Big employment hub coming to Leatherhead

The future of a possibly major employment hub in Leatherhead has been given a huge "vote of confidence".

Four new buildings and 13 industrial warehouse units will be built in the north of the town after decision-makers backed plans to modernise part of the Cleeve Road Business Park Research Area.

Three "rather tired" buildings, Alpha, Beta, and Cetec, will be torn down to make way for modern facilities that meet the "expectations of employers and businesses today".

The decision, backed unanimously at the Wednesday, April 3 meeting of Mole Valley's Development Committee, had widespread support within the room given the area was already earmarked as a business park by the borough's planners.

Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (LD, Leatherhead North) said: "I am broadly in favour of this.

"I think it is a sort of vote of confidence in the industrial unit there, and the site, and the future of it, which is a really good thing.

"I'm pleased to see investment being put into that area."

Cllr Chris Hunt (Ind, Ashtead Lanes & Common) said: "I really think this application is good.

"I love the mix in the size of the units, I think that appeals to firms throughout."

He said the noise, lighting and access were all positive and added: "It's the right site at the right time."

Among the comments received during the planning process were concerns over the loss of existing pedestrian and cycle access.

Councillors did urge the developers Stefania Chancerygate (Leatherhead No. 1) Limited, to keep these throughways, particularly for those who work at the site as they would benefit from easy routes into town - but were told it was not a planning matter.

The meeting heard the site had good access to the M25 and that "strategically" this was where the council would direct this type of development "as it would boost employment and promote growth".

The new plans include 112 parking bays, of which at least 50 per cent must have fast-charge sockets before any of the units are allowed to open for trading.

Cllr Phil Hammond (LD, Fetcham): "The employment land strategically for the district is really important and this is a big area but it's got rather tired and it's not really meeting the expectations of employers and businesses today.

"It needs upgrading, it's important employment, we need that in north Leatherhead and we need that in the north of the district."

Image: Leatherhead Business Park (Mole Valley Planning Portal)

Tree felling foul of the law

The culprits who illegally chopped down more than 100 protected trees and damaged seven others have been fined nearly £20,000, Woking Borough Council said.

A landowner, together with its contractor were prosecuted and fined for the unauthorised felling of the trees near Upshot Lane, Pyrford, after pleading guilty at Guildford Magistrates' Court.

Burhill Development Ltd admitted it ignored a tree preservation order on its land and was made to pay £15,140, comprising fines of £11,000, a victim surcharge of £2,000 and costs of £2,140.

Their contractor, P&A Services, which carried out the work, also pleaded guilty to the unauthorised felling and causing damage to the protected trees and was ordered to pay a total of £2,900; fines of £1,000; a victim surcharge of £400; and council costs of £1,500.

The action was taken against the two firms by Woking Borough Council. The original hearing took place in October 2023 with the judge issuing sentence in March 2024.

Speaking about the prosecution, Beverley Kuchar, Woking Borough Council's strategic director for place, described it as an "important case" and welcomed the decision.

She said: "Whether you permit or cause wilful damage to our environment we will take legal action wherever necessary.

"It is important that landowners and their contractors take the necessary steps to understand what consent is required before commencing tree works.

"The status of the borough's trees can be checked quickly and simply online. If in doubt, our arboricultural team can provide advice in advance of any works commencing.

"There is no excuse and, as in this case, failure to do so can lead to a criminal prosecution and significant fines,"

Tree Preservation Orders protect specific trees, groups of trees, or woodland that benefit the wider community

Was County HQ sold for a song?

Surrey County Council faces scrutiny over its £25 million sale of a former headquarters site after it was revealed it could have a gross development value of £250 million once revedelopment is completed. The new owner of the former HQ has listed the site for sale with a gross development value of 10 times more than the council got when it sold the historic building in 2021.

The huge gap between the two figures led to the county council to be challenged on whether it got the best deal for residents although the lead member for property said it secured a "good deal" and would sell it again at the same price. The 5.2 acre site in Kingston is being marketed by Savills. It is described as a "landmark opportunity" with "stunning former County Hall buildings" and has planning permission for 254 private apartments, 16 shared ownership apartments, and 20 affordable rent apartments.

Rob Pollock, Savills director, London development, said in a statement promoting the sale: "With its scale and heritage, Surrey County Hall offers the opportunity to deliver a truly unique development in southwest London that might seem more at home in central London, and consequently appeal to buyers across the city. With world famous attractions like Hampton Court and Wimbledon Tennis Club in striking distance of the property, combined with the obvious curb-side appeal, we expect that the ultimate developer of the property will set new record for pricing in Kingston."

The sale was discussed during the Tuesday March, 19 meeting of Surrey County Council. In March 2021 Surrey County Council sold the site for about £25m to RER Kingston Limited, according to officers although it was suggested the figure may have been "in excess" of that.

Councillor Robert Evans (Lab Stanwell and Stanwell Moor) asked: "When Surrey County Council was selling County Hall, its former Kingston headquarters, developers RER issued a release stating it had a guide price of £20m. This week Savills has issued a press release stating the site now has a Gross Development Value of £250m.

"Can the council tell us exactly how much it got for its former Grade 2 listed site, and whether it feels this was best value for residents seeing as it now has the potential to bring in hundreds of millions of pounds for its new owners?"

In a written response, he was told the council sold the site for £25million, on a subject to contract only basis, following "an extensive open marketing campaign for which best value was secured". Since the sale, RER (Kingston) Ltd has been holding the 300,000 sq. ft site vacant, while pursuing a planning application through the Royal Borough of Kingston to convert much of the former complex into residential units.

The official council response read: "Costs would have been incurred for empty business rate liability, which would have been circa £700,000 per annum alongside security and other holding void costs. "Although planning consent is now expected, RER have placed the complex on the market through Savills.

"Whilst the agents suggest a potential value post development, it should be noted that when fully sold or let, this is not the value that a market bidder will pay for the asset today. A value bid would consider the cost, timing and risks of the development, the capital investment needed to complete any approved scheme (heritage build costs, consultant fees, ongoing security, void costs, finance costs at elevated rates since 2021) and the marketing period to sell or rent all units once converted.

"This could be a further three to five year project". As part of the sale agreement the council negotiated a contractual position to secure any excess of value that might arise from any future development "if the quantum of development exceeded a certain level".

When asked to elaborate on this, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure, Councillor Natalie Bramhall said the developers had spent £700,000 a year on empty rates, had to cover the cost of security, and that planning application costs would have been in excess of £1m.

She added that to get to the full £250m they would also need to spend 'hundreds of millions" to bring it forward. She said: "Residual land value with planning persimmon is between £35m and £40m.

"Somebody is going to have to spend hundreds of millions of pounds bringing that forward and I would suggest that as the purchaser is trying to sell at this time in the market which is probably at the bottom they spent far more on this site then they probably expected already. I actually think we secured a good deal and would again sell at that price."

Image - former SCC HQ County Hall in Kingston. Surrey Live

Cancer patient getting the right royal treatment

The first cancer patient set to undergo a revolutionary new procedure that could cut treatment time to almost a quarter said it was a "privilege" to be given the opportunity.

The **Royal Surrey NHS Foundation Trust** is taking part in a new clinical trial led by the **Royal Marsden** into prostate cancer. Currently, patients are treated with radiotherapy over a minimum of 20 treatments which lasts four weeks or more. Under this new process, that time could be reduced to one and a half weeks.

Michael Robson, 78, is the first patient to be part of the trial in Royal Surrey. He was diagnosed in December 2023. He said: "One of my friends was diagnosed with prostate cancer and he said I should get a test so I had a blood test and I was called by my GP and sent for an appointment at urology. I was fortunate enough to meet Dr Philip Turner who gave me the options and went through everything. Everything has been explained to me in a way that is easy to understand and made the journey so much easier to deal with. All of the staff I couldn't complement them highly enough. They have been fantastic."

Michael was given options for treatment and was asked if he was interested in taking part in the clinical trial and he agreed straight away. He added: "It's been fantastic here. I feel very privileged to be the first patient. The service has been first class from everybody concerned."

Patients with low and intermediate risk disease who took part in a trial called PACE-B demonstrated that the process would work in the tighter time frames. This new study is to determine whether those considered high-risk would get the same benefits. The trial, called PACE-NODES, was opened at The Royal Marsden and was designed jointly by investigators from Queen's University Belfast and The Institute of Cancer Research, London.

Dr Philip Turner, consultant clinical oncologist and principal investigator for the trial, said: "We are delighted to be opening the PACE NODES trial in Royal Surrey. This is part of our drive to give Surrey patients access to the very best oncology clinical trials from across the UK and indeed from across the world.

"The benefits with regard to timing are enormous – the standard of care for these men is a minimum of four weeks of daily visits which is very disruptive to life. The rates of side effects are low. Crucially, the five fraction treatment appears just as safe as conventional 20 fraction treatments which we have been using for years very safely."

Chief executive Louise Stead said: "Royal Surrey has a long and proud tradition of being a premier centre of UK oncology research and we are determined, with the support of our patients and other partners, to ensure as many patients as possible have access to ground-breaking research close to home. If successful, this could make a huge difference to patients receiving treatment for prostate cancer."

L-R: Radiographer Kate Maltby, Michael Robson, Dr Philip Turner

Surrey Borough running ahead on bio-fuel

The first Surrey council to switch its entire vehicle fleet from diesel to waste fats and cooking oil said the move could cut emissions by about 90 per cent. **Runnymede Borough Council** said the decision, unanimously approved by its environment and sustainability committee last week, will stop about 650 tonnes of C02 from being released into the air each year.

The shift to Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) is expected to take place over the coming months as about 80 of the council's refuse trucks, minibuses, vans, street sweepers and other vehicles make the switch.

It makes Runnymede Borough Council the first in Surrey to go all in on HVO with the change expected to make greater inroads

into reducing the council's operational carbon emissions than any other initiative explored to date.

Details on how much it will cost have been kept private and confidential but the day-to-day operating costs of moving over to HVO are expected to be higher than with diesel, the council confirmed, but said it had set aside an additional £100,000 to cover fuel costs.

A statement issued by the council said it demonstrated the desire "across all parties to make an effective and lasting positive impact on Runnymede's climate and environment".

Committee chair Councillor **David Coen**, said: "It is great to know that in the coming months our fleet, from our bin lorries to our road sweepers, will continue to provide the same high level of service whilst producing less harmful pollution into the environment and people's lungs.

"We've committed that by 2030 all our council operations will be carbon net zero. Switching over to HVO has the potential of hugely reducing the council's overall carbon emission."

HVO can be used with the council's existing fleet without the need for engine modifications or new machinery.

Cllr **Don Whyte**, leader of the Liberal Democrat group and member of the environment and sustainability committee added: "It's a positive move. Runnymede is very late coming to the climate crisis declaration. This is a small step, but it's an important thing."

"Bonkers but essential" job to cut back jobs?

'Bonkers but essential' is how a new £75,000 job, running bankrupt Woking Borough Council's decimated leisure and communities services is being described.

Last month, the council cut more than £8million from its budget; slashing spending on daycare centres, Citizens Advice Woking, and telling Pool in the Park to become self-sustaining or risk closure.

Now, it is advertising a new Head of Leisure and Communities to oversee the service and, on top a basic salary of between £65,624 and £76,439 a year, includes a £3,255 'flexible benefits allowance".

The advert, which runs until March 24, is seeking somebody to lead on the "commissioning, oversight and delivery of a range of leisure and community services, ensuring the facilities are operated in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way."

The successful candidate will be in charge of leisure contracts, sports and leisure services, arts and culture, community centres, and community safety.

A spokesperson for Woking Borough Council described the role as "a permanent position" adding that it was "essential to ensuring these services can move to a self-financing position through strong and effective partnerships, including managing the Council's leisure contract."

The outgoing postholder played a key role in making it possible for the borough to retain as many of the services it has, in the face of the necessary swinging cuts needed to balance its books. Leader of the opposition, Councillor Kevin Davies said: "Ultimately you can argue that it s a non-statutory service, but the residents of Woking have made it extremely clear that they see it differently.

"On the face of it, the high value of the role is galling particularly as people have been made redundant but the (post holder) will be responsible for a lot of services that people hold dear.

"Will the council come across as tone deaf? Of course, but the residents want these services as at the end of the day.

"It looks bonkers, but it's to protect something that people see as absolutely valuable. We need a really good person and the incumbent has done a really good job in protecting as many of the services we could - without him we'd have lost Pool in the Park."

He added that the service would soon become a "shadow of its former self" with the council delivering the minimum is could get away with, for the maximum tax. He said: "Before it was trying to do the opposite, the real answer should be somewhere in the middle.

Among the role's duties will be working with both public and private sector partners to develop a "healthy, inclusive and engaged community" and to drive new initiatives that support residents as well as commissioning and contract management.

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Woking's whopping bail out and tax rise

Woking's debt crisis explained

Surrey County Council workers to strike?

Staff at Surrey County Council could walk out after a "record number" of people backed strike action - unless the authority makes a significantly improved pay offer, unions have said.

For the last two years the workers at the council have been offered less than the National Joint Council (NJC) pay award and less than most other neighbouring councils, according to Unison.

Those working in local government and schools have their pay and other conditions are negotiated by the NJC. The Local Democracy Reporting Service understands that those offers were rejected.

Last year, turnout for a full-strike ballot fell 40 votes short of the threshold required for legal industrial action, and the pay settlement imposed without agreement.

This year, a consultative ballot of members, covering core Surrey County Council workers and support staff in Surrey maintained schools, concluded on Friday, March 1, and achieved enough votes with a 53 per cent turnout – with 87 per cent of members rejecting the 4 per cent average pay offer, and 91 per cent of those voting for strike action, record in Surrey.

Union representatives are due to meet next week and have said that unless staff receive a "significantly improved offer" they will "be recommending a vote for a full legal industrial action ballot over the next few weeks".

Paul Couchman, branch secretary of Surrey Unison, said: "Our members are more frustrated and more angry than they have ever been. Voting over 90 per cent for potential strike action is unprecedented in Surrey. We hope the council will see the strength of feeling of their staff and reconsider their offer.

"If there is no significantly improved offer from the council in the next few days we will have no choice other than to go to a formal ballot for strike action, where we are confident our members will once again respond positively to a call for action."

It comes as the county council's new £30 million payroll system was reported to have left staff "wiping tears of frustration and helplessness" over missed payments.

The council brought in a new Enterprise Resource Planning system last June and said it had "experienced some issues relating to payroll" and that it had been working to improve the system but given its complexity, needed an ongoing programme of software upgrades and fixes to address issues that have arisen.

Mr Couchman added: "No doubt the anger and frustration over the payroll issues has added to the general cost of living crisis, making Surrey County Council employees vote in unprecedentedly high numbers for strike action."

A spokesperson for Surrey said: "We are still in talks with the Trade Unions regarding the 2024/25 pay offer therefore it would be inappropriate to comment while these discussions are still ongoing."

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Local Government monopoly board at play?

Surrey County Council has added another building to its property portfolio after buying the Victoria Gate site from Woking Borough Council in a deal that will net the bankrupt authority more than £30 million.

The county has said it will not disclose how much it paid for the former Mclaren site in Victoria Way, Woking, but the Epsom and Ewell Times understands the overall package will bring in about £32,250,000 – although the split between McLaren's early surrender of the premises and how much the county paid remains unclear.

It comes two months after Surrey County Council said it expected to add a further billion pounds of debt to its books as part of its capital programme, from £1.3 billion to £2.4bn by 2028/29.

Announcing the deal, the Surrey County Council said the purchase "underpins" its commitment to "efficiency, sustainability, and improved services" with the new site serving as its corporate office hub in north-west Surrey.

It now plans to put its old Quadrant Court site in Guildford Road up for sale in an effort to recoup some of its costs.

The deal is being seen as good news for Woking Borough Council as it nets more than £30m from the site, hopes to bring more people into the heart of the town centre, and potentially allow it to sell off its civic centre as it tries to pay back part of its own multibillion pound debt.

The county council expects staff to relocate to its latest acquisition later this year.

Councillor Natalie Bramhall, cabinet member for property, waste and infrastructure said, "This strategic move reaffirms Surrey County Council's commitment to creating a conducive work environment while aligning with our broader objectives of sustainability and improved service delivery."

Surrey said the decision is part of its overall vision to "provide services from a contemporary, agile environment that caters to the needs of both residents and employees" and that the Woking town centre location was optimal for both staff and residents due to its excellent access to public transport and car parking facilities.

Surrey County Council moved its headquarters from Kingston to Woodhatch Place in Reigate after acquiring the site for £50m. Other hubs across include Dakota in Brooklands Weybridge, and Fairmount House in Leatherhead.

The Leader of Woking Borough Council, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, said: "Asset rationalisation is a key part of the Council's Improvement and Recovery Plan agreed with Government.

"The sale of Victoria Gate delivers best value both in terms of return to the public purse and benefit to the community."

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Water company blind to Mole pollution?

A single **Surrey river** and its tributaries have had more than 4,500 hours of raw untreated sewage dumped into it by **Thames Water** already this year, according to a campaign group.

The **River Mole River Watch** (RMRW), which is calling for clean water for the health of wildlife and people, tracks sewage outflows and storm discharges by the utility giant and said that February "saw the highest recorded duration of storm overflows of any month we have been testing so far".

The group said the February figures topped the 2115 hours from January with the majority of the damage coming from the nine big sewage treatment plants.

Both Thames Water, which maintains over 68,000 miles of sewers, and manages 354 sewage treatment works, and RMRW said the pollution was more diluted than normal due to the heavy rain. Thames Water has also said it is carrying out improvement work across its network.

Campaigners though said the sheer volume of untreated waste meant the "absolute load" of phosphates would be "much larger during wet months".

Posting to their website, RMRW said: "Some sewage works were discovered to be failing so badly that storm tanks overflowed outside the treatment works in a cascade of raw sewage that flooded footpaths and recreational fields. Despite the long duration of sewage overflows and perhaps contrary to expectations, our February pollution tests recorded some of the lowest phosphate levels in the 10 months of testing so far.

"While lower concentrations of phosphate are measured by our Hanna low range meters, the absolute load of phosphate entering our rivers will nevertheless be much larger during wet months. This is due to the long duration of untreated sewage outfalls added to the other pollution sources such as misconnections, road and farm runoff."

Thames Water is the only firm to give live updates to its sewage overflows, or storm discharges. The data received from its monitors isn't always accurate and only indicates rather than confirms discharges. The company says in makes the information immediately available to open to allow customers to make more informed decisions. Verified data is published annually.

A spokesperson for Thames Water said: "Storm overflows are designed to operate automatically when the sewer network is about to be overwhelmed which then releases diluted wastewater into rivers, rather than letting it back up into people's homes. We regard any untreated discharges as unacceptable, and we're committed to stopping them from being necessary, with the assistance of our regulators.

"We're currently spending £34milion upgrading Crawley sewage works, as well as spending £23million improving our site in Burstow. These upgrades are due to complete in 2024. We've also started a £14million upgrade to Dorking sewage works and we have plans to upgrade our Earlswood, Esher, Holmwood, Horley, Leatherhead and Merstham sites.

"Taking action to improve the health of our rivers is a key focus for us and we are leading the way with our transparent approach to data. We remain the only company to provide live alerts for all untreated discharges and this 'near real-time' data is available to customers as a map on our website and is also available through an open data platform for third parties, such as swimming and environmental groups to use. We have published plans to upgrade over 250 of our sewage treatment works and sewers to treat the high volumes of incoming sewage and reduce the need for overflows during wet weather."

Image: River Mole at Leatherhead. Jim Linwood. License details

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Woking's whopping bail out and tax rise

Woking Borough Council has raised its share of tax by 10 per cent. It comes as the bankrupt council was offered an "exceptional" £785 million Government bail out

The major bailout package aims to offset its debt and was signed off last night during a full council meeting. The offer was dependent on the council increasing its share of council tax by 10 per cent and comes on top of the previously agreed £8.4m in spending cuts.

Deputy leader of the council **Will Forster** said the total package of £785m was "the largest ever set of measures required for a council in intervention" He added: "Just let that sink in. Not the largest ever in Surrey, the largest ever in the country, not this year, ever."

Coupled with the rises announced by **Surrey County Council** and the police, B and D Council Tax homes will now pay £2,371.60 a year, up from £2,248.77. Had councillors failed to agree on the package, the local authority would "grind to a halt and be acting unlawfully" the meeting heard. Staff would go unpaid and services stop.

Leader of the council, Councillor **Ann-Marie Barker**, said a vote against the tax rise was to vote against the government's offer. She said: "A vote against the tax rise is to turn down the offer. I wanted a better offer but it's the offer we've got."

The council also announced that there would be £100,000 in hardship money to help ease some of the pain caused by the massive spending cuts, price hikes and tax rises.

Groups such as the bustler transport service, Citizens Advice Woking and the Lightbox have been forced to find new funding if they wish to continue. Some have approached the national lottery.

Woking Council has said the money would be for those most impacted by the added cost or loss of so many services. It includes £25k for a Council Tax hardship fund, £50k for Citizen Advice Woking and £25k for grants that replicate the Government's Household Support Fund.

Speaking after the meeting, Cllr Barker said: "Despite the council's complex financial situation, I am pleased that we have overcome this important hurdle and set a robust budget for the forthcoming financial year. I welcome the significant and unprecedented support package offered by Government which gives us flexibility to deal with money that should have been put aside for borrowing and allows us to capitalise our debt over the long-term.

"The conditions set out by Government align with work already being undertaken on asset rationalisation, debt reduction and improved commercial governance as part of our Improvement and recovery plan. I know residents will find any increase in council tax difficult which is why we are putting in place support for those who find it hard to meet the cost of rising bills.

"These critical decisions are ones I did not want to make. However, they are necessary if we are to continue to provide essential services, set a balanced budget in future years and begin to return Woking to long-term financial sustainability. The future remains difficult and challenging. I am determined that Woking will recover to become a better council focused on delivering essential services to local people."