

Social housing options boxed in

12 August 2024



Hundreds of people desperate for social housing will finally have homes to call their own after a seven storey block was approved – despite concerns it would blight historic views from Box Hill.

There are 640 names on Mole Valley District Council’s housing waiting list and the plans, approved on Wednesday, August 7, will add 126 new affordable homes to the borough’s stock.

Developers Clarion Housing Group will demolish the existing office and residential buildings at the vacant Regent House. The homes will be spread across two blocks ranging from three to seven with shops on the ground floor.

Officers told the meeting the council was behind its housing targets and the huge number of affordable housing on offer meant it was hard not to recommend the proposals.

Of the 640 names on the council’s housing waiting list, 218 households are currently waiting for two bed units and this development will accommodate 42 per cent of those with a further 10 per cent of the 316 households waiting for one-bed homes also set to benefit.

Councillor Monica Weller (Liberal Democrat: Bookham West) said: “I am particularly mindful of the horrendous number of people on the housing list.

“That really is quite shocking, 640 on the housing list. A lot of my time is spent with people who are actually living with a partner and children in their parents houses or homes or flats.

“The situation is actually dire and I think there are a lot of people who don’t actually realise that.

“A lot of people who I have contact with do not have cars, they can’t afford cars, and I think that with this site so close to Dorking, it is walkable.

She added: “I am particularly interested in the National Trust’s case about the view from Box Hill but seeing the proposal from the planning officer and the photographs I think there is a limit to how much we can protect these views weighed against the need for homes

Some spoke out against the plans and warned of a “slippery slope” of allowing too many tall buildings.

Andrew Holden speaking on behalf of a number of residents in Lincoln Road and the surrounding area said a development with fewer floors could still provide a large number of homes while minimising the impact on the area.

He told the meeting: “The view of Dorking from Box Hill and to visitors arriving by train will be of a significant cluster of multi-storey buildings thoroughly out of character with our historic market town.

“To avoid this slippery slope leading to irreversible harm, its important that councillors draw a clear line in the sand of what the scale of development is appropriate n this area..”

The plans were approved unanimously by planning committee members.

Image: New homes set for Dorking (credit Clarion Housing)

Wine tasting on the slopes of Leith Hill

12 August 2024



Wine aficionados will soon be able to sample the delights of pinot noir, chardonnay, and cabernet in their famous fermented form after a Surrey Hills vineyard was granted planning permission to build a new tasting room.

The Tanhurst Estate, on the southern slopes of Leith Hill began planting grapes in spring of 2020 as part of a growing shift away from traditional hay and dairy farming.

The family, who have been living amidst the semi-ancient woodland there for the past 40 years, decided the best way to promote their wines was to let people visit and sample the fruits of their labour. At Mole Valley District Council’s Wednesday August 7 planning committee, their efforts became a reality after members unanimously granted approval.

Speaking to the committee, the owners said: “The estate, has been in my wife’s family since 1826. The estate comprises traditional farmland and semi ancient woodlands. The estate used to have milking herds but this became unviable in the 1980s although there remains a small herd of beef cows on the estate.”

He added: “In order to keep its agricultural use we needed to find an alternative and economically viable way to farm the land so we consulted two of the most respected vineyard consultants in the country.” The land’s southern slopes make it ideal for growing grapes as it allows the berries to soak up as much sunshine as possible, while the hilly terrain helps water run off.

He said: “I believe the general public enjoy visiting vineyards and this is part of the experience of enjoying a bottle of wine that they buy. They need to see where the grapes were grown to understand the process the grapes have been through; from growing on the vine, to harvest, to fermentation in the tanks, and then bottling.

“We do all this at Birketts Farm. We are a small scale business and therefore rely on selling directly to customers and this requires interaction at the point of sale. We need to use these barns for wine tasting and other events in order to persuade customers that our wine is made totally on site, available, and worth the money they pay for English wine -once they see how much time and passion and effort goes into making it.”

The plans for the Birketts Farm, in Tanhurst Lane, Abinger, allow for the existing barns to be converted and used for wine tasting and associated sales, as well as for hosting educational classes and private events and a cafe. There will also be added onsite parking and toilet facilities.

Surrey teacher banned for underwear social media pupil chat

12 August 2024



A Surrey teacher has been banned after messaging pupils about thongs, favourite underwear, and shaving.

[The Teachers’ Regulation Agency (TRA) has not published the name of the school in the interests of pupils. The Epsom and Ewell Times has decided not to publish the name of The Teacher for the same reason.]

The Teacher has been prohibited indefinitely from the profession and can no longer teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children’s home in England.

The 30-year-old can apply to have the order set aside after June 29, 2026 and has one month to appeal the Secretary of State’s decision.

In a Teachers’ Regulation Agency (TRA), she was found to have behaved unacceptably and brung the teaching profession into disrepute after failing to keep professional boundaries with pupils between February 2023 and May 2023.

The panel, which sat in her absence after The Teacher declined to attend the June 2024 hearing, found she communicated with pupils via social media - discussing underwear, relationships, shaving, body piercing and vaping. The TRA did not name the school in their report, to prevent undue harm to pupils.

The Teacher was also said to have met up with pupils outside school and later tried to conceal her behaviour - asking them not to communicate with her, while her social accounts were being monitored and deleting exchanges.

The report reads: “Instead of teaching the dangers of social media to young children taking their initial steps into the online world, The Teacher actively exposed them to such risks.The panel therefore found that The Teacher’ actions constituted conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.”

In a signed statement of agreed facts, The Teacher admitted the allegations in full.

They read: The Teacher admits that she engaged in discussions... in connection with underwear. The Teacher accepts that she initiated a conversation ...about the topic of thongs, which was in response to (a pupil) asking what underwear The Teacher owned. The Teacher also accepts that she received messages... in which (a pupil) described what underwear she liked. The Teacher also accepts (a pupil) sent The Teacher internet images of underwear that (a pupil) liked. The Teacher accepts that she discussed with (a pupil) what underwear The Teacher owned and how [they] wore their underwear”,

The Panel Decision and reasons on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education report read:

The teacher also messaged about whether she had a boyfriend and “what things put her off”.

A week after pausing communications while accounts were being monitored, messaging started up again, with the teacher telling the pupil “not to tell anyone about their contact.”

The Teacher also admitted deleting a large majority of messages in an effort to conceal what had been sent. She also admitted to deliberately misleading the school over the nature and extent of her communication with pupils on social media.

The report read: “At the school’s suspension meeting, The Teacher accepts that she told the school the pupil had been in communication with her for one week and that The Teacher had been trying to ‘bat her away’.”

The Teacher is prohibited from teaching indefinitely and cannot teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children’s home in England. She may apply for the prohibition order to be set aside, but not until 29 June 2026, 2 years from the date of the order.

Image: Ibrahim.ID Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International licence.

Safety set back for a Council’s car park revenue

12 August 2024



Safety work to repair crumbled concrete and rusted steel reinforcements at the **Swan Car Park** in **Leatherhead** could cost a council more than £200,000.

Mole Valley District Council is set to approve the repair work after its emergency budget passed through its extraordinary scrutiny committee.

The car park is fully owned and operated by the council with all revenue going straight into its coffers. The flip side is that it is also responsible for 100 per cent of the maintenance costs.

The work will be carried out over a three-year period, which the council hopes will prevent anything more significant from developing.

It has set aside £116,496 for the first year, £49,745 in year two and £50,910 for the final year of the project for a total of £217,151.

The meeting heard from cabinet member Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson, who said that in 2022 the council carried out a five-year maintenance report that warned of the need to “monitor concrete and rebar (reinforced steel) ” within the car park - and remedy any failings.

For financial reasons the council decided not to go ahead with any work but the situation earlier this year “had deteriorated.”

She said: “It’s not a health and safety issue at the moment however it is important that the works are remedied in order that they don’t deteriorate any further.”

The majority of the project’s budget is expected to be used “primarily in relation to the concrete frame and repairs to concrete which has crumbled.” Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson added.

A final decision on whether to proceed will be made by the council’s cabinet committee on July 17 2024.

Officers told the meeting how surveyors had been monitoring the car park “visually” and that its condition has since stabilised.

The repairs, the council hopes, would eliminate the need for regular observations.

Asked if there was a risk of concrete falling off the walls, and onto people or their cars, officers replied that there wasn’t an “immediate risk but the longer they leave it the greater that risk becomes”.

Work will be scheduled to avoid the busiest times of the year and be done piecemeal to limit impact on people parking and minimise any revenue losses for the council.

Image: Swan shopping centre car park in Leatherhead (Google)

Wet weather kicks into the long grass

12 August 2024



People fed up with long unsightly overgrown grass and verges can use an interactive map to see when their favourite spots are next due to be cut.

The seemingly endless rainfall this year has heavily affected work across the county as the wet weather shuts down the process - Surrey County Council says this is because its machinery will not cut wet grass properly and can, in some cases, even damage the turf.

Urban areas are due to have six cuts a year by the county - unless they have been designated as a blue heart zone. Rural cuts and high speed roads are chopped twice a year.

Blue hearts are part of Surrey’s 3,000 miles of grass verges but have been deliberately left to grow as a way of increasing plant and insect biodiversity.

Reducing the amount of times these areas are cut is intended to allow native plant species to thrive - or even to sow native wildflower seeds.

As well as using the map, the county council has published a table covering each area in Surrey and when it estimates to get on with the job.

The council’s website reads: “We are experiencing some delays with our planned grass cutting programme dates in parts of the county as a result of the weather and operational issues.

“We are working with our contractors to improve the situation and are sorry for any inconvenience. Thank you for your patience.”

The Blue Campaign, founded in 2014 by wildlife filmmaker Fergus Beeley in response to dramatic declining biodiversity in the UK, lets nature take a bit more control, the county council said.

It encourages the rewilding of green spaces in suitable areas and are marked in blue on the map.

Often they can be identified with a blue heart planted in th ground to show residents grass and flowers are deliberately being left to grow - and the council is encouraging residents to identify new sites and gather local support.

Any areas put forward for blue hearts will be reviewed by the county council and, if approved, contractors told to skip the verge unless some safety work is needed.

All verges, including blue hearts are supposed to have a full cut each autumn.

Surrey County Council spokesperson said: “Our new interactive grass cutting map available here shows residents when their area is due to be cut.

“Our grass cutting programme can however be heavily affected by weather. We cannot cut when it is raining heavily or shortly after as the machinery will not cut the wet grass properly and risks damaging the grass itself.

“Weather and ground conditions permitting, urban spaces are cut six times a year and for rural areas, this takes place twice a year.”

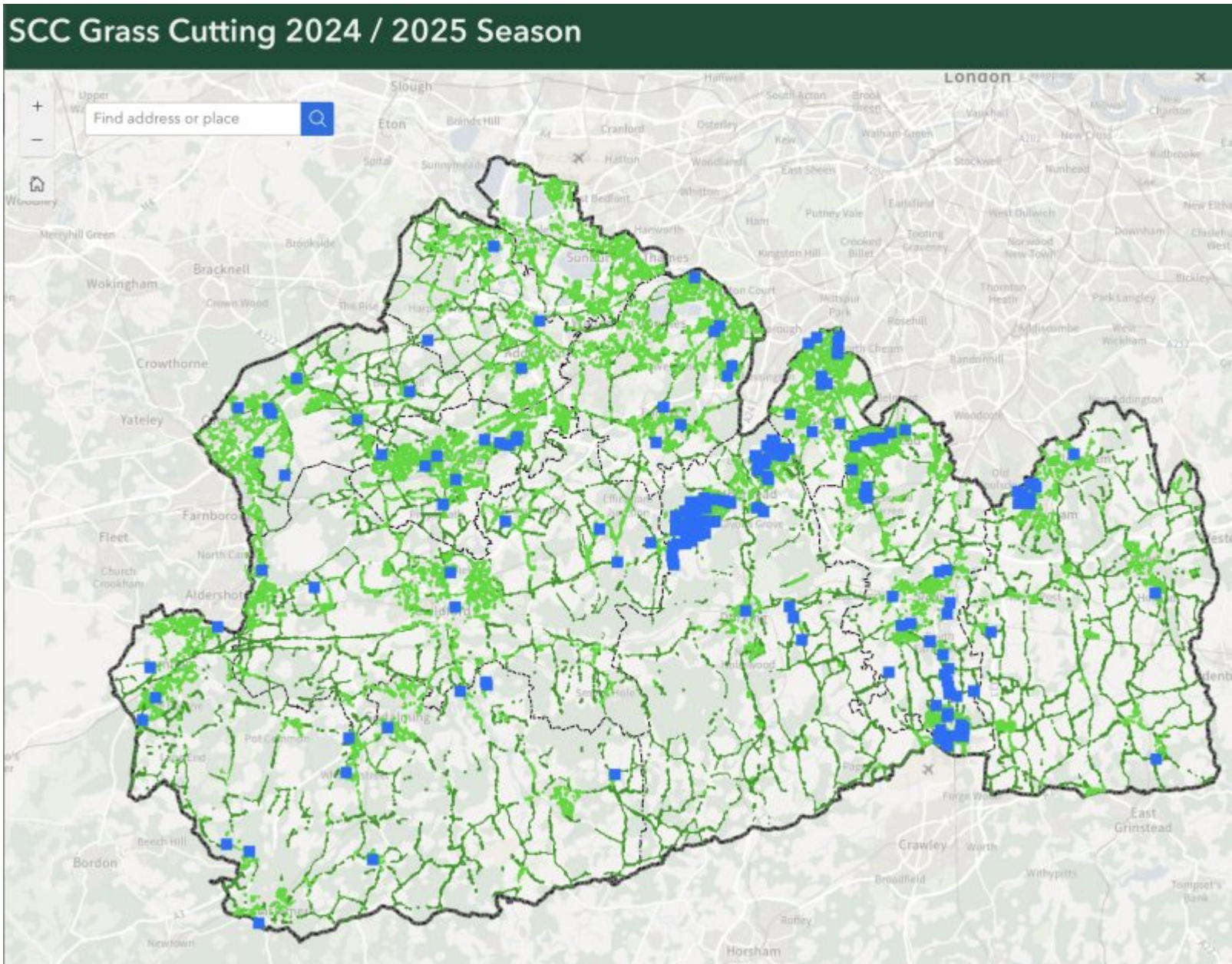


Image: Surrey grass cutting, when your verge is due to be cut. Areas in blue are being left to grow over the summer to encourage biodiversity (image SCC)

INTERACTIVE MAP

Blue Heart

Related reports:

A Greener Future in Partial Sight As Verges To Be Left Unmown

Verging on the ridiculous

Feature photo: *credit Jon Hawkins – Surrey Hills Photography*

Surrey to have a new political colour 4th July?

12 August 2024



Jeremy Hunt “faces a tight race” to be re-elected according to new polls that show Surrey could have as many as 12 new MPs after the July 4 general election.

Only East Surrey’s Conservative MP and Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Claire Coutinho, are predicted to be safe.

Data published by Ipsos suggests the combination of big beast Conservative resignations and huge swings in voting intentions could drastically alter the political map.

The projections are based on Ipsos’ first MRP poll that uses a large-scale online survey of nearly 20,000 participants together with population data at a constituency level, to project which party will win individual seats at the upcoming General Election.

Currently every single seat in the county is held by a Conservative but Ipsos polling has the Liberal Democrats poised to win in Esher and Walton, Dorking and Horley, Guildford, and Epsom and Ewell leaning that way too.

The scale of the swings needed are huge with the Conservatives holding majorities as high as 29 per cent in constituencies predicted to go to the Lib Dems.

Three seats, with what would normally be considered safe Tory strongholds with majorities greater than 30 per cent, are also said to be in play.

Runnymede and Weybridge, Woking, Spelthorne, Windsor, and Godalming and Ash are all toss ups, according to Ipsos.

Even among the seats Ipsos has staying blue, Ipsos says that Surrey Heath, Farnham and Bordon, and Reigate are only “leaning” Conservative with just East Surrey – which was last won by Claire Coutinho in 2019 with a 40 per cent majority “likely” to stay Tory.

Nationally the polls show:

Labour winning 453 – with ‘certainty’ range of 439 to 462 seats

Conservatives 115 – with a range of 99 to 123 seats

Liberal Democrats 38 – with a range of 35 to 48 seats

SNP 15 – with a range of 13 to 23 seats

Plaid Cymru four – with a range of two to five seats

Reform UK three – with range of three to 10 seats

Green Party three with a range of zero to four seats

According to Ipsos data the voting intentions in Surrey are:

Liberal Democrat gains

Esher and Walton (Strong Liberal Democrat) overturning conservative majority of 5 per cent

Con 28%, Lib Dem 50%, Lab 11%, Ref 8%, Green 3%

Dorking (Likely Liberal Democrat) overturning Conservative majority of 19 per cent

Con 30%, Lab 17%, Lib Dem 41%, Ref 8%, Green 4%

Guildford (Likely Liberal Democrat – overturning Conservative majority of 6 per cent

Con 25%, Lab 16%, Lib Dem 39%, Ref 15%, Green 4%

Epsom and Ewell (Lean Liberal Democrat – overturning Conservative majority of 29 per cent

Con 30%, Lab 23%, Lib Dem 35%, Ref 7%, Green 4%

Conservative holds:

Surrey Heath (Lean Conservative) majority 30 per cent

Con 36%, Lab 18%, Lib Dem 30%, Ref 12%, Green 4%

Farnham and Bordon (Lean Conservative) majority 27%

Con 37%, Lab 17%, Lib Dem 31%, Ref 11%, Green 4%

Reigate (Lean Conservative) majority 36%

Con 34%, Lab 29%, Lib Dem 18%, Ref 9%, Green 10%

East Surrey (Likely Conservative) majority 40%

Con 38%, Lab 26%, Lib Dem 16%, Ref 15%, Green 5%

Toss ups

Runnymede and Weybridge (Toss up) Conservative majority 31 per cent

Con 35%, Lab 31%, Lib Dem 18%, Ref 10%, Green 5%

Woking (Toss up) Conservative majority 17 per cent

Con 35%, Lab 30%, Lib Dem 25%, Ref 9%, Green 5%

Godalming and Ash (Toss up) Conservative majority 19 per cent

Con 34%, Lab 17%, Lib Dem 33%, Ref 11%, Green 5%

Spelthorne (Toss up) Conservative majority 37 per cent

Con 31%, Lab 31%, Lib Dem 17%, Ref 16%, Green 5%

Jeremy Hunt and Paul Follows were contacted for this story.

Related reports:

6 out of 11 Conservative MPs leaving Surrey

Justice Stops Oil

12 August 2024



A Surrey campaigner is “over the moon” after a landmark legal decision found that planning permission given to drill for oil at Horse Hill is unlawful. The Supreme Court has found that the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels must be taken into account when granting planning permission. Sarah Finch has been fighting Surrey County Council’s decision to approve UK Oil and Gas’s oil drilling site in Horse Hill, south of Reigate, for years – having first brought the case to the High Court in 2019.

On Thursday (June 20) the Supreme Court ruled, by three judges to two, that planning permission for fossil fuel production should not be granted unless the climate impact of the project – specifically downstream greenhouse gas emissions from the combustion of the fuel – have been fully assessed. It means Surrey County Council’s decision to grant planning permission for oil production was unlawful, her lawyers said at the end of the five-year battle.

Mrs Finch said: “I am absolutely over the moon to have won this important case. The Weald Action Group always believed it was wrong to allow oil production without assessing its full climate impacts, and the Supreme Court has shown we were right.

“This is a welcome step towards a safer, fairer future. The oil and gas companies may act like business-as-usual is still an option, but it will be very hard for planning authorities to permit new fossil fuel developments – in the Weald, the North Sea or anywhere else – when their true climate impact is clear for all to see.

“I thank the Weald Action Group, Friends of the Earth and everyone who has been part of our long journey through the courts. And I thank my lawyers for their commitment and hard work.”

The Court found the council’s reasons for refusing to assess the impact of burning the fuel was inadequate, her lawyers said, adding that it made the “common sense point” that combustion emissions were unavoidable and no other controls could be relied upon to reduce their impact.

They added that for similar reasons, the court also dismissed an argument that refining the oil somehow excused a failure to assess its impact at the earliest possible stage.

The decision means planning authorities in England and Wales must now assess the total climate impact of any proposed fossil fuel developments.

Stephen Sanderson UKOG’s chief executive said: “The court’s rather perplexing retrospective ruling, which is counter to all prior judgements, further underscores why the company’s focus over the past few years has shifted away from oil and gas and firmly towards creating and delivering strategic underground hydrogen storage, an essential element of the UK’s future low carbon energy system.

“These projects have the potential to create far greater sustainable value for the company and the UK than any small onshore field such as Horse Hill. They also have the added benefit of making a positive contribution to Net Zero.

“However, although Horse Hill is a small part of our portfolio, it still has a role to play in both the company’s and UK’s future transitional energy mix and thus we look forward to working closely with the local planning authority to rectify this retrospective change to EIA requirements.”

The proposed expansion at Horse Hill Developments would have created five drilling cellars, four hydrocarbon production wells, four gas-to-power generators, a process, storage and tanker loading area, seven 1,300-barrel oil tanks, and a 37-metre drill rig to allow large-scale production of up to 3.3 million tonnes of crude oil for sale and use as transport fuel for 20 years, Mrs Finch’s lawyers Leigh Day said.

UKCOG has said it plans to work closely with Surrey County Council to “promptly rectify the situation”, either via an amendment to the original 2018 planning applications or a new retrospective planning submission, for which there is recent planning precedent within Surrey.

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said: “The long awaited judgement of the Supreme Court in the case of R (on the application of Finch on behalf of the Weald Action Group) v Surrey County Council and others has found that the Environmental Impact Assessment undertaken for the planning application at Horse Hill to extract petroleum did not assess the effect on climate of the combustion of the oil to be produced.

“Council officers at the time of the planning application assessment believed that they acted in compliance with the law. The judgement makes it clear that local planning authorities must have regard to downstream emissions. The council was unsuccessful in defending its decision.

“The planning permission remains to be determined in due course.”

Image: Redhill climate campaigner Sarah Finch at Horse Hill rally 5 Nov 2021. Credit Denise Laura Baker

Miniature railway set to get bigger

12 August 2024



There will be a new train line coming to Surrey – for enthusiasts, engineers and eager families looking for a day out.

The Surrey Society of Model Engineers has been given planning permission for a revised inner track complete with a new bridge across a man made pond.

The site, in green belt on Fetcham Springs, Mill Lane, just outside Leatherhead, has long been established as a model railway.

It was considered acceptable for development because it was being used for outdoor recreation and the pond would add to the biodiversity of the area.

Councillor Chris Hunt said: “I think this is an excellent proposal and the policy grounds for approving it are very clear.

“My hope will be that the pond is maintained.

“As you might know we’ve had some issues with the main pond in Ashted in terms of some of the species were too aggressively growing and led to a loss of biodiversity in the end until it was cleaned out.

“Perhaps if there were to be an extra informative about the maintenance of the pond would be just as important?

“Planting is a condition already – but obviously the engineers might not be biodiversity experts and maybe they could approach the council for some hints on long-term care for the pond. – or Surrey Wildlife Trust?”

Leatherhead Miniature Railway is run as a non-profit, members’ club, and “unites those with interests in model and miniature engineering, particularly but not exclusively trains” planning documents presented to Mole Valley District Council’s Wednesday June 5 planning committee read.

The club has about 11 open days this year usually falling on Sundays and Bank Holidays, including a Santa weekend in December.

One of the open days is in association with the fire station open day. The fire station is adjacent to the site, and train rides take visitors to and from the fire station open day.

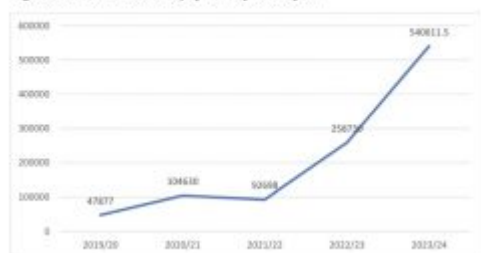
Tickets are sold for rides on the miniature trains at £2 per ride.

Failing children costs Council taxpayers half-million

12 August 2024

42. During 2023/24 the total amount paid in financial remedies was £540,611.59.

Figure 4: Financial Redress payments year-on-year



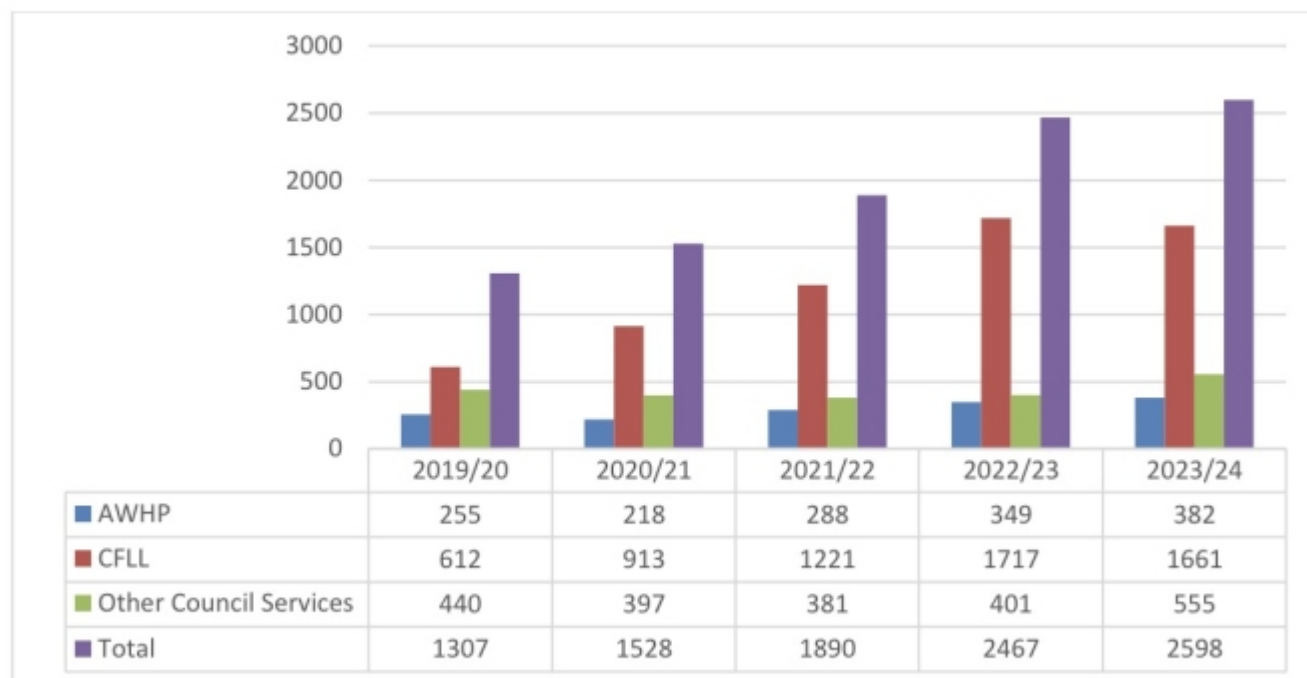
Fines paid out by **Surrey County Council** for repeatedly failing children and young people topped half a million pounds in the past year – more than doubling its previous worst level. The council paid £540,611.59 in the last year to families who raised complaints through the children and social care watchdog.

It is an increase of £281,880, or 109 per cent, on 2023’s figure – when the council said it was “working hard to improve services”. Part of the “notable increase” is due to a change in guidance from the Ombudsman, which encourages local authorities to provide financial remedies earlier, as well as on an ongoing basis for delays to education, health and care (EHC) plans.

The council said it has cut its backlog of delayed care plans and is approaching the national norm.

Opposition members said ombudsman complaints and fines were just the tip of the iceberg and the trauma caused to families has long-lasting effects.

Figure 1: Total complaints received.



Dr **Julia Katherine**, Surrey County Council’s interim director of education and lifelong learning said: “We are working hard to reduce spend on fines, which we know is higher than it should be.” She added: “However, we recognise that delays in issuing EHC plans have also contributed to missed provision and subsequent fines, and we apologise for any distress caused to the children and families affected.

“As timeliness improves, provision will be put in place within normal service delivery rather than retrospectively through remedies and we naturally expect fines to fall in line with this. We have seen a 64 per cent increase in EHC needs assessment requests across Surrey since 2020, at a time of a national shortage of educational psychologists, and this has naturally had an impact.”

Dr Katherine said the council had prioritised how it was addressing timelines and had reduced the number of delayed EHC plan requests from 1,658 in October 2023 to about 100 by the end of May 2024 – and is on track to eliminate the backlog altogether.

She said: “This should ultimately result in improved timeliness of assessments, putting Surrey in line with national levels, from June 2024, and in turn an improved experience for families and a reduction in the need for financial remedies. We are resolute in our ambition to continue to improve services and outcomes for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so that they are happy, healthy, safe and confident about their future.”

According to the council’s own figures, £107,102.50 was paid in “symbolic financial remedies” in recognition of the “distress and anxiety and time and trouble taken in pursuing” complaints, an increase of £19,656.85 (11 per cent) when compared to the previous 12 months.

The council paid £255,318 because of problems in its education services, including a single payout of £12,900 which included missed education and delay. There were also two one-off payments of £12,486 and £12,400 for loss of education provision and delay. Children’s social care shortcomings cost £74,441 with £43,245 to one family to acknowledge financial support errors. The figures were released ahead of the June 5 meeting of its Audit and Governance committee.

Councillor **Catherine Powell**, leader of the residents group at Surrey County Council, said “I’m sad but it doesn’t surprise me. The half a million is devastating for the families, it’s devastating that its money not being spent on services, but it’s all the other families that are not even able to take it to that point. To go through to the ombudsman, you kind of have to have money behind you and there are an awful lot of people who don’t and they just end up sitting in the system.”

She added: “Once you’ve traumatised a child you don’t untraumatise them, they learn to live with it and that’s where the long-term mental health issue can. “The parents of these children are under extreme strain. If we don’t support the parents in the right way, we are actually creating long term health issues for the parents as well because they are burnt out and unable to cope. I hear it’s a very isolating experience.

“If you have a child not in school regularly there are lots of things you can’t do, you can’t work and you have to support the child in an intense day-to-day way. It’s very hard.”

Cllr Powell added (the council) has “put money into educational psychologists and the service believes it will get the backlog down but the reality is not just that, but the support we provide along the way.”

Missed education provision meant the council had to reimburse parents £222,657 in symbolic financial payments to recognise each month missed. These are payments the council should be spending to meet assessed needs irrespective of a complaint being made.

In the past year, Surrey County Council recorded a total of 1,661 complaints in its children, families and lifelong learning service – down from 1,771 the previous year.

Only a “very small number of complaints” escalate to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, the council said, with the vast majority successfully resolved and responded to by the local authority.

Cllr **Will Forster**, leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said: “We have highlighted Surrey County Council’s awful record of protecting vulnerable young people before. All too often the Ombudsman has found the county council wanting. This is an awful way to spend taxpayers’ money, and on lawyers fees fighting these judgements. The cases that come to the ombudsman area only when parents have fought and pushed through the system to get to this point. There will be so many more failures that carers and young people aren’t able to complain about.”

A Surrey council resists green-belt housing

12 August 2024



A contentious plan to build dozens of affordable homes in Surrey was rejected by councillors who prioritized protecting greenbelt land over addressing the area’s housing shortage.

Developers had wanted to build up to 135 homes, of which at least half would have been sold at affordable rates, at Grove End between the A30 and A322, in Bagshot.

The outline planning application was rejected by Surrey Heath Borough Council’s planning committee on Thursday May 23.

Early indications suggested there would have been at least 68 affordable homes, including 17 set aside as affordable first homes and 51 social affordable or intermediate rented properties. The developers said they would be willing to increase those numbers but the application itself had to be determined on those figures.

The committee was advised that permitting the plans would be a departure from its developing local plan and undermine the council’s aim of only developing on brownfield sites in the near future – these are abandoned or underused former industrial land.

Councillor Kevin Thompson (Liberal Democrat, Lightwater) said: “Often we talk about this need for affordable housing and we talk about numbers and we talk about statistics, but I think it’s important that we think about what that actually means.

“We have a situation where the people that teach our kids, who look after us in hospital, can’t afford to live in this borough and they have to commute in, because we don’t have the affordable housing we need. We need to look at this very carefully because [this proposal] does provide us with a significant amount of affordable housing.”

The land, between the A322 dual carriageway linking the M3 with Bracknell and Windlesham Golf Club had been considered for redevelopment as the council looked for sites as part of its local plan. It “discontinued” the idea however as the borough could demonstrate it had enough brownfield land to meet its housing targets.

Developers tried to argue the land, next to the A30, was not the idyllic rolling Surrey countryside that people think of as greenbelt because the main road had an “urbanising” affect on the site. Speaking on behalf of the application, the agent added: “The borough unfortunately has a major and sustained issue with failing to meet affordable housing needs as demonstrated.”

Cllr Shaun MacDonald, said: “We need to be extremely careful before we give up any green belt. I do accept the comments that this is not the most unique piece of green belt we have but it does form a barrier to the other areas adjacent and if we start allowing creep we will soon have all of the Green Belt gobbled up between Bagshot and north Windlesham. If this space was on the other side of the A322 I suspect we would be having a very different conversation about the feasibility and viability.”

Access was another issue raised during the meeting with one Bagshot resident, who had lived in the area for 56 years raising safety issues for any young families would could move there. He said: “This particular site to my mind has a very serious problem attached to it with regards to access.”

He said in recent years there there had been a need to build 1,752 affordable homes, and so far it’s delivering just 39 a year. This development, he argued, would provide two years of affordable housing on a single site.

He added that they needed to look at the quality of green belt in the borough as otherwise there would never been any development.

Image: Bagshot planning (SBC planning portal)