

Local Government Reorganisation; a catalyst for local cultural renaissance

**CASE STUDY: Surrey County Council
Cultural Services: our story so far...**



Surrey's timeline

- Surrey is part of the UK government's "fast track" scheme for local government reorganisation (LGR).
- **From April 2027**, two new unitary councils – East Surrey and West Surrey – will replace the existing 12 councils (districts and the county) currently covering the area.
- It is anticipated there will be a shadow unitary authority(ies) established 12 months in advance of any handover. This will ensure as smooth a transition as possible for Surrey residents. **It is expected that elections to new 'shadow' unitary council(s) will take place in May 2026**, followed by the official 'vesting day' in April 2027, where the new unitary council(s) will officially take hold and become responsible for the provision of services, including the statutory library service in the authority, and existing councils will dissolve. These elected members will help set up the new councils and operate in a 'shadow' capacity until vesting day.

[Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation \(LGR\) - Surrey County Council](#)

Councillors and officers effectively working together

- *Given all of this change it is timely to remember the basic principles for officers and councillors:*
- **Councillors** provide a democratic mandate to the council, whereas officers contribute the professional and managerial expertise needed to deliver the policy framework agreed by councillors. The roles are very different but need to work in a complementary way.
- **Officers** role is to provide information, guidance, support and advice to all Members so that they are equipped to make effective decisions. Officers are responsible for implementing and delivering the outcomes of policy and decisions.
- **Officers** can make recommendations based on existing guidance, statutory requirements and best value legislation *but final decisions will rest with members once appointed.*
- **LGA** have great resources about this: [A councillor's workbook on effective councillor/ officer relationships | Local Government Association](#)

We are creating entirely new services – how exciting is that!

- **For cultural services** e.g. libraries, heritage, culture, this is more than just an administrative exercise. Officers will soon be tasked with creating entirely new services. Having a clear pitch, narrative and vision ready for libraries' heritage, culture, etc in place in the new authority will be essential, especially since these are statutory services and need to be safe and legal from Day 1. *Start planning now and avoid last minute risks.*
- Officers must also be cautious not to overstep their roles. E.G. The library service in its current state will cease to exist and any decisions made now are null and void in the new authority. Services should make informed decisions, without limiting the options open to the new authority.
- LGR provides an opportunity to review, revise and update key systems and information. E.G. Library services don't have to start this review from scratch; they can use the range of resources that are already available including the DCMS Task Force guidance. **(Don't forget to read the Govt Industrial Strategy Creative Industries Sector Plan)**
- *Use all available resources now to ensure that your services are flexible and ready for change, whatever that change may be. And get ready to understand the new normal!*

Understanding the new normal: Surprising Surrey: data headlines

- The Understanding Inequality in Surrey 2025 report found that **20,000 children were growing up in poverty**, minority groups were more than twice as likely to be unemployed, and women were hit harder by the cost-of-living crisis.
- In the worst affected areas in Surrey, **over 40% of children are impacted by income deprivation** and the associated higher incidence of poorer average health, obesity, isolation and difficulty accessing local support services.
- Elsewhere in Surrey, **adjacent Wards have a differential in life expectancy of up to 10 years**, there is a 14-year gap between the wards with the highest and lowest life expectancies for females and an estimated **10,600 5 to 15 year-olds have a mental health disorder**.
- *Our response was to pilot a new approach in Staines as an area of high need...by creating an alliance of the willing...that is scalable*



ESCALATE ARTS

**Transforming how people work, design,
enjoy and participate in the arts**

ESCALATE
ARTS



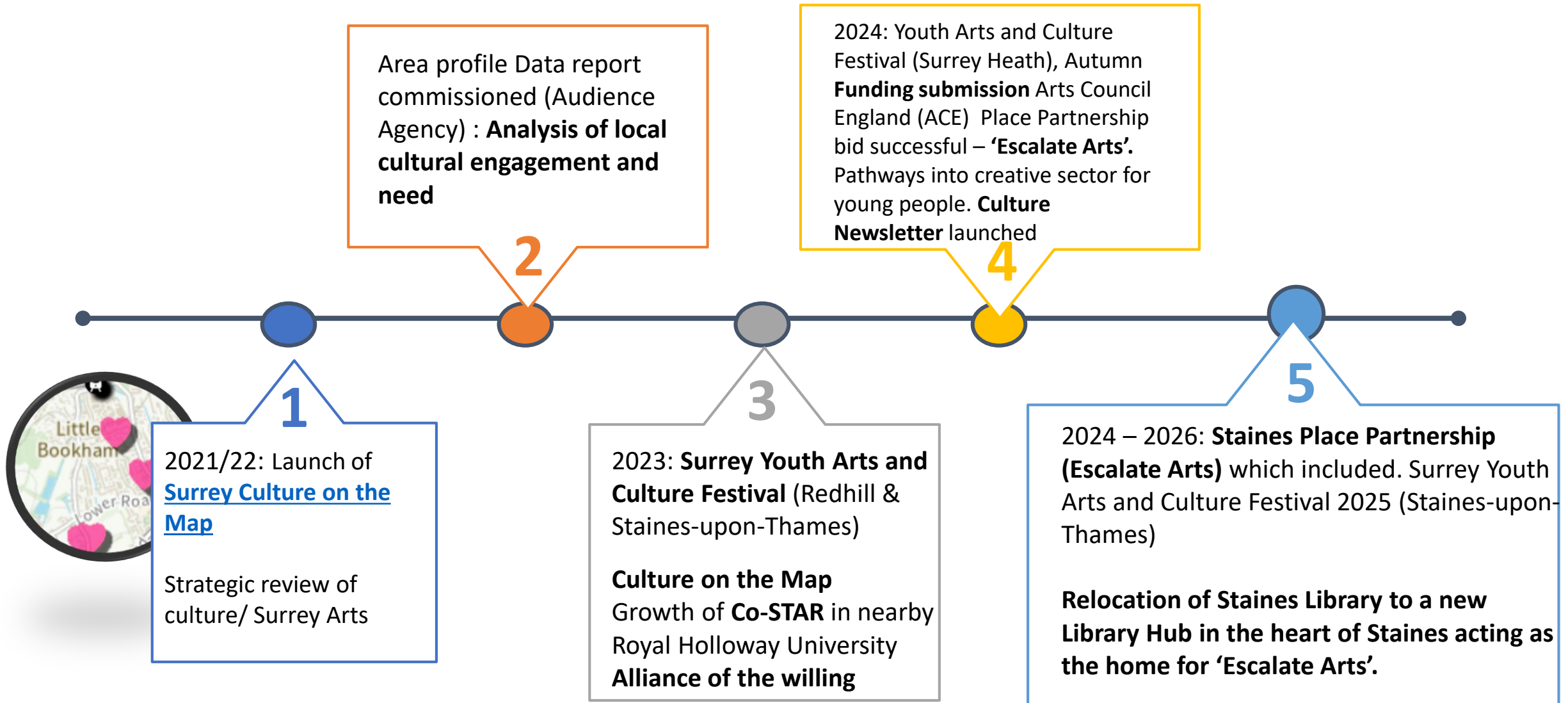
Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Ashford
YOUTH
and Community Centre



Strategic Journey Map: Staines



Conclusion

- **AND finally**...have the confidence and vision to lead your team through LGR because strong local leadership of libraries and cultural services, focused on meeting community needs, is vital. Standing still is not an option. That is why LGR can be a catalyst for local cultural renaissance

Thank you.

susan.wills@surreycc.gov.uk or find me on LinkedIn.