

Surrey Borough running ahead on bio-fuel

15 March 2024



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 CO2 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?

15 March 2024



'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 it 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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Surrey County Council workers to strike?

15 March 2024



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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15 March 2024



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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15 March 2024



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 it 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 £34million 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

15 March 2024



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.

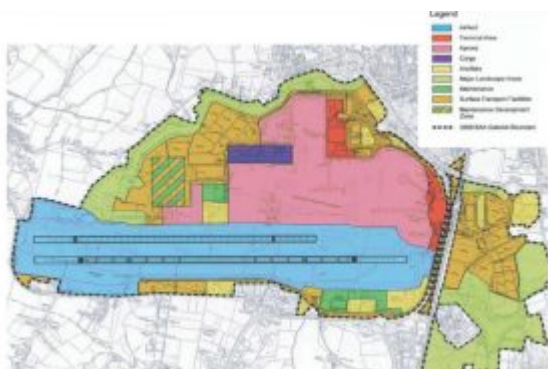
Speaking after the meeting, Cllr Barker said: “Despite the council’s complex financial situation, I am pleased that we have overcome this important hurdle and set a robust budget for the forthcoming financial year. I welcome the significant and unprecedented support package offered by Government which 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.”

Gatwick Airport Expansion

15 March 2024



The six-month inquiry into Gatwick Airport’s plan to double capacity is underway.

Airport chiefs at the country’s second busiest airport want to modify its northern runway so that it can increase passenger numbers to about 75 million a year on 386,000 flights.

It says this will help minimise delays, bring in about £1billion into the region’s economy every year, and create 14,000 jobs – all while staying within agreed noise levels.

It also has a carbon action plan for how the airport will be net zero for its own emissions by 2030.

Opponents, who staged a protest outside the Crawley hearing ahead of its February 27 opening, said the expansion will “have a devastating impact on both people’s lives and the environment.”

Also opposing the current plan is a coalition of 10 councils in Surrey, Kent, East Sussex that surround Gatwick.

Sally Pavey, chairs the Campaign Against Gatwick Noise Emissions (CAGNE) an umbrella aviation community and environment group for Sussex, Surrey, and Kent.

She said: “If this application to build a new runway is permitted, it will have a devastating impact on both people’s lives and the environment.

“That is why it is so important that CAGNE are here – not just today, but every day of the hearing, with our qualified team of Kings Council, plus surface transport, aviation noise and air quality expert team, as well as supporting non-government organisations tackling the subject of jet zero and the environmental destruction of our planet.

“This fight is not over until the Secretary of State for Transport makes his decision.

“Whatever political party will be in power then, come elections, local or general, we hope that residents here today will reflect their feelings when it comes to the ballot box and the impact that aviation is having on our planet.

“We could not have put together such a strong team, acting for communities and the planet, if residents had not put their hands deep in their pockets and donated to CAGNE.”

Crawley Borough Council, East Sussex County Council, Horsham District Council, Kent County Council, Mid Sussex District Council, Mole Valley District Council, Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Surrey County Council, Tandridge District Council, and West Sussex County Council make up the consortium of councils opposing the plan.

They are concerned the proposals, as they stand, fail to provide sufficient controls to noise and air quality levels are not exceeded.

The councils are also worried about how a doubling of passenger numbers would impact the transport network – and over the impact the huge surge would have on meeting sustainability needs.

The statement read: “We have been working together to ensure that if the proposal were to be approved, the required controls, mitigations and where appropriate, compensations are put in place to limit the environmental impacts and to maximise the economic and community benefits that should be sought from such development.”

Gatwick Airport said it was not taking part in any interviews.

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Computer lets down County Council workers

15 March 2024



Surrey County Council's new £30 million payroll system has left staff "wiping tears of frustration and helplessness" over missed payments, it is claimed.

It is claimed that the payroll system is paying employees the wrong wages, with reports that some are missing mortgage and rent payments, almost a year after it was introduced, unions have said. Workers on payroll and experiencing issues include teachers and firefighters.

The council brought in a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system last June and said it had "experienced some issues relating to payroll".

The council has said it was working continuously to improve the system but given its complexity, needed an ongoing programme of software upgrades and fixes to address issues that have arisen.

A permanent fix is not expected until early summer, Surrey County Council Trade Unions (SCCTU) has said.

The ERP was introduced last summer after the council was notified its previous payroll system, which was close to 20 years old, would no longer be supported with updates.

According to SCCTU, which is made up of 12 recognised bodies including Unison, NEU and Nasuwt: "All the trade unions in Surrey County Council have been helping distraught staff deal with pay errors month-on-month since June 2023.

"These errors include large overpayments and underpayments, which have had dire reverberations for the staff in question.

"This includes employees being unable to make payments on their mortgage, rent, cars, and utilities.

"For single parents, lower paid staff, and staff who have their wages topped up by Universal Credit, the fallout from these mistakes have had a catastrophic effect on the mental health of staff and their families."

They said in one extreme case a staff member confessed she and her children had to stay with her mother because they didn't have money to buy electricity or food.

The council said it does not have figures available for how many have been affected but say that the vast majority of cases have had minimal impact.

To make up the shortfall, the council has been making emergency payments with staff pleading the cases to their line managers, the union said.

Surrey UNISON estimates at least £100,000 has been paid in fees alone for emergency payments.

Overpayments can be equally problematic for low-paid staff who receive in-work benefits as they find themselves with too much money in their accounts and their top ups switched off - only to be out of pocket with the overpayment is clawed back, the unions said.

As such, the unions are now in dispute with the council over its implementation and said they have no confidence in this new payroll system.

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said: "Following the installation of a new Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system last summer, we have experienced some issues relating to payroll.

"We have put in place a number of workarounds and extra resource to try to minimise the impact on staff and schools, and a dedicated technical team is working to resolve underlying issues.

"The recovery plan is making good progress, with the number of errors reducing significantly over time including updating leavers' processes and the school financial reporting system, and a programme of engagement clinics has also been coordinated to provide individual schools/settings with focused support.

"We are still working through some of the issues and we are grateful to our staff and schools for both their efforts and patience as we continue to do this.

"Some level of disruption was expected throughout such a fundamental transition to a new system, but we are sorry for any inconvenience to employees and schools adversely affected; our primary focus has always been the welfare of our staff as we resolve any errors, and we will continue to work with them throughout this process."

Image: Mike Lawrence License details

Primary school blighted by drive-by fly-tipper

15 March 2024



A "horrible, antisocial" pile of rubble was fly tipped outside a popular Surrey primary school by a lorry in a drive-by dump and run.

Neighbours heard a truck driving down Vine Road in East Molesey at about 11pm on Monday, February 26 but say they were unable to spot the culprit, a witness said. A video shows the swathes of rubble lining the residential street.

The huge mess was still there the following morning resulting in the road's closure during the busy school run drop-off. The nearby school, St Lawrence Church of England Primary, wrote to parents warning of the shut street and knock-on impact.

A witness said: "I heard it thunder down into the road, but it was such a fast drive by that when we went out it was gone. I think one of the parked cars was damaged. Several neighbours came out and we tried to secure the scene from accidents with cones and bins. The police came about an hour later and then the highways lorry came with official road closure signs."

On February 27, environmental officers from Elmbridge Borough Council had moved the waste to the side of the road and installed barriers to keep traffic away.

“The police said it was unusual for flytipping to be right in the middle of a residential road rather than in a corner or wasteland. It is a horrible antisocial crime. People who need waste removing really should check that they are using a licensed disposal contractor and not just go for the cheapest. I don’t think people realise that they are responsible for their waste being disposed of legally and responsibly.”

Another parent said: “How can you do this and feel ok about yourself?”

A spokesperson for Elmbridge Borough Council said its enforcement team is visiting the site and will be making enquiries in the neighbourhood. A call for witnesses will also be put out on its social media channels.

The said: “The fly-tip has been reported to our contractors for clearance and will be dealt with within 24 hours. We take fly-tipping incidents very seriously and will investigate every occurrence. If there is enough evidence, we will prosecute the person responsible.

“We will shortly launch an anti-litter campaign for this spring/summer and reiterate a strong message that littering and fly-tipping are not acceptable and will not be tolerated. We will be working with community groups towards a cleaner and greener Elmbridge so that everybody can take pride in the borough. We have a beautiful borough, and we will do all we can to make sure it is being protected.”

A spokesperson for Surrey Police said: “We were called at around 11.30pm last night (26 February) to a report of a large amount of rubble strewn across Vine Road in East Molesey. We briefly attended to help clear the road and the incident was then passed over to National Highways.”

Police probe abuse of public funds

15 March 2024



Suspected fraud and alleged breaches of procedure in **Guildford Borough Council**’s housing maintenance team have snowballed, culminating in a police investigation.

Last year, the council instigated a staff investigation following what was described as “an issue” within the housing maintenance department of Guildford and Waverley Borough Councils. They share services as part of a cost-cutting drive.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service understood at the time that staff had been suspended, contracts terminated and possible fraud examined. **Surrey Police** previously confirmed it had escalated its fraud investigation to a regional organised crime unit.

This week, the two councils announced they had received a report following a review of its housing maintenance team. It found ‘serious areas of concern’ which they said needed further investigation to determine whether correct governance processes were followed in the letting and management of housing maintenance contracts.

The councils have also announced that two strategic directors, Annie Righton and Ian Doyle, responsible for the relevant service area at the time contracts were let, have both agreed to step back on a temporary basis from their roles “to protect the integrity of the investigation”.

However the councils said they were “unable to provide a copy of the confidential report” as it’s “essential that the integrity of any investigatory process is upheld.”

Leader of Guildford Borough Council, Councillor **Julia McShane** and Cllr **Paul Follows**, leader of Waverley Borough Council issued a joint statement. It read: “Public bodies need to be absolutely resolute in their commitment to openness, transparency and accountability for public money. We are determined to identify exactly what has happened in order to safeguard both councils and continue to deliver on our commitment to best value and service delivery possible for all our residents and businesses.”

The councils joint chief executive, **Pedro Wrobel**, said: “When it comes to public money, nothing is more important than propriety and value. All monies should be used to deliver the best possible services for our residents and businesses. I will be working with officers, councillors, external investigators and auditors to get to the bottom of these issues and account for every penny. I will ensure the organisation has the right systems in place to safeguard the public’s money, and will take robust action where necessary.”

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