

Surrey East Guiding 2019 to 2021.

It is customary for the County Commissioner to provide a report for the last 12 months, but today I will update you on Guiding in Surrey East since the pandemic. Back in March 2020, leaders were well into the Spring term with exciting and adventurous programmes planned when we received the notification on 18th March - all Guiding activity is suspended. This was unprecedented in post-war Britain. All guiding suspended.

This created a new challenge - refunding all the monies for camps/holidays/international trips and negotiating refunds too from organisations such as PGL who were equally hard hit. At a County level, this included big events: Scoutabout, Musicals. Work for the volunteers with none of the return of the pleasures of being with the girls and having fun. And at a time when their lives too were potentially disrupted by loss, home schooling, employment disruption and all that the pandemic brought.

Guiding is resilient and quickly adapted. We were given zoom accounts free of charge, new policies were written, the programme was adapted, covid risk assessments produced, new consent forms were required from parents and the virtual meetings began.

Virtual Guiding wasn't for everyone. Many favoured sending out activities for the girls to do each week. I run Guides and have a background in IT and yet the prospect of running virtual guides was daunting. I joined my old unit to see how it worked - the younger leaders were confidently navigating the online tools with the full unit doing a whole range of things - from scavenger hunts, to escape rooms, to fitness workouts to baking. As time progressed people got more and more creative with breakout rooms to enable smaller group work. There were some advantages - we were taking Guiding into people's homes and they could see what we were doing - parents were helping to support and at times would get involved. Our county meetings could be frequent enabling us to monitor progress and provide guidance and support to our members

Over social media, we held a County Stayabout weekend - typical camp activities but from home - girls put tents in the garden or slept in a den under a table and re-joined virtually to share activities. We had a pet show - an art competition and a bake off. All without leaving the house, no wet tents and with no washing up!

But as you all know, Guiding income is essentially the annual subs, revenue from uniform and badge sales, income from using the campsites and activity centres and donations. In February 2021, HQ was asking for annual subs from units that had been largely closed for two terms. The impact was significant at all levels. Overall, we lost 10% of the volunteers and 23% of our young members. In Surrey East, we have our holiday house and campsite -Faurefold. The focus became how to minimise the running cost whilst we had no income.

By June, we were able to meet outdoors in groups of 15. 15? What do you do if you have 24 in your unit? There was the constant threat of a positive case which would result in members having to isolate for 14 days. And maybe the leaders being unable to work?

We braved the British weather and yet there was an excitement of being able to meet face to face again - we were masked and socially distanced, unable to share resources - some leaders created and distributed activity packs for each girl so they didn't have to share. HQ had provided guidance on how to adapt the programme and Facebook became a centre for leaders sharing ideas and adaptations that worked well.

At the end of December, Lesley Bailey stepped down after 4 successful years as County Commissioner and handed over to Assistant County Commissioner - Jennifer Sibley. In 2021, we all longed for things to return to normal.

We were playing catch-up on getting volunteers DBS checks completed, first response and safe space qualifications up-to-date and also in presenting overdue awards. A Laurel award for Val Hickmott, Region Chief awards to Margaret King, Alison Cotterill, Rosemarie Belcher, Stella Cantor, Jennifer Sibley and Mary Zoeller. 40-year long service awards for Cheryl Clark, Meryl Arnold,

Christine Moss, Pat Garbutt and 30 years for Jenny Bryant, Roo Harmer, Claire Campion and Elaine Briggs.

Going forwards Veronica Ballard will be celebrating 60 years, Menai Jones 50 years, Tracy Lovell and Gill Utting 40 years - so many people who have made a significant contribution to Guiding in Surrey East.

Our virtual meetings had become more adventurous - with virtual camps and activity weekends - girls in their own home/gardens and an exciting timetable of themed activities to do. I know some of you helped with distributing the resources for these. Virtual district Thinking Days.

Epsom Division created an Epsom town challenge which you may like to try if you haven't - a circular walk exploring the history of the area including the new Emily Davidson statue in the centre - open to all units and with a badge to raise much needed funds. Reigate Division took the opportunity to refurbish Empire Hall.

Finally in September 2021, we were back face to face. We held a successful County Training Day, themed back to basics - face to face. It was well attended showing how keen people were to get out again.

I took over as County Commissioner in October 2021 and we celebrated with Lesley and Jennifer with a Thank you event at Epsom Division's campsite - Little Acres. I've now been in the role for 6 months and we are all learning to live with covid. Our masks are off but there remains a nervousness. Many units have girls who have never camped or have never been away with Guiding before and for some the equipment has not been touched for over 2 years.

In November, we shadowed Middlesex West in helping at the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall and this year 15 people from Surrey East will be proudly supporting this event. Epsom Division held an outdoor evening for girls at Little Acres 'Epsom Glow'.

Bigger events are being planned again - Bazazz for Rainbows, Scoutabout for Guides and Rangers, camps and holidays, International trips - with one girl from our county going to the World Jamboree in South Korea. We also have the Faurefold activity days - one for Rainbows, one for Brownies and one for Guides.

Guiding continues to evolve. Following a review held in 2020, Guiding concluded that more needed to be done to address Diversity and Inclusion so have developed a plan to address it, have established an Inclusion team at Headquarters to provide guidance and advice to leaders and have provided a wealth of resources. Hot off the press, it was announced to leaders yesterday that after a successful pilot, from August 2022 the Rainbow starting age will be officially reduced to 4. We are also in the process of refreshing the leadership qualification and there is a focus on trying to reduce the admin burden particularly on Commissioners.

Today in Surrey East County, we have over 3000 young members supported by 900 volunteers in 208 units. There is still a constant demand for places, only constrained by the number of willing volunteers. Thankfully the 2022 figures are more in line with the pre-pandemic numbers.

We have always known the importance of our role as part of the community, supporting our members, promoting well-being and helping girls and young women to realise their potential whilst making friends and having fun - and never more so than now.

Please do encourage new leaders to join us by continuing with positive talking about Guiding as you engage with your neighbours, schools and other volunteers and please do continue to give your support for which we are really grateful. We do ask a lot, but the rewards are huge. Thank you to you all.

Beverly Heywood-Jones
Surrey East County Commissioner
March 2022