultural offer across the county to support health and wellbeing as restrictions lift. In addition to continue to strengthen the offer to enable local economies to recover and support the council's inclusion agenda.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Select Committee to note the positive response to the current pandemic from Cultural Services to continue to provide services and support to Surrey residents.
- 6.2 Select Committee to note the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the risks highlighted in this report as a result of these challenges

and the actions being taken to continue focussing on deliver of frontline services.

7. Next steps

7.1 To be agreed.

Report contact 1: Marie Snelling, Executive Director, Communities and Transformation

Contact details 2: Marie.Snelling@surreycc.gov.uk

Report contact 2: Susan Wills, Acting Assistant Director Culture, Libraries & Registration

Contact details 2: Susan.Wills@surreycc.gov.uk

Sources/background papers

Background papers:

[Carnegie Diagram](#)

[Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021](#)

[Arts Council Strategy 2020-2030](#)

[SCC Library and Cultural Services Strategy 2020-2025](#)