A different kind of cutting in Surrey's NHS?

Robots will be performing more operations, including general surgery and gynaecology at a Surrey NHS hospital trust seeking to introduce "significant savings", a board meeting heard.

The **Surrey and Sussex NHS trust** held its much delayed annual general meeting on Thursday, March 30, where attendees heard from its chairperson, chief executive, and head of finance.

The afternoon meeting, which board members suggested may have led to its lower than usual attendance, was broken into three sections: a review of the year, a run through of its financial health, and guestions from the floor.

Chairperson Richard Shaw led off proceedings explaining the AGM should have taken place in autumn last year but was delayed because of the late filing of its 2021/22 audited accounts.

Chief executive **Angela Stevenson** told the meeting that the 2021/22 year was heavily influenced by the "significant impact" of covid with "very tired" staff "having to work under pressure". This created a backlog the trust was only beginning to get back under control.

She said: "Staff were working with a disease that we didn't know how to treat. We had high staff absences due to covid or due to family members having covid. Since then we've really got to grips with the backlog. We started to work through but at the start of 2022 these numbers were at their peak."

Post pandemic, she said, there was a huge increase in patients seeking primary care compounded by the increase in "baseline complexity" as cases were left untreated during the pandemic."

Ms Stevenson praised the trust for **delivering robotic surgery** for the first time and that it would be rolled out further to include general surgery and gynaecology services. They will also be investing in services with a new MRI department on the horizon – including new CT scanners at East Surrey and Crawley hospitals.

The trust also plans to work in partnership with other groups to better manage the health of the population rather than solely focus on its role as an acute hospital.

On finances, the meeting heard how its deficit continues to grow – even not including the covid years. It expects to run at a £26.5m deficit for 2022/23. This will be the first time the trust has run at a deficit since at least 2013/14 as spending pushes towards £400m a year.

Chief finance officer **Paul Simpson** said this could be partly attributed to an increase in staff costs. The hospital expects to take on an extra 130 new nurses. He said: "Now we have to recover the growth in costs that has happened and now we are (looking at) a significant savings plan."

They were, however, quick to say "there should be no reason why we accept any reductions in quality of (care) for patients and that before any cuts were made there would be full impact assessments on cost improvement plans."

Image: Nimur at the English-language Wikipedia CC BY-SA 3.0

Pothole payouts and repairs penalise Councillor projects?

Surrey County Council has spent more than £800,000 in pothole compensation payouts in the last five years but it hopes front-loading the road maintenance budget will help end the broken-road scourge.

In that time it repaired about 221,456 potholes along its rundown road network, at an average of 121 per day. It was also announced that the Government was to give the county £3million to tackle the problem but some say this is "just a drop in the ocean" compared with how much the road budget falls in future years.

County hall's finances this year include a capital fund of £69.8million for highways maintenance as part of a front-loaded £188m that was announced in February.

That is set to fall back to £29.5m a year - for the next four years - much more in line with the spending under its previous

highways strategy which has led to the roads we have today.

It was also announced that individual councillor allowances of £100,000 to spend in their divisions would go, meaning any individual projects earmarked by members can not go ahead.

If highway's can not be maintained, the opposition leader at Surrey County Council warned, then the roads will fall into further disrepair and the number of potholes, and motorists insurance claims, will rocket.

Councillor **Will Forster** said: "The cut to is to the road maintenance budget, this will mean the road surfaces will get worse. The cut is notable in the next financial year 24/25 and makes the £3m to repair the potholes from the Government look like a drop in the ocean."

In 2018, Surrey County Council paid out £399,189 in compensation payments for claims relating to potholes – on both carriage and footway.

This declined to £135,949 in 2019 and was followed by two years where people were off the roads during the pandemic £83,415 and £79,364 in 2020 and 2021 – before climbing again as roads got busier in 2022 to £118,553.

These figures, the council said, relate to both property damage and personal injury with the "best endeavours" made to only include compensation payouts, however, "some figures may also include elements of legal costs and disbursements."

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said the road maintenance, capital, budget agreed by council in February totalled £188m for the next five years.

They added that the budget was front loaded, because work had been accelerated in order to realise the benefits sooner.

Image: Potholes in Surrey (Surrey Ad)

Related reports:

On the Hunt for pothole repairs

Don't blame us for potholes say Surrey's highway authority.

Going potty about pot-holes?

The Hills Are Alive With the Sound of Drilling...?

The owners of a Surrey oil field have signed an agreement to "deliver increased production and revenues" that will allow it to focus on its Dunsfold site.

Environmental campaigners, however, are still holding out hope the Supreme Court stops the drilling.

Uk Oil & Gas (UKOG) announced to shareholders that it was to "farm out" production at **Horse Hill** to the US-based **Pennpetro Energy**.

The Texas firm is to takeover 12 kilometres at the site, just north of Gatwick Airport, at a maximum cost of £4.6m.

Announcing the tie up **Stephen Sanderson** UKOG's chief executive said: "This mutually advantageous transaction will inject new activity into Horse Hill, aiming squarely to deliver increased production and revenues from the oil field.

"The farmout enables UKOG to move this asset forwards without the need to raise capital, enabling our resources to be firmly focussed upon the appraisal and development of the Loxley gas discovery, our most material petroleum asset. We look forward to a close working relationship with Pennpetro and a mutually successful future at Horse Hill."

UKOG refers to its holdings at Dunsfold as its Loxley site and hopes to drill for £123 million of oil near the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – pending its own High Court review.

Environmental campaigners who have been fighting against oil drilling at Horse Hill are still confident that the new company's involvement will not change things materially.

In June the **Supreme Court** will sit for a legal challenge against **Surrey County Council's** 2019 decision to grant planning for the four extra wells at Horse Hill. The same year the county also declared a climate emergency.

The application will go before the UK's highest court after three judges were split in their findings - that the county council's

decision to grant permission for 25 years of oil drilling and production was lawful.

According to UKOG the Horse Hill site has so far produced about 185,000 barrels of with approximately 1.362 million barrels still available.



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

Campaigner **Sarah Finch** of Redhill argues that the permission is out of touch amid the global climate crisis, Sarah Finch said: "We are taking legal action that is going through the Supreme Court in June.

"Currently the planning is subject to a legal challenge. There is still a possibility that the Supreme Court will not give it the go ahead. There has been low level production for a while there even though they got permission for expansion in 2019. I don't think this new company's involvement will change anything."

Sarah started the campaign against the drill site on climate impact grounds -not just from the impact the drilling would have in the immediate area but the wider overall effect from burning the collected oil.

She added: "It will take us away from keeping climate change within limits. Horse Hill will just make hitting those targets more difficult. I've been concerned about climate change for a very long time and when a new oil well was proposed near my home I was horrified and we really needed to stop it going ahead. And it's not just me, lots of residents have been involved. There have been a series of planning applications for the site but these four new wells were agreed in 2019, such a huge ramp up. That is why I decided it needed a legal campaign."

The Supreme Court is due to sit on June 21 after the Court of Appeal reached a split decision.

Surrey County's Cathedral citadel conserved...

The "fundamental specialness" of Guildford and its cathedral have been preserved after plans to build 124 homes next to the historic site were refused.

Guildford Borough Council's planning committee met on Wednesday, March 29, and heard a "really definitive" 25 minute officer's report that outlined the scheme.

The cathedral, along with developer Vivid Homes, wanted to demolish the existing staff housing and create 124 homes in a mix of flats and housing - 54 of which would be affordable properties - on undeveloped woodland.

The cathedral said it was selling land surrounding its Grade II listed site to create an endowment fund to pay for maintenance costs but during the presentation, the public heard that cash from this sale would only last five years. When combined with a separate sale, planners said, this would only raise 23 per cent of the budgeted maintenance costs.

Top image: The 124 new homes would be built in the area surrounding the cathedral (Image: Grahame Larter)

Officers at the council recommended refusing the plans of a host of reasons including its harm to the the setting of heritage

assets, "visual prominence of the apartment blocks" and the impact on the "green collar" forming part of the "landmark silhouette".

The plans attracted 286 letters of objection raising issues such as over development, a lack of details on a wider masterplan, and harm to the heritage assets.



Indicative Cgi Of Planning Application For Homes Near Guildford Cathedral. (Image: VIVID Homes)

Councillor **Will Salmon** said: "We've been looking at it this for a number of years and there's definitely been some improvements made in the application over those years particularly on issues like sustainability. The percentage of affordable housing is also admirable here. My overall feeling is it would have to be somewhere else.

Fundamentally this is not the location for this scheme. My concern is the scale, the whole setting, it's the openness and semi-wild spaces that you can really appreciate as part of the community, that's the green collar that we see from all sorts of distances. That is the sense that I can certainly feel coming from the many representations.

"The parkland provides very special setting with different short and long views of the cathedral and it provides a sense of proportion which is really essential for a building as big as the cathedral and I think a lot of that would be lost with the high density scheme. Overall my feeling is very much that this is a heritage asset that must be protected. I do worry that the over development here would actually risk the fundamental specialness of the cathedral."

His concerns were echoed by both Cllrs **Chris Blow** and **Angela Gunning** among others as the chamber united almost unanimously in its opposition to the plans.

The only exception was Cllr Marsha Moseley who did not speak on the application but abstained from voting.

A spokesperson for the **Friends of Stag Hill** group which has been campaigning against the application, said: "We would like to thank the **Guildford Borough Council** planning officer for her care and attention to what must at times have been a difficult task, and the committee for looking out for the interests of Guildford.

"Friends of Stag Hill will wait to see the cathedral's reaction to this second refusal, but would hope that the cathedral now pauses and realises the damaging nature of their proposals, both for the cathedral and the community. The community has now been fighting with the cathedral over the development plans for over seven years, and it is time to accept that developing the land is not an appropriate way to raise funds for the cathedral.

"They have put the local community through significant distress over the last 7.5 years."

The Grade II-listed cathedral was designed by **Sir Edward Maufe** and work began at the site 1936. This was interrupted by the Second World War and eventually finished through a fund-raising campaign.

The cathedral was consecrated on May 17, 1961.

Related reports:

Will Cathedral repairs threaten Canadian WW1 memorial?

How to cut the County's cake?

A Surrey MP challenges the cuts the County makes to supporting children with special educational and disability needs (SEND), in a classic how to cut the County Council's cake dilemma. Chris Caulfield LDRS reports.

Surrey County Council "may be in breach" of statutory duties over its decision to cut respite breaks for parents of children with special educational needs. The county council redesigned its short breaks services and has been able to maintain its provision of overnight care but, with the budget frozen at 2017 levels, cuts had to be made elsewhere.

It wrote to care providers saying it was freezing payments from April this year and issued a statement saying it was only "able to fund two-thirds of the current capacity in community-based play and youth schemes for children with disabilities".

Parents left furious and on the brink as they struggled to find ways to balance full-time care needs and work have been given a glimmer of hope by Runnymede and Weybridge MP Ben Spencer.

Dr Ben Spencer, MP for Runnymede and Weybridge, has written to Surrey County Council. Credit SurreyLive/Grahame Larter.

In a letter to a constituent, he said: "I have now written to Surrey County Council regarding their new policy on short breaks. I share your concerns about the impact the new policy will have on families. I understand the importance of short breaks and am grateful for you taking the time to raise these issues with me.

"Since receiving the response from Surrey CC and doing some research I am concerned that Surrey CC's new policy may be in breach of their statutory duties. "These duties are set out in the Children Act of 1989 include specific references to breaks for carers."

A spokesperson for Surrey County Council said the decision to freeze – rather than cut-funding was an "important decision" given the "real challenge for public finances" and that the authority understood the importance of these services for children, young people and their families.

They said: "We have a statutory duty to deliver a balanced budget and this means we have not been able to increase the budget for short breaks services at this time, in line with inflation.

"We understand the concern this may cause families and we are pleased to announce that we have been successful in securing £907k of Short Breaks Innovation funding for 2023/24 from the Department for Education.

"This will enable us to deliver some enhanced short breaks services for children and families with more complex needs in 2023/24, which we believe will make a real difference. Whilst there will still be changes to services, we hope this additional funding will be welcome news to families.

"This funding will be allocated to services that meet the highest level of need. In particular, we are committed to maintaining current capacity of overnight respite services for children who have been assessed as needing them, so that we fulfil statutory commitments in children's care plans."

Waking to Woking's woeful debt

Epsom and Ewell Times has followed the finances at this sister Surrey borough. We all should perhaps be concerned and learn lessons from a County borough that can get in such a mess. In contrast Epsom and Ewell Borough Council has been balancing its books for years. At the end of the day where will the money come from to save Woking? Local Democracy Reporter Chris Caulfield reports:

The dire financial future of Woking Borough Council was laid bare with senior figures warning of the "significant risk" of it effectively going bankrupt as its cash reserves run dry.

The council's executive committee met on Thursday March 23 to hear an update on its financial strategy. It was told of the budgeted shortfall of £9.5m for the next financial year and the swingeing cuts coming as it moved to provide only the minimum levels of services – those it must provide by law.

Woking Borough Council's financial disaster is the product of years of heavy borrowing to pay for a failing investment portfolio. The previous administration had hoped this would generate income but instead it has saddled the local authority with annual interest repayments of more than £60m a year while only generating £38.5m.

Councillor **Dale Roberts** is now the portfolio holder for finance on the council. He said it had gone to the government seeking to lower the minimum amount it can set aside to repay its loans and has been searching for further "restrictions on expenditure necessary to address the budgeted shortfall of £9.5m for 24/25. He added: "Both of which relate to the ongoing and significant risk of issuing a section 114 notice."

Councils can not go bankrupt. Instead, they enter what is known as being under section 114 notice and means they cannot make new spending commitments.

He also said the council would seek to try to fund "transformational projects" through any capital receipts. Cllr **Ian Johnson** (Lib Dem, Mount Hermon) said: "It shows a stark issue, the deficit next year is £9.5million based on current numbers, and yet our services expenditure is just under £45m. So that's a 20 per cent difference. So we need either cost savings or revenue generation to be able to cover that gap of 20 per cent.Because the £62million interest payments we are making at the minute could well go up given today's interest rate rises.

"Its unaffordable at the present level. We know that DLUHC (the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities) have been in the office talking to us for the last couple of months. Until we get their report as well we won't be able to be definitive in where we're progressing with any of the business we've got including talking to the government about our debt levels and how we might be assisted in reducing the interest payments we make."

DLUHC was not expected to return any decision until the start of the new political year in May. Cllr Dale Roberts said: "The enormity of the task ahead of us for next year, the affordability of the borrowing, the degree that we have to find savings are deeply concerning."

Cllr **Stephen Dorsett** (Con. Pyrford) asked about the possibility of future savings if council was already operating at "statutory spend only" - that is for services the council is legally obligated to provide. Cllr Roberts said: "Even costs savings cost".

Leader of the council **Anne Marie Barker** said: "We're having to put controls on day to day spend and just keep a very tight rein on everything. We've got our balanced budget for the year by using reserves but going forward that £9.5m next year, and more than that the following year, we do need to do a fundamental review of what were doing and how were doing it. It's the only way we can make those budgets balance, the reserves aren't going to last forever."

Related reports:

Would you want to live in Woking?

Woking up to a very big debt problem

Breaking the mould for Ukrainian refugees

Families fleeing war-torn countries such as Ukraine should not be placed in "derelict" and "mouldy" homes run by a Surrey council's housing association partner, a councillor has claimed.

Mole Valley District Council's scrutiny committee met to discuss the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities £500million funding for local authorities to provide homes to Ukrainian and Afghan families via the resettlement and relocation schemes.

Councillor Paul Potter. Image credit: Surrey Live - Grahame Larter

If fully progressed, the council would receive about £1.5m to help deliver up to nine properties for families seeking refuge. These would then become part of the area's long-term affordable housing stock – available on a rental basis of 80 per cent market value.

The move was widely supported by members at the March 7 meeting but the council's main social housing provider, **Clarion** was criticised by councillors.

The housing association said it was investing £5m and "hiring 100 new staff" to tackle the problem.

Councillor **Paul Potter** (LD, Brockham, Betchworth and Buckland) said: "Great that we are helping people less fortunate than ourselves but I did have a couple of concerns, the first was that affordable rent was not actually affordable. My bigger concern is Clarion, if you are going to pick someone to do houses we should be doing it ourselves because my dealings with Clarion over the last God knows how many years has been a nightmare. It has got better, the chap they got now he's done more in seven days than they have in 10 years – so something is happening there. But to put someone in the houses I've seen, in the state they're in.

"I had a family actually move into Tanners Meadow from a house that was quite frankly derelict, mouldy, the kids area all on inhalers. These people have come from a war zone. They really don't want to be going into a damp house, like that young kid last year. So I do have a big concern that Clarion is taking over."

Cllr Potter was referencing the decision reached at Rochdale Coroner's Court which said two-year-old boy Awaab Ishak died following prolonged exposure to mould - three years after his parents first complained about damp in their one-bed Rochdale Boroughwide Housing association flat.

It also follows a statement issued in December 2022 when district leader, Cllr **Stephen Cooksey**, said he would write to Clarion Housing to address "widespread issues of mould and damp problems" and urged the association to give the problem "higher priority".

He said he was "fully supportive" of the **Housing Ombudsman's** report - where Clarion Housing was one of the six housing associations highlighted for multiple failings of damp and mould, complaint handling and record-keeping.

Cllr **Caroline Salmon** who presented the local authority housing fund report to the committee agreed that there has been an issue with damp and that efforts were underway to remedy the situation in Mole Valley.

The Lib Dem member for Beare Green said: "Clarion have been trying to improve damp, and we've been working with them too. There have been some really good changes."

The meeting was wound up with the select committee chairperson, Cllr **Joanna Slater**, recommending that cabinet moves forward with the proposals with a preference for freehold housing and a discussion over the choice of partners.

A Clarion Housing spokesperson said: "Members of our senior management team recently met with cabinet members of Mole Valley District Council to outline Clarion's strategy to address the conditions of a small number of our properties in the region, including issues with leaks, damp, condensation, and mould. Housing for refugees was part of the discussion and we look forward to working closely with the council to provide essential housing for those in need. We at Clarion are determined to resolve condensation, damp and mould in our homes promptly and effectively.

"As part of this effort, we have increased the ways residents can get in touch with us to report it and are investing an additional £5 million annually to tackle the issue, including hiring 100 new staff - which will include specialist surveyors and new Resident Liaison Officers to deal specifically with leaks, condensation, damp and mould cases."

Surrey MPs oppose each other on drills in the hills

Jeremy Hunt MP has said it is "disappointing" that plans to drill for oil and gas in Dunsfold have not been "formally shelved" altogether. The Chancellor of the Exchequer issued the statement after the High Court ruled the government-approved exploratory drilling in his South West Surrey constituency would go to Judicial Review.

The High Court ordered the review on the grounds that there was "inconsistency in decision-making" by Secretary of State **Michael Gove**, and that Dunsfold bordered the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – where great weight should be placed on "conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty".

Mr Hunt, who has campaigned against the planning application in Dunsfold before, said: "Despite the latest judicial review, it is again disappointing that plans for this potential gas exploration have not been formally shelved. The idea of drilling on this beautiful area continues to be inappropriate – what's more UKOG's data and mapping of the sub-surface is sparse, old and simply not detailed enough. I hope to meet with Protect Dunsfold again later this month to continue discussions."

The Conservative MP has form in the matter. In June 2022 he wrote that DLUHC's decision to overturn Surrey County Council's initial refusal was "bitterly disappointing and wrong both economically and environmentally".

He also wrote a letter to Housing Secretary **Michael Gove** that said the project had been strongly opposed by both county council and "the entire local community", going as far as accusing DLUHC of "ignoring the strength of local opinion".

After news of the judicial review broke, UK Oil & Gas (UKOG) issued a statement to the London Stock Exchange.

It said: "Mr **Justice Lane**, dismissed five of the opponent's grounds seeking to reverse the Secretary of State's grant of planning consent as being unarguable. Two remaining grounds were given leave to be argued at a further hearing at some time in the future, as yet unknown."

It added that full planning and environmental consents remain in force.

Stephen Sanderson, UKOG's chief executive, said: "The company's legal team remains robustly confident that following the extensive Loxley public inquiry, the secretary of state's decision to grant planning consent was thoroughly considered and entirely lawful. Consequently, we will continue to move our project ahead."

Can you beat the ULEZ charge?

Established in **Epsom** in 1904 **Wilsons** car dealership still keeps ahead with the times. LDRS reports on its efforts to stay ahead of ULEZ expansion to Epsom and Ewell's London borders

A quick-thinking car dealership in Surrey is advertising ULEZ compliant cars to drivers looking to make the switch before the zone expands to the Surrey border later this year.

Wilsons Epsom car dealership, in Kiln Lane, has placed a huge advert emblazoned with "beat the ULEZ charge" and its marketing team said they have been thinking of going large as the expansion was "something that's been in the news a lot lately".

Last year, London mayor Sadiq Khan announced the expansion of the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) which would bring it right up to the county's border with the capital in areas such as Epsom and Ewell, Elmbridge and Spelthorne from August 2023.

The scheme will slap motorists of most petrol cars registered with the DVLA before 2005 with a £12.50 daily charge to enter the ULEZ zone after August 29. Diesel cars must be much newer and will have had to have been registered after September 2015 to enter the zone free of charge.

Check your vehicle HERE

The car dealership told the LDRS: "It's at the forefront of people's minds and there is a lot of confusion still around with councils looking to challenge the expansion or to comply with the new zones." they added: "The situation was still at an early stage given the zone is only scheduled to come into force in August. People who have got older vehicles are considering electric or hybrid. ULEZ directly impacts our business and we want to be helping all of our customers as much as possible. We have a large range of ULEZ complaint stock and we want to show that off to customers."

According to the Mayor of London's office, five million more Londoners will breathe cleaner air as a result of the zone

expanding.

A scrappage scheme exists for Londoners, but those on the outside are currently unable to apply despite requests from Mr Khan to the Prime Minister to include Surrey residents.

Surrey County Council was one of five local authorities to announce a legal challenge to the scheme.

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ULEZ will come to Epsom and Ewell borders

Yet more on ULEZ....

More on Epsom and Ewell and Surrey and ULEZ

Council's last minute opposition to ULEZ extension.

Fractious Court case anticipated

Anti-fracking campaigners are celebrating after the High Court granted a judicial review into the exploratory drilling of £123 million of oil near the **Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**.

The **UK Oil and Gas** (UKOG) was refused planning permission to search for fossil fuels at Loxley Well in Dunsfold in December 2020 by Surrey County Council's planning committee.

But UKOG, which describes itself as an energy company focused on oil and gas exploration, appealed in June 2022 after a public inquiry. It was granted permission by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, led by Surrey Heath **MP Michael Gove**.

Almost immediately, **Waverley Borough Council** challenged the appeal decision in the High Court with £13,000 set aside for the legal challenge. Yesterday, the High Court ruled the matter would be examined again – by Judicial Review.

Responding to the court decision was **Frack Free Surrey**. They said: "We are delighted by the news. Allowing exploration for fossil gas during a climate emergency, and in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, was an appalling decision by the government. We need to rapidly wean ourselves off gas, not look for more of it. It will be good to hear the arguments tested in the High Court."

The legal challenge has been supported by the **Goodwill Law Project**. The group's director, **Jo Maugham**, said: "No Secretary of State who cared about the natural environment, or climate change, would have ignored the wishes of local people to grant planning permission for a huge new fracking project next to an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We are pleased the High Court has given **Protect Dunsfold**, who we are supporting, permission to bring a judicial review challenge to a decision made under Michael Gove."

According to lawyers, the Protect Dunsfold campaign succeeded for two reasons. The first was the "inconsistency in decision-making" by Secretary of State Michael Gove, who gave the Dunsfold drilling site the go-ahead on the same day he refused permission for a comparable site.

The second is that Dunsfold sits on the edge of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and there should be great weight to "conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty".

Jeremy Hunt, now Chancellor and whose constituency covers Dunsfold, has previously campaigned against the drilling site going ahead. He was approached for comment.

UK Oil and Gas (UKOG) and DLUHC were approached for comment.

Paul Follows, leader of Waverley Borough Council has been approached for comment.

No date has been set for the review.