

# Heathrow expansion reaction

29 January 2025



Heathrow has been given the go ahead to press forward with plans for third runway that will bring in hundreds of thousands of extra flights to the West London airport every year, the Chancellor has announced – but questions remain about how deliverable the project will be.

The airport has long pressed for a third runway. The plans in the past have involved demolishing the mediaeval village of Harmondsworth and its neighbours Sipson and Harlington.

Feasibility studies have also been carried out about re-routing the M25 through a tunnel under the new northern runway and the enormous infrastructure project is supposed to be built while the country meets its environmental targets.

Heathrow has welcomed the Chancellor’s announcement today that the Government is backing a third runway – and would be inviting proposals to be brought forward by the summer.

The government has already tightened legal pathways against any plans, cutting the number of appeals allowed from three down to just one.

Opponents, including the London Mayor’s office, MPs and campaign groups however, argue a third runway won’t bring in hoped-for economic benefits but will raise “serious environmental and health concerns”.

The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, said: “I remain opposed to a new runway at Heathrow Airport because of the severe impact it will have on noise, air pollution and meeting our climate change targets.

“I will scrutinise carefully any new proposals that now come forward from Heathrow, including the impact it will have on people living in the area and the huge knock-on effects for our transport infrastructure.

“Despite the progress that’s been made in the aviation sector to make it more sustainable, I’m simply not convinced that you can have hundreds of thousands of additional flights at Heathrow every year without a hugely damaging impact on our environment.”

Stanwell Moor is the Surrey village at the end of Heathrow’s southern runway.

Residents there have grown used to jet engines flying overhead. So much so, that some regard the noise made from incoming planes a respite compared with the roar when taking off.

The Stanwell Moor Residents’ Association, in a statement published on its website, said: “What is different this time is that easterly alternation planning application will go ahead regardless of the airport expansion and would lead to more flights over our village; and secondly, the Government are likely to reform planning to speed up the approval for expansion.

“We will be ready to represent the village with a list of demands that put residents first.”

The Government said it would issue a full assessment of any expansion plans through the Airports National Policy Statement.

It said the project must represent value for money and that it, plus any associated service transport costs, will be financed through private funding to “ensure that a third runway is delivered in line with our legal, environmental and climate objectives.”

Paul Beckford, policy director at the HACAN clearskies group said: “The announcement today will disappoint the thousands of residents whose communities will be destroyed by a third runway and the millions who will be exposed to increases in noise and air pollution.

“Labour have set four tests that any airport expansion must pass in order to be approved and we believe that Heathrow’s current plans are simply not compatible with those tests.

“The Government believes that it can achieve both growth and meet its climate targets but this decision puts both of those ambitions at risk.

“Expanding the UK’s largest emitter of carbon in a forlorn hope of increasing GDP at some point in the future without a credible plan to deliver zero emission aviation is a folly of the highest order.”

The Liberal Democrats issued a statement from its MPs saying the third runway would jeopardise the UK’s climate commitments and will have a significant negative impact on local communities and human health.

The hundreds of thousands of extra flights to-and-from Heathrow, they said, will increase the risk of health conditions including heart disease, strokes and mental health issues.

MP for Esher and Walton Monica Harding said: “A third runway at Heathrow would have a profound impact on our climate, health, and communities. With a lack of clarity on the economic benefits and costs to the taxpayer, along with serious environmental and health concerns, the Government must urgently address these questions.”

Others, such as the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport UK were quick to praise the announcement but cautioned the importance of prioritising environmental concerns.

Its chairperson, Paul Le Blond, said “Any expansion strategy must prioritise public transport integration, leveraging existing transport hubs and accommodating new rail links.

“The development should include modernised terminals and new gateway facilities for both the northern and southern perimeters. Crucially, all environmental impacts—including noise, local air quality, and greenhouse gas emissions—must remain within statutory limits.

“Whilst the expansion would be privately funded through passenger and shipping revenues, government support through policy frameworks and strategic rail investment will be essential to unlock private sector investment.”

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## “Blocks away” from airport expansions

29 January 2025



So called “blockers” to major transport projects will be cleared in a move that looks set to curb challenges to Heathrow and Gatwick Airport expansions, the Government has announced.

The Prime Minister wants to curtail legal challenges to major decisions in what the Government describes as “unarguable cases” they say can cause “years of delay and hundreds of millions of cost to projects that have been approved by democratically elected ministers.”

Instead, the legal system will be overhauled with campaigners given just one attempt at a legal challenge for “cynical cases lodged purely to cause delay rather than three”. It comes after reports the chancellor Rachel Reeves said she was prepared to face down critics of plans to expand Heathrow Airport and Gatwick – arguing economic growth outweighed other concerns.

The Government has said this would balance the need for ongoing access to justice against what it describes as a “challenge culture” where small pressure groups obstruct decisions taken in the national interest. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said: “For too long, blockers have had the upper hand in legal challenges – using our court processes to frustrate growth. We’re putting an end to this challenge culture by taking on the NIMBYs and a broken system that has slowed down our progress as a nation. This is the government’s Plan for Change in action – taking the brakes off Britain by reforming the planning system so it is pro-growth and pro-infrastructure. The current first attempt, known as the paper permission stage, will be scrapped.

“Primary legislation will be changed so that where a judge in an oral hearing at the High Court deems the case Totally Without Merit, it will not be possible to ask the Court of Appeal to reconsider. To ensure ongoing access to justice, a request to appeal second attempt will be allowed for other cases.”

#### What the airports say

Heathrow has said it would wait until formal plans before commenting but that it strongly believed in its “vital role for the UK economy” and its long-held belief that expanding capacity at the UK’s hub airport was critical for economic growth.

A Heathrow spokesperson said: “Heathrow is the best-connected airport in the world. That competitive advantage for UK plc already enables over £200bn of British trade annually. But growing the economy means adding capacity at the UK’s hub airport which is full. That’s why we’re planning to unlock capacity by improving and upgrading our existing infrastructure, while also looking at potential options to deliver a third runway at Heathrow in line with strict tests on carbon, noise and air quality.”

Stewart Wingate, CEO of London Gatwick said: “We can be a major part of the Government’s drive for growth. We are already contributing over £5.5billion to the UK economy and supporting over 76,000 jobs, but unless we can access greater airport capacity the UK will miss out on opportunities to enhance global connectivity and unlock further opportunities for trade, tourism and job creation. Bringing our Northern Runway into routine use, through a £2.2 billion privately financed, shovel-ready investment will create 14,000 jobs and generate £1 billion a year in economic benefits.

“The project, which is due for government approval early next year, could be operational by the end of the decade. We have put forward a strong and compelling case focused around making best use of our existing infrastructure, minimising noise and environmental impacts and meeting the four ‘tests’ for airport expansion set by Labour.”

The average legal challenge takes about 18 months to resolve and more than half of all major infrastructure decisions were taken to court.

#### Campaigners will not rest

Paul Beckford, the chairperson of the HACAN clearskies campaign group challenges the notion that expanding the airport would bring the craved-for growth.

He says that at best it could bring in £3.3bn over 60 years and that 75 per cent of passengers using a third runway would likely be transfer passengers “who contribute nothing to the economy”. He also said that Heathrow expansion would not be in a vacuum and instead “suck growth” from the regions.

Government’s own figures show that a third runway at Heathrow would suck growth from the regions, citing Department for Transport Aviation Forecasts that suggested “expansion at Heathrow would see 170,000 fewer flights per year from regional airports than if expansion does not take place”.

Mr Beckford said: “Local communities around Heathrow represent nearly a third of all people across Europe exposed to levels of aircraft noise that harms their health. If Heathrow were to expand the Government would expose over two million people to increases in noise pollution in spite of a deepening evidence base of the negative health impacts, particularly at night. Such expansion would increase the emissions of the country’s single largest source of carbon by around 9million tonnes per annum, which is incompatible with the UK’s climate targets.

“It would be a failure of duty for any Government to put the health of their citizens at risk in the forlorn hope of generating growth when we know that the business case is marginal at best and 75 per cent of passengers using any third runway would contribute nothing to the UK economy.”

Sally Pavey, who chair the CAGNE group that opposes expansion of Gatwick airport call the government’s decision a disgrace that ignored public opinion in order to build a new runway by stealth. She said: “If this story is true it opens the door to us communities concerned about the decline in our wellbeing to benefit the shareholders of Gatwick Airport. Any airport expansion shows a lack of understanding and priority placed by this government towards global warming and yet we see the signs constantly on the news of flooding, fires and rising temperatures.

“Aviation is one of the biggest polluters this planet suffers and yet a new runway would add extra carbon a year plus greenhouse gases, and there are no true decarbonising factors that will reduce this as with more planes comes more CO2 and noise. CAGNE has been at the forefront of opposing this new runway due to the lack of infrastructure, lack of workers, decline in air quality and unbelievable increase in noise as Gatwick would be as big as Heathrow today.

“Gatwick already has serious issues with noise and yet we were not allowed to include the modernisation of airspace that Gatwick is reliant upon to reach its economic growth goals with two runway operation. This is just one of the reasons we will be legally challenging a decision to allow a new runway at Gatwick. We have already started to fundraise to legally challenge a decision to allow two runway operations as there were so many flaws in the evidence provided by Gatwick at the DCO hearings, this news story, if factual, is just another reason to challenge a new runway decision.”

## New homes planned for Ashted

29 January 2025





Hundreds of new homes could be built in Ashted if newly submitted plans to Mole Valley District Council are approved. Wates Developments and its partners, Vistry Group, have submitted outline plans for up to 270 homes, of which about 40 per cent will be affordable.

The proposals, which still need to go through the planning process, also include a community centre that could become a children’s nursery. Nearby schools are said to be under-subscribed, with vacancy rates expected to grow in some areas, according to planning documents submitted to the council. The documents suggest that the new homes could help boost pupil numbers in local schools.

John Tarvit, director of planning for Wates Developments, said: “We have an exciting vision for this site to create a sense of place and community, with landscaped design that incorporates a variety of green spaces. Our proposals will help encourage social interaction, provide safe and attractive streets, encourage sustainable travel choices, and maximise biodiversity. We’re proud that this will be a high-quality, net-zero development that reduces carbon emissions and enhances the resilience of the development to a changing climate. All new homes will be lean, clean, and green.”

The land, south of Ermyn Way, has been allocated for residential-led development by the council. The developers state they are “committed to creating a distinctive and responsive new neighbourhood, offering a good range of house sizes and types.

“The proposed development will enhance the existing local community and deliver a range of benefits for people in Ashted in addition to the much-needed new homes.”

In addition to the housing scheme, the developers are proposing a community building with the potential for a children’s nursery, 30 acres of open space, and a children’s play area. At this stage, the plans are in outline format, but the developers have said that buildings will vary across the site, reaching up to a maximum of three storeys, although the majority will be two storeys.

The developers believe this approach will “create a varied roofscape, define marker buildings and add to the visual richness” of the project. They have also indicated that details such as the sizes of the homes, in terms of bedrooms, and the layout of the development are yet to be finalised.

Wates said the site currently consists of arable agricultural fields just north of the M25 and within walking and cycling distance of both Ashted and Leatherhead. It is also already well connected to bus services. As part of the pre-planning process, Wates held meetings with nearby schools, including Trinity Primary School.

The planning statement noted: “At the meeting, the applicants were informed that the school is well below pupil capacity and referred to the same position at other local schools. It was explained to the applicants that local schools are accepting pupils who might not otherwise meet their selection criteria.” It added: “It was confirmed that Greville School currently has capacity and in the coming years will likely have greater capacity as there are significant spaces available in the reception year.”

Homes would be built on the western side of the site to create “a clear distinction between residential development and the eastern section within the retained green belt.” The final layout will be determined through discussion with the council.

Wates Development’s outline plans for up to 270 homes near the M25 in Ashstead (image Wates Development)

## Local Plan lessons from a Surrey borough?

29 January 2025



Precious green belt sites could be at risk of speculative developments and Waverley Borough Council could be powerless to stop them after its biggest housing project was judged to be taking too long to build.

All planning authorities must demonstrate they can provide enough land to supply housing for five years.

If they don’t they can become vulnerable to speculative applications and can lose control over where new homes are built – and may have to approve applications they would normally refuse.

Waverley Borough Council has been hit by a double whammy of increased housing targets by the Government and the Planning Inspectorate’s decision to pull the 2600-home Dunsfold Park from its projections over its “development trajectory”.

This has left the council running out of earmarked land for new homes in just two and a half years.

The situation gets even worse when the new Government’s increased housing targets are added into the fold, bringing the figure down to just one and a half years.

The figures were published in a Waverley Borough Council position statement last November following the Planning Inspector’s Dunsfold Park ruling.

It read: “The site has been discounted from the council’s five year housing land supply by Planning Inspectors in recent appeals and for this reason, the council has decided to exclude the site from the five year supply until there is more certainty about the timescales for delivery of housing on the site.”

The plan has been to redevelop the aerodrome to form a new garden village on the brownfield site.

Planning permission for the first stage of the project was originally granted by the Secretary of State in March 2018. Its infrastructure is expected to support other developments in the borough.

So far “not one home” has been built.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group on Waverley Borough Council, criticised the borough for not publicising the change more widely saying residents deserved to know what was happening.

She said: “These housing supply figures are utterly dire and will mean more opportunistic development in inappropriate locations.”

“We may as well just hand over the keys to opportunistic developers for any of the borough’s green fields without some kind of national planning protection over them. I am extremely concerned about what this means for Alfold and edge of town sites across the borough.”

Surrey County Councillor for Waverley Eastern Villages Kevin Deanus added: “Since Dunsfold Park gained planning consent in 2018 not one home has been constructed.

“Meanwhile local villages like Alfold have doubled in size. Major planning permissions in the local area have been granted dependent on infrastructure upgrades delivered via the Dunsfold Park permission.

“We now have raw sewage coming out of the ground in Alfold and huge pressure on local roads and infrastructure. Local people are despairing.”

Councillor Liz Townsend, Waverley Borough Council portfolio holder for planning and economic development said they remained fully committed to delivering sustainable housing that meets the needs of the community while challenging unjustified and unrealistic targets imposed by the Government.

Dunsfold Park had originally been included in the 2018 Local Plan when the council was under Conservative control and was one of several sites identified to meet housing needs.

She said: “While the council sets the framework for development, it is important to clarify that we do not have the power to compel developers to build homes once planning permissions are granted. As of now, planning permission has been granted for around 5,000 homes across Waverley.

“However, this is no longer sufficient to meet our five-year housing land supply target, primarily due to significant increases in government-mandated targets.

“Originally set at 590 homes per year, this skyrocketed to 710 homes under the previous government, and now to an extraordinary 1,481 homes per year under current government policies.

“This cumulative target amounts to a staggering 29,000 homes over the next 20 years — effectively requiring the construction of an additional Farnham and Godalming within the borough, which is entirely unfeasible.

“Waverley Borough Council has made robust representations to the Government, including direct appeals to the Deputy Prime Minister, outlining why the housing need calculations are flawed. To date, these concerns have been ignored.

“We are actively working with the promoters of Dunsfold Park and other developers to accelerate delivery.

“However, Government Planning Inspectors have questioned the certainty of delivery on the Dunsfold site within the next five years.

[As a result, the council has been forced to remove this site from its short-term housing projections, although this position will be continuously reviewed.

“The council is working urgently to develop a new Local Plan that ensures sustainable housing, job creation, and critical infrastructure.

“This is the only mechanism available to justify a more realistic housing target. Claims that the council is not fulfilling its obligations or has alternative options are factually incorrect.

“We are committed to addressing the national housing crisis while balancing the need to protect our borough’s character and environment. However, it is the Government’s disproportionate and unrealistic housing targets—not a lack of action by the council—that are placing immense pressure on local authorities across the country.

“Waverley Borough Council will continue to advocate for realistic and sustainable solutions to meet housing needs while standing firm against policies that jeopardise the future of our communities.”

Image: Waverley Borough Council (Chris Caulfield)

## The Redhill Harlequin Theatre bows out for 5 years.

29 January 2025



It could take another five years before the Redhill’s Harlequin Theatre reopens after dangerous crumbly concrete forced its closure.

The popular theatre and cinema space in the heart of the town centre welcomed up to 120,000 people a year through its doors before it suddenly shut when reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, which can collapse without warning, was discovered in September 2023.

Now it appears it will potentially remain closed until 2030 while Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, which owns the theatre, carries out the £10m safety refurbishment work.

Council leader Richard Biggs told the January overview and scrutiny committee: “I understand the strong feeling and interest in resolving this situation at the Harlequin.

“I think we can all agree that none of us wanted to be in this situation but the safety risks associated with RAAC are paramount.

“The critical red nature of the RAAC panels means that this is going to take some time to resolve.”

He added: “Optimistically two to three years, possibly up to five years to get it back.

“I don’t think that’s changed from the conversations that we’ve had so far but we need to get further down the road and then we can start putting proper dates on things.”

The Harlequin Theatre is regarded as a key cultural venue in Redhill and acts as a hub for cultural and social activities.

It’s closure has forced the council to look at providing alternate venues but early pledges to find a 500 seater venue have so far proved fruitless.

Cllr Biggs has still not ruled out the possibility of a larger venue being found but feels it is more likely that the arts community will have to settle for something less than half that size.

He said: “The likelihood at the moment is that we haven’t found a suitable arrangement for something of that size and costs.

“If we’ve got to spend the money I want to spend it straight on getting the Harlequin back up and running.”

He added: “I have said consistently that at the moment, we haven’t found any suitable temporary venues.

“We have to consider the cost. I know people think that there’s a money tree somewhere, there isn’t.

“My priority is to get the Harlequin back up and running, particularly because of our lease obligations but partly because I genuinely believe that it’s a huge asset to Redhill and for the borough and for the wider area.

“There are lots of reasons for getting it back up and running as quick as possible and I want to make sure that we are concentrating on the right thing.”

He did not rule out the possibility of finding a larger site but added that there is a need for a variety of spaces.

In 2023 they sold about 69,000 tickets at the Harlequin’s box office with a further 5,000 sold via alternate sites.



On average the Harlequin Theatre cafe welcomed a further 40 people per day and about 2,400 a year.

The productions would bring a further 6,000 people to the site and room hires an additional 10,000 each year.

Room hires included local churches and the NHS for café Milk and baby weigh-ins.

The council said it is looking for a mix of sites to fulfil these roles as well as audition spaces and performance venues.

The council leader invited interested groups who may have suitable sites to come forward with options but stressed that he did not wish to distract from his main priority of finishing the Harlequin project.

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## Blot on Epsom Down’s west horizon to grow?

29 January 2025



The “Croydonisation” of Woking will continue after a 26-storey town centre tower block on the former BHS site was approved. The plans for the 272-home 85-metre-tall building are nearly identical to those previously rejected in March 2024 but have been signed off following changes to Woking Borough Council’s housing targets and further clarifications from the developers. Donard Real Estate will demolish the former store to create the Crown Gardens project. The build-to-rent project will include 28 affordable homes as well as retail and commercial zones on the ground floor of the Commercial Way site. There would also be public space landscaping to improve the area around Christ Church.

Approving the plans – which were also under a separate appeal – would help the council meet its new, higher housing targets and help take pressure off green belt sites. The meeting was also assured the building would be predominantly made of brick, limiting the potential of weather damaging external cladding. The town centre had to be closed off after cladding fell from the Hilton Hotel building this year due to storms. Speaking on behalf of the developers was Mervyn McFarland. He said, “Crown Gardens will deliver 272 high-quality build-to-rent homes addressing the growing need for housing and helping Woking’s residents, particularly young people and families, to stay in Woking and contribute to the town’s vitality and growth. It will help alleviate pressure on traditional housing stock while also contributing to meeting housing targets. It will free up homes better suited to families and other demographics, contributing to a more balanced housing market in Woking. Crown Gardens will support Woking’s regeneration, bringing up to 700 new residents to the town centre. This is expected to bring in around £10m expenditure annually in local spending, boosting businesses.”

The limited parking at the site was no longer considered a valid reason to object to the plans given its proximity to Woking Railway Station and active travel options. The January 7 planning committee also noted that a similar high-rise application at Technology House was allowed on appeal, with the Planning Inspector saying parking options were sufficient. Councillor Rob Leach (Liberal Democrat, St Johns) said: “It’s clear that the development will help meet the housing needs that we have and the new government target building levels, to a significant extent, are helped by this. I’ve always been resistant to skyscrapers in Woking, what I’ve called the Croydonisation of Woking, in the past, but I think this has to be preferable to incursions on the green belt where that can be avoided.”

Related report:

Blot on Epsom Downs horizon to grow no more?

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## Surrey County elections must go ahead clamour

29 January 2025



The May 2025 Surrey county elections must not be postponed, the 11 boroughs and district councils have said. That call has been amplified with the Surrey Liberal Democrat MPs writing to Government lending their support to the call – while a petition arguing the same has been signed by more than 3,000 people. The decision to call off this year’s poll will be down to Government ministers who said they would consider delaying local elections in areas going through the devolution process. Surrey has put itself at the front of that queue – which would get rid of existing councils and replace them with a new structure. What that would look like is anyone’s guess at the moment, but could range from a single mega council, or potentially two or three slightly smaller bodies. Any new system would have an overarching strategic mayor.

The county leadership argues that postponing the elections would give officers time to get on with the once in a lifetime reorganisation – which needs to have interim proposals submitted by March ahead of a more ironclad May deadline. They also question the value of holding elections, which would cost an estimated £2.48m, for a council that was effectively doomed to die within two years – the new devolved authority is expected to be up and running in 2027 with shadow elections held the year before.

The leaders of the 11 Surrey District and Borough Councils met with their Surrey County Council counterpart on January 7 to discuss the English Devolution White Paper and what this would mean for the residents of Surrey. There was acknowledgement that the central Government was determined to introduce sweeping changes through devolution with district and county councils merged into new unitary authorities. A statement released after the meeting read: “All the Leaders of the Surrey District and Borough Councils expressed their concerns around the pace of change being imposed by central government and that such widespread and significant change needs wider consultation with the residents, stakeholders, and businesses across the county. In addition there was concern that the change, as proposed, will decrease local representation for residents of Surrey. While the Leaders concluded that there needs to be a dialogue with Surrey County Council on the proposed changes, there was wide agreement that the county council’s plan to write to the Secretary of State, Jim McMahon MP on Friday January 10, requesting to postpone the county elections scheduled to take place on May 1 2025 was not supported by the District and Borough Leaders and would be opposed if submitted.”

Surrey Heath Borough Council leader Shaun Macdonald added that allowing the elections to go ahead would ensure that all those involved “in shaping the future of our communities” had the democratic mandate to represent residents. The six Liberal Democrat MPs for Surrey also co-signed a letter to Government calling on it to not pass legislation postponing this year’s elections, describing it as an affront to democracy. They also expressed concerns over the speed of devolution and local government reorganisation. They said: “A proposal of this scale requires careful consideration and broad support. Yet, just three weeks after the government’s announcement, no credible plan exists. There has been insufficient engagement with district and borough councils or MPs to justify this unprecedented step.”

Elections, they said, must go ahead to give those voted in the mandate for how to deliver those changes. They added: “This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape local government in Surrey, and it must not be derailed by unnecessary delays or a lack of transparency.”

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## MP spies pollution in Mole

29 January 2025



Raw sewage has spewed out of a broken manhole cover and into the River Mole. Video taken by the Dorking and Horley MP, **Chris Coghlan**, shows the waste pumping out of the ground, just yards from the River Thames tributary in Brockham. He had been alerted by residents who said they were fed up after repeatedly trying to get Thames Water to fix the problem. The utility firm has apologised to those affected and said they would also clean up the surrounding areas.

Posting a video to social media, Mr Coghlan said: “So it’s happy new year, happy new sewage spill from Thames Water. I’m here outside a broken manhole cover here in Brockham and you can see it’s literally busting sewage out of it, spraying it everywhere. And behind me you can see loo paper, what looks like condoms.

“I’ve been speaking to some of my constituents here, this has been going on for years. They have been reporting it to Thames Water and they’ve done nothing and if you look behind me down here, this is the River Mole. It’s going straight into the River Mole. We’re a little upstream from the stepping stones where many people would love to bring their kids to paddle but they just can’t because this sewage is being dumped into the river and dumping E Coli everywhere.

“So I am very upset about this, I will be writing to Thames Water and the Environment Agency. It is a completely illegal sewage dump and I want it fixed.”

Thames Water publishes an up-to-date map showing near real storm discharge activity, as indicated by its monitors. At the time of publication there were active discharges in Chertsey feeding into the River Bourne meaning “there could be sewage in that section of the watercourse,” as well as at Leatherhead into the River Mole, at Holmwood into Holmwood Stream, at Cranleigh into Cranleigh Waters, and at Ockley Road feeding into Cobbler’s Brook.

In London, Thames Water has issued an update after E. Coli was found in an area of South East London with people in Brockley advised to boil their water before using it. A Thames Water spokesperson said of the Brockham leak: “We responded to reports of external sewer flooding near Hillside Close in Brockham on Monday January 6. When our engineers attended the water had receded, however we will carry out further investigations to understand why the flooding occurred. During this time we will also clean up the surrounding areas and we are sorry to those who have been impacted.”

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Image: Broken Manhole Chris Coghlan Dorking and Horley MP

## Local government reorganisation: What will it mean for Epsom and Ewell?

29 January 2025



The leader of “doomed” Surrey County Council will write to the Government asking for the May 2025 elections to be postponed and Woking’s debt cancelled as part of devolution measures to merge the county’s councils. The moves are said to allow the council the time to draft proposals for how the county and its 11 boroughs and districts will be dissolved and reborn as potentially a single authority with a directly elected mayor. Other plans could see the county split in two or three smaller unitary authorities in one of the biggest shake-ups in a generation.

In December, the Government placed councils on short notice over devolution plans, giving those who want to get on board until March to submit interim merger proposals. Those who do not will have their devolution plans dictated to them by Downing Street. To give councils time to reorganise, the Government also said it would consider passing legislation postponing the May 2025 elections until next year. On Wednesday, January 8, Surrey County Council confirmed it would pursue the Government’s offer, with conditions.

The move to push back elections, however, was disputed in the chamber with councillors calling it undemocratic, while the leaders of the 11 boroughs and districts



have also called for the May polls to go ahead. Councillor Paul Follows, leader of the opposition, told the meeting the boroughs and districts made it very clear local government reform was necessary – but that it could be done alongside the democratic process. He said: “We accept and broadly agree that some unitary council combination would make sense for a variety of reasons but we believe that the pace, the haste, and the lack of plans should not just be folly but a clear threat to services our residents need, and we do not accept that elections must be cancelled.

“The Government aren’t asking us or making us cancel elections. The deputy prime minister confirmed in an interview [on Wednesday morning] that councils are not being asked this way.” He added: “The timetable is going to remain as is and the work is going to happen and we can do everything that the leader is proposing to do while holding the scheduled elections. The leader has argued that leaping in here brings benefits but nobody has outlined what they are and honestly whatever they are, unless they include defined government interventions on debt and adult social care, nothing is worth taking that leap because then any successor authority will be immediately in serious troubles.”

He would also raise concerns that without clear guidelines and financial support, scenarios where playing fields in Godalming could be sold off to pay debts in Woking could emerge. The ruling Conservative group, however, dismissed demands to keep the election saying it would not only cost millions – estimated at about £2.48m – but also elect a “zombie” body that would be dissolved in just a year’s time.

Councillor John O’Reilly (Conservative; Surrey) said: “This council is doomed. This council will not survive and the 11 boroughs and districts will also not survive. So we are talking about a new structure and framework and for those saying the election to go ahead, it is quite clear, the minister’s letter has said that those authorities where elections do go ahead, they have still got to provide submissions by autumn, leaving only a few months. So what is going to happen if we have elections? It will essentially be a zombie council in the twilight, lurching through its own oblivion maybe only a year or so later when elections will take place for the new authorities.”

Councils have until March to submit interim devolution proposals with final drafts delivered by either May or the Autumn. The council has said it will work with “all stakeholders” over the next eight weeks in drawing up plans, including residents, as well as taking feedback from police, fire and rescue, and health services. The Government states it wants new councils to have a minimum of 500,000 residents meaning it is most likely Surrey would become either a single mega authority or split in two – with a directly elected mayor.

Some councillors raised a preference to create three bodies. Councillor Tim Oliver did not rule out expanding beyond the Surrey border to create a regional authority but hoped that all parties could come to an agreement. He said: “We propose to make it clear that the Government will be asked to deal with the debt partially, Woking that is publicly known and crystallised, but there are other levels of significant debt across the county.” He said it was better to get in early to create some leverage over the debt position rather than be handed down a Government dictate.

He said: “Work will start on Friday – officers are putting together the working groups needed. This will be exceptionally time consuming. Not only will it need collaboration between the boroughs and districts, but this council will need to have an input into the proposals. We may go with more than one proposal, one from this council and one from the boroughs and districts.”

The county council leader will now write to the Government setting out that Surrey wishes to be part of the accelerated devolution program and that it would support any new legislation postponing the May 2025 elections until next year.

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## All change! Epsom and Ewell Borough Council approaching its final stop?

29 January 2025



Surrey is changing “whether we like it” or not and county council leader **Tim Oliver** says it’s better to be at the forefront of that change.

The Government wants to introduce new mayoral authorities across the country in a bid to streamline councils and shift power away from Westminster.

For Surrey, that means scrapping the 11 boroughs and districts as well as the county council, and replacing them with either a single, or what seems more likely, two authorities with a Strategic Mayor.

The question is how will it be done? The answer; it will either be imposed on Surrey, or the councils can create their own plans to merge under devolved powers.

County Council leader, Councillor Tim Oliver, favours playing a central role, arguing that change is inevitable, and it’s best to be part of the conversation in order to shape the future, rather than sit on the sidelines waiting to be told what to do.

The Government wrote to the county council in December outlining how it planned to “transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government.” It wants a simpler structure that is “clearer for residents” and said it would even pass new laws to postpone the May 2025 elections “to help manage” the once in a lifetime opportunity to restructure.

Writing to Surrey, Jim McMahon, minister of state for local government and English devolution, said: “We are under no illusion about the scale of issues facing local government. It is in all our interests to make sure we are avoiding unnecessary spend at a time when budgets are already tight.”

He added: “I have heard from some areas that the timing of elections affects their planning for devolution, particularly alongside reorganisation. To help manage these demands, alongside our objectives on devolution, and subject to meeting the timetable outlined in this letter, I am minded to lay secondary legislation to postpone local council elections from May 2025 to May 2026. However, I will only do this where this will help the area to deliver both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe – either through the Devolution Priority Programme or where reorganisation is necessary to unlock devolution or open up new devolution options.”

Cllr Tim Oliver is already minded to take up the offer of pushing back the elections for a year to get devolution done. Holding the elections this year would cost about £1million, he says, and would take time away from officers already working to a tight five-month deadline to get devolution over the line.

“The Labour Government has set up their agenda in the white paper and that is to create Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) across England. They have a strong majority and we can assume they will pass the legislation,” Cllr Oliver said. “If you don’t reach an agreement locally, then they will legislate. It’s going to happen. It’s better that we try to control or have some influence over what happens rather than have it imposed on us down the line.”

“The primary focus should be ‘what is in the best interests of the residents of Surrey?’ Whether we like the model or not it is going to happen in Surrey and the reason for getting in early as we are, is that we are slightly unique here in that there are councils in Surrey that have significant debt levels.”

This, he says, gives the Government a huge stick, to push councils to get on board. Councils such as Woking are bankrupt and need Government intervention. Merging the councils would pile its £2billion debt on to others.

Similarly, though not bankrupt, Spelthorne Borough Council has debts of more than a billion and Runnymede has debts of more than £600m. Surrey County Council, albeit with significantly larger spending power as a top tier authority, is also heavily indebted.

Cllr Oliver said: “The longer we leave it, the less likely we will get any support from the Government. That’s what’s driving me.”

Historically, Surrey councils have not benefited as greatly as other local authorities from Government funding reviews and have to raise more money locally. Areas that can raise taxes will continue to be required to. Removing tiers of local government will be an efficiency driver and help stave off service cuts, or lead to more investment.

He said: “We have to divide up the county to create a minimum of two strategic authorities, and then we get a mayor. If we don’t get on with that reorganisation, we will be years away from the benefits of a mayor, compounded with almost certainly reduced funding to Surrey councils.”

Papers published ahead of the January 10 deadline to respond suggest the council leader will take up the Government’s offer to hold off on this year’s elections “to give time to consult.”

Cllr Oliver said: “If we go ahead with elections in May, and I’m fine with that, I wasn’t going to run again. But, ignoring who wins, you end up with an election in May that will cost over a million pounds, which they do, and then you will have a bunch of new councillors who have to find their feet, only to be out in two years when the council disappears. The next five months should be about the negotiation with the Government about what the future looks like.”

“Every political party, and all the existing councillors who know the county better, will have the opportunity to input. I can’t see what the Liberals, if they got a majority, would do differently? This way, we will get a bit of goodwill from the Labour Government by engaging with them now.”

“Hampshire, Essex, and Hertfordshire are already getting on with their own plans for devolution, and if Surrey County Council just puts its head in the sand and gets on with the elections we will miss the opportunity to have the conversation with the Government about the debt levels.”

“We’ve got five months to consider it, the key thing is to do an intensive piece of work now. We’re not at the point where we’ve had the conversation about how it’s split, but we’ve got five months to do this either the Government’s way or our way. Yes, the timetable is much shorter than anybody would want particularly putting a letter in by January 10 but we have to respect the fact that this Government has an agenda and it can deliver because it has the mandate.”

Later this month the Government will set out which areas will be included in its Devolution Priority Programme with a view to inaugural mayoral elections in May 2026. They are looking at creating new unitary councils with populations of 500,000 or more. Surrey has a population of about 1.2 million. Exceptions will be made to ensure new structures make sense for an area.

An extraordinary meeting of Surrey County Council is set to go ahead on Wednesday January 8 where the council will be “asked to note” that the leader intends to express interest in pursuing devolution and local government reorganisation.

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