

Cabinet Member Update

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Deputy Cabinet Member

It is fair to say that the last six months have been challenging.

When the libraries closed their doors to the public, it was a realisation for many, that lockdown really did mean lockdown. But, thankfully – our staff were undeterred by this necessary pause and with ingenuity, flexibility and drive - the service reinvented its social media presence, taking to the World Wide Web with great gusto - in order to engage once again with our residents.

Much has been achieved over the last few months, but I thought it worth going through some key statistics, which I think best crystallise the great achievements of our cultural services.

Since the lockdown:

- We have seen an 110% increase in library membership.
- Some 54,000 new books have been purchased for stock, in order to keep up with the demand since lockdown.
- We've witnessed impressive social media engagement with our cultural teams, with over 40,000 engagements on Twitter, in comparison to 5,000 for the same period last year. On Facebook, we have expanded our reach – with 530,000 residents able to access service information online.
- Our Heritage Team has received 55% more written enquiries than 2019, with more residents than ever before choosing to investigate their either local or family history.
- And, since its launch five months ago, the Libraries YouTube Channel now has 538 subscribers, compared to the SCC YouTube channel, which launched 12 years ago and currently has 602!

Today, I am delighted to confirm that 41 of 42 main network libraries are now open with the community partnered libraries starting to come online. Staff have been critical to this effort and have navigated challenging guidelines and safety procedures, with great care and initiative, in order to ensure that our libraries return to as near normal conditions as possible. Already, the service has received excellent feedback from our residents; with all appreciating the return of their local library. By October, I hope libraries will be able to introduce a limited number of events, launched along the lines of 1-2-1 sessions, which will be able to provide focused, crucial support to our residents.

Our library co-design work is underway to help identify how libraries can best meet the needs of residents. We have concluded interviews for our internal co-design team and I'm pleased to announce that the team is now up and running. We have engaged an external consultant in Stripe Partners who, as well as doing some of the design work, will be training up our own staff, which should mean that in the future - we will be able to undertake this work without a need for costly consultation.

The exact locations for the first stage of engagement are being finalised, though it is a given, that this stage will take on a very digital bias until restrictions allow us to engage more directly.

Work continues at pace on our library restructure programme. We will be working with colleagues across the organisation to best readjust our timelines to take into consideration the impact of COVID-19. We expect to launch this in Autumn 2020, with the expectation that we will be live by the new financial year 2021/22. Looking ahead, it is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 has had a real financial impact on our Cultural and Registration services and therefore, over the coming months – the services will look to prioritise recovering lost income and driving forward service-based recovery plans.

Colleagues, as we adapt to our new normal, it is fantastic to note that our library service has sought to look to the future, with the launch of six new library apprenticeships. This is a great endorsement of our County's desire to offer more opportunities to our young people, which has already attracted much interest – as to date we have received over 100 applications for these roles.

Throughout this unprecedented time in our history, our Cultural offering has proved its worth to the wider community in Surrey and has led the way nationally in how we have dealt with challenges and brought our services back to our public.

I am very excited that the service is working with the Arts Council to establish a more strategic role for culture in Surrey, particularly in response to COVID-19. We are starting work with four National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's) in Surrey funded by the Arts Council, which are as follows: New Adventures (Matthew Bourne), Watts Gallery, Farnham Maltings and Stopgapdance. The Arts Council are also supporting the service to engage with our Surrey universities, which will start later this month.

I would like to thank the staff from the bottom up for the dedication and pride they take in their work and the obvious love they have for the service they provide. We are lucky to have a team that is prepared to challenge adversity, that is embracing of change and is genuinely excited about the opportunity the transformation project is going to give us.

It is going to be a very exciting twelve months!