

# Changes to the Basingstoke Canal Authority and Canal Centre



Surrey County Council (SCC) and Hampshire County Council (HCC) are joint landowners of the Basingstoke Canal, with the Basingstoke Canal Authority (BCA) managing operations on the canal on behalf of both councils. Six local, borough and district Councils (Hart, Rushmoor, Guildford, Surrey Heath, Woking and Runnymede) that have the canal running through their areas (known as 'riparian authorities') also make important contributions to the BCA. All partners work together as the **Basingstoke Canal Joint Management Committee**.

The Canal is managed by the **Basingstoke Canal Authority (BCA)**, that was set up in 1992 to manage the canal on behalf of Surrey and Hampshire County Councils. The BCA's responsibilities are on critical functions, such as ensuring the canal remains safe, maintaining navigation, and conserving nature. The BCA has no legal or corporate identity itself and its staff are employed by Hampshire County Council and are governed by their policies.

From 1 April 2024 Surrey County Council took on the Canal Visitor Centre and the Visitor Services functions and staff.

Over recent years, decreases in funding coupled with rising costs have made it harder and harder for the BCA to present a balanced budget. Both HCC and SCC recognise the importance of the canal and the significant recreational and health and wellbeing benefits it offers, and are proposing to make changes that will help make the BCA more effective in its decision-making abilities and more financially resilient to help protect it into the future.

Marisa Heath, Surrey County Council Cabinet Member for Environment said: "Surrey County Council and Hampshire County Council have reviewed how the Basingstoke Canal Authority operates to future-proof services on the canal. A recommendation was presented to the canal's Joint Management Committee (JMC) in November last year, with JMC members invited to provide feedback. Details can be found in the [Council and Democracy section of our website](#).

"In the recommendation the Basingstoke Canal Authority will continue to manage the statutory duties and leisure navigation associated with the canal. Surrey County Council will take on responsibility for the Canal Centre's Visitor Services from April 2024. There is no intention to close the Canal Centre. Our priority is to maintain the centre's services as much as possible, while considering small changes that will help it to operate more efficiently and with maximum value for taxpayer's money."

For the vast majority of residents and visitors, they will notice very little difference from these operational changes and will be able to continue enjoying the canal itself and Visitor Centre facilities as they always have done.

## What changes are being proposed?

The operating model of the BCA has not been reviewed for a significant period of time. A report has been undertaken by consultants who advised that the existing arrangements were unlikely to be the most effective to support efficient decision making, a point echoed by consultees of the report. A simplified governance structure has been proposed to the stakeholders involved with the Joint Management Committee (JMC) and is currently under review.

In order to address some of the challenges in funding, it is being proposed to focus the BCA's responsibilities on critical functions, such as ensuring the canal remains safe, maintaining navigation, and conserving nature.

Functions that fall outside of the above are generally classed as 'Visitor Services' and are located at the Canal Visitor Centre in Mytchett. As part of the proposals, the BCA Visitor Services team will transfer to SCC where resources and expertise can be shared with other SCC teams. SCC is also exploring possibilities for longer-term investment and enhancement of the Canal Centre and its services that will allow it to remain relevant and effective into the future.

## **What is the proposed timeframe?**

The proposed changes to the management arrangements were agreed by Hampshire County Council on 11 March and were agreed by Surrey County Council on 26 March.

## **What does this mean for the Canal and Visitor Centre?**

Under the proposal, SCC will be taking on direct responsibility for the Canal Centre from 1st April 2024 and will be reviewing ways to make it operate more efficiently, but there will be a strong focus on continuing to provide the services that residents and visitors value. Most people will notice very little change and will be able to continue enjoying the Centre and its services as they have always done.

## **Are you planning on closing the Visitor Centre?**

SCC recognises the importance of the Canal Visitor Centre as a community facility offering a wealth of benefits and has no plans to close it.

## **Will services and opening hours change?**

The Visitor Centre will continue to provide the services that residents and visitors care about. Over the coming months there will be a review of processes to identify changes that may help the Centre to run more efficiently, but these are expected to be small changes with little impact on most residents and visitors. Any changes to areas such as opening hours will be communicated in good time before taking effect.

## **Why is it important to have a well-managed and maintained canal?**

The canal is an important blue-green space for thousands of residents to enjoy and engage with nature. As a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) linking many other green spaces, it acts as a corridor for nature and helps to deliver our nature recovery strategies. As a man-made waterbody integral to the local drainage network, the canal does not self-manage and needs constant attention to ensure that its infrastructure remains safe for residents.

## **What does it mean for BCA staff?**

Staff who are involved with critical functions and navigation of the canal will be unaffected and will continue working for the BCA under a HCC contract. Three members of staff whose work is primarily related to Visitor Services will transfer to SCC to work as part of its

Countryside Visitor Services team, where resources and expertise can be shared.

There will be no redundancies, all staff will continue to have a position, but Visitor Services staff will report into a different team and manager at SCC.