

Cabinet Member of the Month (Feb 2024): Denise Turner Stewart, Customer & Communities

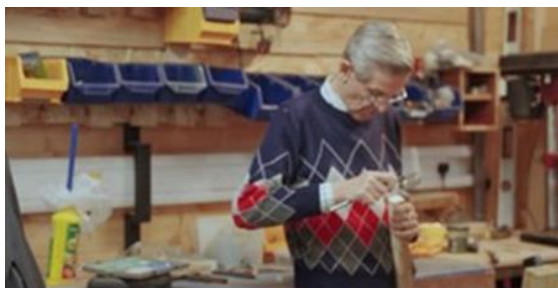
The Customers and Communities Directorate delivers a range of public-facing services which many residents rely on, as well as shaping policies and driving strategies that aim to support the development of thriving communities, ensure a greener future, grow a sustainable local economy, tackle health inequalities and ensure that no-one is left behind. Services within the Directorate include:

- Community Partnerships & Prevention incl. Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector
- Community Investment & Engagement incl. Community Link Officers and Your Fund Surrey
- Local Areas Coordinators (LACs)
- Customer Services and Customer Transformation
- Libraries
- Heritage and Archive Services
- Active Surrey
- Surrey Arts
- Registration & Nationality Services

Community Investment, including Your Fund Surrey: Your Fund Surrey (YFS) has recently had its' third anniversary with 35 large projects having been funded to-date, equating to a total of £17m in value. Many of the funded projects are under construction, while a number are now open to the public. As a consequence, tangible, meaningful benefits are being realised for local communities, which support the County Council's priorities, particularly ensuring no one is left behind.

For example:

- I) Weybridge Men's Shed, supported by YFS, now provides a new community space to pursue practical interests/hobbies, learn new skills and most importantly, encourage social connections and friendships. On average 12 "shedders" attend per session, equating to 1,872 shedder hours per year. The Shed has established regular working arrangements and provides access to its facilities to 3 local charities – Surrey Choices, Cook4Care, The ClubHouse project, as well as providing hands-on training for young adults with learning difficulties.



- II) YFS provided funding that has enabled a specialised sensory room and gym to be created at Leatherhead and Dorking Gymnastics Club, for those who find it overwhelming in the main gym and need time out. The physical and mental well-being benefits for the user group are well-established and clear to see at the Club. On average they have an additional 12 new users using the facility every week and run special one to one classes for children who are severely autistic.



- III) The family garden project in Claygate is receiving over 800 visitors per quarter and has also led to numerous volunteering opportunities being created, including for groups of children who help maintain the planting. The volunteering hours have significantly exceeded the target set out in the YFS application.



- IV) The launch of Pirbright Pavilion was attended by 1500 people, with its popularity exceeding expectations. The new facility has led to a significant increase in membership to all sporting clubs, resulting in waiting lists in some areas. In 2019, there were 26 members, in 2023 there are now 243 members. The pavilion is being used daily and has a full schedule of summer camps and activities planned, as well as being used to host community events.



There have been other benefits too, a group of parents identified a lack of playground equipment for young children in Spelthorne so formed themselves into a CIC to apply for funding from YFS. Following their success, they have realised what a big impact funding can have on the community and are now applying to other funds to improve their local area further.

The two smaller, Member-led community funds have continued to be popular and well-subscribed to. YCCF has now closed for this year with almost 400 funded projects across all areas of the County, with £1.3m having been allocated to projects to support local communities. Subject to the final applications being approved, we anticipate only £2-3k will be unallocated, meaning Members have spent 99% of their allocation (previous years were 92%). Achieving almost 100% allocation is a reflection on the team who have liaised with Councillors and processed applications, but also through the efforts of our Community Link Officers who have encouraged their local Members to spend their allocation and directed community groups their way.

Due to the success of YFS projects, Members have been allocated an additional £50k for small community projects, increasing each Member's allocation to £100k. We have received numerous thank you emails from community groups saying they are certain their projects just wouldn't have happened without Surrey's funding. The number of residents benefitting from the funding is immense and varies from the refurbishment of a community building benefitting the whole community, to specific projects benefitting some of the most vulnerable residents in the County.

Through Your Councillor Community Fund (YCCF), a six month "Be Me Project" course was funded for 6 students at a school in Dorking. These students were struggling with anxiety, confidence and self-esteem. They consulted with the students prior to, and after, their course and saw real evidence of success including increase in confidence, learning to be more open and developing coping strategies. One student said: "Before

I started Be Me, I was very anxious and I wouldn't eat in the morning and I felt horrible. I really struggled at school a lot. After I finished, I feel a lot better. I have now started to eat in the morning, I don't feel sick anymore. I am not very stable with my anxiety but I am slowly getting better. Be Me has helped me a lot and I am very grateful for being in this course."

Community Link Officers Engagement: We introduced the Community Link Officers (CLOs) so we could better connect and understand our communities, they are there specifically to engage with our residents to find out what matters to them the most. They play an essential role, being the glue in the community and being part of the early prevention work envisaged by our Empowered and Thriving Communities ambition. CLOs engage with communities, enabling them to deliver community-led projects, have their say in local decision making, build connections and support each other, and shape the places, services and outcomes they want and need.

CLOs have increased their community engagement this year by over 100% through in-person engagement in key neighbourhoods, towns and villages, with over 7300 face-to-face interactions, as well as via digital channels such as social media. They have joined-up approaches to engagement with partners in health, the Police, and district and borough councils, and have shared insights obtained from communities with internal and external colleagues and organisations, including the Council's recently established Resident Insight Unit (a central function at SCC which will ensure residents' views are used to help shape and deliver policy).

CLOs are helping to encourage communities to do more for themselves which will in turn result in them being less reliant on acute or statutory services in the longer term. As part of this CLOs are making connections between residents and local partners to enable community-led projects to happen. Recent examples of CLOs making a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of residents in key neighbourhoods, towns, and villages include:

- **Elmbridge:** CLO brought a local hoarder/campaigner and a housing association together to raise awareness and reduce stigma for tenants experiencing this mental health problem
- **Epsom & Ewell:** CLO helped places of worship decide how best to target their emotional wellbeing services to residents
- **Mole Valley:** CLO arranged volunteering for 15 employees of international toy manufacturer, Tomy UK, at The Jam Place in North Leatherhead which resulted in Tomy UK donating toys, games and £4000 towards the community venue's special education needs dance classes
- **Tandridge:** A women's craft group started by the Local Area Coordinator (LAC) formed a spin-off Fibromyalgia Warriors support group that is now in talks with a leisure provider identified by our CLO to introduce hydrotherapy sessions to help them manage their condition
- **Woking:** Residents using the public living room space organised by our CLO and LAC have introduced a clothing donation rail for members of their community unable to purchase essential items themselves
- **Waverley:** Parents brought together by our CLO's coffee mornings are undertaking their first litter pick to improve cleanliness, tackle antisocial behaviour, and increase pride in their neighbourhood
- **Spelthorne:** Engagement in Ashford pre-Christmas collected great insights into what residents would like to see on the High Street

Local Area Coordination (LACs): Over 250 residents have now been supported by our LACs who work at a local neighbourhood level to offer individual 1:1, cross-agency support to anyone who might need it for a range of reasons - there are no eligibility criteria, thresholds or time limits, meaning they can build trusted relationships and provide early, highly accessible preventative support.

Our current LACs are based in Sheerwater & Maybury (Woking), Hurst Green (Tandridge), Old Dean & St Micheals (Camberley, Surrey Heath), Horley (Reigate & Banstead), Bellfields & Slyfield (Guildford) and Goldsworth Park (Woking). Following NHS match funding and recruitment alongside partners and community members, two further coordinators started in January in Upper Hale (Farnham, Waverley) and Stanwell (Spelthorne). Examples and feedback from residents about the support LACs have provided to people of all ages and backgrounds to become stronger, healthier, happier, more connected members of their communities include:

- *"I am quite optimistic; I feel better about a lot of things. She's made a huge impact on my life"*

- *“I feel independent, she wants me to be independent, before I didn’t go anywhere by myself and the first time I went on the train outside the area, I didn’t think I could do it, but she said I could do it – I couldn’t believe I could do it”*
- *“I was so reluctant to tell our story to another person, and for them to go ‘I don’t know how to help you’, it took the lady from church a while to tell me to get in touch with her (the local area coordinator), but it was the best thing”*

The strong links that these teams and this work has with positive health outcomes, addressing health inequalities and the Towns and Villages model for local partnership delivery, has prompted the relocation of the CLOs and LACs within the Public Health team. A formal independent evaluation of this approach is being completed and will report in April.

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Voluntary Community Faith Sector: The Council has invested £100k into the Community Foundation for Surrey ‘Strategic Transformation Fund’ - which with match-funding creates a total of up to £230k. This fund is available to VCFS organisations to build their capacity and develop new sustainable business models enabling them to become more resilient and better placed to face the challenges and opportunities that may arise.

In addition, we will also be providing the VCFS Infrastructure organisations with the second tranche of one-off **“Sparks Funding”** (£160k) which will enable them to offer direct easy access small grants for community led activity across the 21 key neighbourhoods. We know from the first tranche that this enables the CVSE infrastructure organisations to support community groups with small seed funding that will benefit these neighbourhoods directly. Examples to date include:

- Activities by the Maybury & Sheerwater Community Trust which was enabled by the Sparks Funding, including career support sessions, English tuition sessions, a friendship cafe’, computer tuition sessions and interactive wellbeing sessions and hearing aid maintenance sessions.

Community Prevention: The Independence Skills programme specification was agreed with the Library Service, securing £250,000 to collaborate with community-sector partners and run courses to support residents at risk of escalating care needs to improve their life skills in Libraries across Surrey. A total of 70 programmes will be delivered across Surrey, with 5 programmes delivered within each of the 14 libraries in Banstead, Camberley, Caterham Valley, Dorking, Farnham, Godalming, Guildford, Horley, Leatherhead, Merstham, Oxted, Reigate, Staines and Walton. Each programme will be delivered over a 3-month period, providing pre-course support, 6 weekly face-to-face 2-hour sessions, covering a range of health, wellbeing and independence topics and post course services to access onwards support for residents.

Communities of Practice is a network of Health and Well-Being professionals that we bring together to support their learning development, good practice and opportunities to network with colleagues across Surrey - this January, we had over 60 health and wellbeing professionals take part in a workshop on loneliness and social isolation, coming together to share their insights and help local leaders and commissioners to make informed decisions to shape services in ways that best serves their communities.

Libraries: Use of Surrey Libraries continues to grow with 3.9m visits (physical and digital), 10, 538 events, and membership of 318, 000 residents in 2023. The service launched a video celebrating the work of staff in libraries across the county during the year: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_rMjrEzgDk Libraries ‘Warm Welcome’ spaces continue to be well received and in November there were 4,011 drinks taken across 44 libraries, 118 warm welcome events organised and 194,176 visits to the warm welcome libraries.

‘Super Access’ was launched at Horley Library with 144 people signing up to the extended service offer which has enabled controlled-access use of the library outside of normal opening hours, for an additional 44 hours per week. Increased use by community groups such as the English Conversation Group, Homeschoolers, as well as from SCC staff and customers previously unable to use the library during the staffed opening hours has been recorded. Customer feedback has been positive with one user saying: *“I usually work in London but sometimes I work from home and Super Access means I can use the library from early until late and on Mondays which is great. The library is nice and warm ... The introduction ticked all the boxes and I was able to ask questions. A superb service.”*



Super Access will be rolled out to a further 8 libraries over next 6 months including Camberley, Dittons, Dorking, Egham, Farnham, Godalming, Guildford, Oxted, with Redhill, with Staines, Woking, Epsom delivering alongside their capital improvement works.

Planning is underway for the delivery of a new Domestic Abuse Offer in libraries – including additional training for staff, new and revised webpages detailing support available, promotional material and culminating in a special promotion with events planned around the 16 Days of Action Against Domestic Violence 2024 in late Autumn.

Virtual tours have been created for 30 libraries to improve accessibility and signpost to a range of virtual and in person services/programmes of activity to encourage, promote and inspire current and future library users' engagement with libraries. [Virtual tours of libraries in Surrey - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/virtual-tours)

The service has been awarded a commission through the Community and Prevention Team for delivery of a programme of curated, bespoke skills and personal development courses for residents, aimed at empowering them to live independently for longer. The course will be delivered through local libraries over the next 18 months, including: Banstead, Camberley, Caterham Valley, Dorking, Farnham, Godalming, Guildford, Horley, Leatherhead, Merstham, Oxted, Reigate, Staines, Walton.

Surrey History Centre, which collects and preserves the records of Surrey's past and present from the 12th century to the 21st century, hosted a visit by Her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Edinburgh on 31st January, which involved a tour of the centre and meeting with volunteers and staff, before viewing documents related to Bagshot Park and the Womens Institute.

We are currently delivering the Libraries Capital Programme which entails providing modern, multi-use and flexible libraries which are fit for purpose; these include, Woking Library, Redhill Library, Epsom Library and Staines Hub, Weybridge Hub, and Sunbury Hub. Recent successful engagement events at Weybridge library have enabled residents to be involved in the codesign of the library space.

The securing of Arts Council funding has allowed the completion of mini-refurbishment works at Chertsey, Farnham, Dittons, Egham, Godalming, Haslemere, Oxted and Reigate libraries. Further refurbishment using capital funding will be delivered to Ashted, Leatherhead, Chertsey, Hersham and Molesey later this year.

Arts & Culture: The Cultural Services team recently submitted a bid to Arts Council England for £400k to support the development of the cultural hub in the new Staines library with a focus on youth leadership, and a programme to support progression into the creative industries sectors. As part of that work and building on the success of the Youth & Arts Festival in 2023 in Redhill and Staines, that reached 1481 young people, we are now planning a Surrey Heath Youth & Arts festival for Autumn 2024. A key aim of this work is to advocate for creative skills development through local cultural engagement.



Surrey Arts music team continues to deliver the Youth Music funded 'I Speak Music: Next Generation' programme with refugee communities and is currently working with Reigate and Banstead BC to deliver a programme of activity within a women's refuge, using music as a tool for community cohesion and health and wellbeing.

Active Surrey has secured place investment from Sport England into Stanwell, which is in the bottom 10% nationally for inactivity levels. This partnership will focus on strengthening local systems and communities with the aim of increasing activity levels in the local area.

Our Registration & Nationality Service remains one of the busiest in the country, supporting people at key life moments and offering a high quality, efficient and responsive service. Appointments to register births are being offered to customers within one day and 97% of births are being registered within the statutory 42-day timescale; the highest level since March 2020. The digital self-service offer continues to grow, offering more choice and flexibility for customers. For example, citizenship ceremonies can now be booked online, with 394 bookings made since go-live on 1 December 2023 and 98% of couples are now booking their own appointment to give notice of marriage/civil partnership.

Customer satisfaction levels are also high, as demonstrated by the feedback from service users: *"very quick and efficient and we were welcomed with lovely warm smiles!", "very kind and sympathetic staff", "super-friendly and supportive, most appreciated at a sad time", "smooth and informative process, ran to time and very efficient. Thank you for making it a great experience and memory"*.

Customer Services: Last year Customer Services saw a significant increase in calls many of which were driven by the return of parking enforcement and environmental maintenance responsibilities to Surrey from the District and Borough councils. The teams received over 240,000 calls, dealt with over 100,000 emails, c. 10,000 tweets and over 15,000 live chat and there were over 3.8 million website visits. The start of 2024 is being dominated by calls associated with recent storms, with many emergency reports of fallen trees. Many staff worked additional hours to deal with holding calls and ensure all emergency reports were dealt with.

Our community helpline received several calls relating to grants and funding for flood damage to property and the replacement of household goods. In 2023 the helpline supported 3681 residents with enquiries relating to cost of living challenges and mental wellbeing and processed over 2700 applications for the Homes for Ukraine free bus pass scheme, which has been extended again into the next financial year.

Our training team continues to roll out training associated with the refreshed Customer Promise, both to a new customer champions network and more widely to the organisation. They are designing and delivering Handling Challenging Calls and Building Resilience training to approximately 85 members of CFLL staff from various teams throughout January and February.

Customer Transformation: As part of the Council's commitment to regularly look for ways to improve the experience of residents and customers to ensure they are able to engage with and access services as smoothly as possible, a 'Customer Transformation Programme', has been initiated. This significant piece of work which will review how we organise our customer structures, systems and processes so that customers are better able to access what they need in more efficient and effective ways.

The programme will involve ongoing engagement with customers as we design and deliver improvements in access to information, self-service and simpler ways to engage with the Council. The use of technology where appropriate, to manage and respond to queries more effectively than we do now will be a key feature, with the intention that residents and communities will experience a swifter response from us and there will be better use of specialist resources to help those that need it most.