

Covid impact means difficult decisions to be made

The impact of the current Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has put significant financial pressure on the Council as it works hard to provide new and maintain existing frontline services for the borough. A £15 million emergency fund was agreed by Full Council in May in anticipation and next week on 23 June at a meeting of the Executive, councillors will make a decision on whether to continue with four existing corporate projects.

Leader of the Council, Cllr Caroline Reeves says: 'In light of the pandemic and the immense scale of the financial effect it will have not only locally for Guildford but on a national and international level, it has been necessary to review a number of projects in our portfolio.'

She adds: 'While we completely understand and appreciate how important all of our projects are to our residents and businesses, we are just not able to continue with them all at this time.'

Lead Councillor for the Town Centre Master Plan, Infrastructure, Major Projects and Strategic Asset Management, Cllr John Rigg explains: 'The report which goes to the Executive next week puts forward a recommendation to adopt a stepped approach to our major corporate projects. This would allow some projects where we are already financially committed to progress and allow for some projects that are at convenient pause points to be effectively closed down and the decision on their next steps deferred until the outbreak is over.'

The reasons behind the recommendation are that it will:

- relieve the pressure on the Council's reserves and the need to borrow money in the current situation
- enable the Council to continue to provide the key services necessary to support the borough's vulnerable communities
- continue to progress those projects that can help kick start the local economy once the current Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has passed or is controlled

Cllr Rigg continues: 'In a different scenario we would continue with all of our projects, but it is just not possible or prudent. Some projects were progressed and led by us the borough council when Surrey County Council, as the Highway Authority responsible for roads in our borough, was unable to do so. The Blackwater Valley Hotspots project is one of these. We have this particular project at such a stage that it could be possible for our partners at Surrey County Council to move ahead with it but we must remember they are also working within an extremely tight budget and time constraints and the need to prioritise schemes. Another example is the bike share project which will be progressed at a later stage in close collaboration with the University of Surrey.'

Projects recommended to be paused or ceased for the time being are:

- Public Realm Improvements (Chapel Street, Swan Lane and Castle Street)
- Blackwater Valley Hotspots
- Guildford Museum Development Project
- Guildford Community Bike Share Scheme

Projects at different stages of evolution which the Council still want to progress, where we can prudently do so, include the following:

- Sustainable Movement Corridor 1
- Walnut Bridge Replacement
- Weyside Urban Village
- The new Spectrum Leisure Centre
- Town Centre Master Plan and Economic Regeneration
- Guildford West station
- Ash Road Bridge
- Town Centre Approaches
- Guildford Park Road redevelopment
- Bright Hill Car Park redevelopment

Final decisions will be made on 23 June at the Executive meeting. Please see here for the full report: <https://www2.guildford.gov.uk/councilmeetings/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=132&MId=1027>