Surrey East Guiding March 2025 to March 2026

Beverly Heywood-Jones, Surrey East county commissioner

When I look back over the past year in Surrey East, my fifth year as county commissioner - one word comes to mind: busy… although "slightly chaotic but completely wonderful" might be more accurate! I really like creating this annual report – taking a moment to step back, consider what has changed and reflect on what we've achieved as a county and honestly say how proud I am to be a volunteer.

You will no doubt be aware of the changes to our equality, diversity and inclusion policy announced in December which means that trans girls and young women are no longer able to join Girlguiding – a decision Guiding would have preferred not to make and I know, is upsetting for our members, but necessary to ensure we remain lawful. A task force has been setup and is actively exploring ways to provide support which some of our members have been involved in.

To celebrate the 7th year of the Guiding programme and following a major review involving over 27,000 members, girls and parents, Guiding launched 72 new interest badges. With topics such as bee rescuer, present maker for rainbows, imagination, folklore and book reviewer for brownies, clean planet, thrift and personal best for guides and nostalgia, gardening and micro-adventures for rangers. I think you would approve. These are badges that were inspired by the inputs and designs provided by the girls and are proving very popular. This was even covered on the BBC News with our very exuberant deputy chief guide – Sally Kettle - on BBC Breakfast.

We have seen a change to our approach to compliance. Guiding DBS checks and safer guiding training needs to be completed when a volunteer joins and is renewed every 3 years. To ensure this, membership is now denied or withdrawn if people ignore requests to complete it by the deadlines set. Obviously, we do everything we can to ensure this doesn't happen and provide additional time where it is needed. That said, much is this is now automated – with people able to update their documents via an app on their phone and complete their safer guiding via e-learning in their own time – which mostly people do. You can still visit an ID verifier if you prefer and Region run face to face training too.

The other notable change is that from next year, we will no longer be paying annual subscriptions (census) for volunteers. I'm sure some of you will recall the challenges of working out where people's main roles are and who was paying for who – well all of that is now gone and our subs is wholly based on the number of young members in the unit. Most units have always paid for their volunteers anyway, but paying for volunteers goes against the model we want where we encourage with flexible volunteering, welcoming people who want to join the leadership team on an occasional or ad hoc basis – may be off to uni and just coming back occasionally – all volunteers that we wish to retain. We will see the rate increase, but we expect for most units the overall total we pay will largely be the same.

In June, we saw the launch of the Young Leader development programme and have established a team who represent each of the divisions in the county to support leaders and their young volunteers to complete it. In turn this will help them with their journey to leadership. At 18, all young leaders now automatically become unit helpers and those who complete the young leader programme will already have some of the leader modules. I'm delighted to share that since we last met, 15 volunteers have successfully completed their leadership development programme with 38 now actively working on it, supported by their mentors.

In the county, we have remained active and busy are so lucky to have such a strong and capable county team which includes the division commissioners, who are all amazing.

Long Service awards remind us of the dedication and commitment of our volunteers – with 19 5-year awards, 12 10-year awards, 11 20-year awards. Plus, Dax Patel, Jeanette Ralph, Michelle Hall and Jocelyn Fallows received 30 years, Ann Turnbull, Janet Coninx and Karen Shepherd received 40 years, and Margaret King celebrated being awarded an incredible 60 years at Faurefold and a led a campfire with all her favourite songs.

Faurefold, our county holiday house and campsite, has also had some changes this year. In May, we saw the original committee members reach the end of their term and celebrated their many years of dedication from working to make the new building a reality, getting the site open for visitors in 2017, closed and open again through Covid 19, and for their continuous hard work establishing the committee and caring for the house and grounds. Thanks to a generous legacy from the estate of the late Margaret Woolley, we have been able to press ahead with site development and improvements with a real focus on the outdoor space. Those that have visited this year will have benefited from our car park extension,

which was completed in February and has more than doubled the size of the car park as well as widening the entrance so two cars can pass. There has been a lot of work carried out in the woodland and in the house, there are now soundproofing panels, new bunk beds, stylish doormats, and outdoor noticeboard and an access ramp for wheelchair users.

At our county day 'County Volunteers Together', it was lovely to catch up with volunteers across the county. We had sessions for different programme themes, learnt about the young leader development programme, how to adjust the programme when there is limited time, resources or to meet individuals' needs. Debbie Rodgers shared her inspirational journey in completing her Queens Guide award having joined Guiding as an adult – which included taking up powerlifting, leading an international trip, supporting 12 girls across LaSER to fundraise and interrail across Europe. And supporting YMCA East Surrey to fundraise for a new youth minibus – finishing that journey by climbing Ben Nevis alongside them!

The autumn term, 44 came to our Leaders weekend away at Hautbois activity centre in Norfolk, taking part in the onsite activities of high ropes, team challenges and pioneering, sharing ideas, experiences and plenty of laughter. It was so successful that we already have 31 signed up to the next one at Youlbury in Oxford.

We also came together to serve lunches to the 5700 participants in the Lord Mayor's Show. An exercise in logistics, ensuring everyone receives their packed lunch within an hour and any uneaten food is not wasted, so it can be given to a food charity for re-distribution in London.

It's easy to focus on the big events, but Guiding is about the units who meet every week – progress from Rainbows through Brownies, Guides and Rangers, many achieving bronze, silver and gold awards on the way and learning they can do anything.

We were incredibly proud when our volunteers received a Team Award at the Central Surrey Volunteer Awards – a wonderful recognition of the dedication you show week after week.

In March, we held Musigals, which included entertaining performances from Trefoil Guild members. This is a musical extravaganza that was held at Leatherhead Theatre, with delightful performances from members of all ages.

We had a fabulous day at May-Hem – a region activity day held in May for all sections at the South of England showground. Surrey East had over 1000 members

take part, travelling in 17 coaches. It was great to see so many there having fun with their units in the sunshine. We were organised into the same activity zone which made it very sociable for the leaders too!

Many units across Surrey East took part in Guiding for Good, a new and exciting region initiative giving members the opportunity to live out a key part of our Girlguiding promise - to serve their communities and to help other people. It showed what Girlguiding is all about, while forging and strengthening more valuable and lasting links within our communities. We saw units helping at foodbanks, visiting charity shops, filling shoeboxes to support families in the UK and overseas and earn a badge – of course.

This year the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts celebrated 100 years of World Thinking Day with a theme of 'Friendship'. Many units celebrated at their weekly meetings, in Districts or Divisions – with silent discos, camps, international themed activities, fundraising and in Epsom, a very muddy Guide camp at Little Acres. A particular highlight was hearing Guiding CEO Felicity Oswald at the Leatherhead Division event with over 200 members present, tell the guiding story of how it all began.

I am so proud to be county commissioner for Girlguiding Surrey East, to lead such an amazing team of volunteers who do so much to help girls and young women know they can do anything. Thank you for all that you do to support our meetings, activities, events and residentials in Girlguiding Surrey East.

Thank you
Beverly Heywood-Jones