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West Surrey’s financial mess

14 November 2026

West Surrey “will operate in a very challenging financial environment, with significant budgetary pressures and limited financial resources” after its constituent councils reported a £4.92million annual shortfall in their accounts.

The new authority is set to take over services from six boroughs on April 1 and early Q1 figures suggest huge overspends in Spelthorne £3.97m, Guildford £1.06m, Runnymede £0.79m, and Surrey Heath £0.536m, will need to be balanced.

It will also inherit it’s share from the county council with the upper tier reporting a £12.19m shortfall – although this is against a budget of more than five times the combined boroughs and will be split with East Surrey Council.

Council staff say the biggest drivers to this are from its children’s, families and lifelong learning service at £8.4 million and adult social care at £3 million.

The long-term picture presents further challenges with the six-legacy boroughs lumping significant debt onto West Surrey’s balance sheet.

Combined Woking, Spelthorne, Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Guildford and Waverley are £3.98 billion in debt having borrowed more than £4billion in a series of investment and regeneration projects that brought mixed returns.

“The borrowing position is significantly influenced by Woking’s debt of £2.19 billion, which is subject to government support, Spelthorne £719 million debt, and Runnymede £587 million debt”, papers presented to West Surrey’s shadow council read.

In all it leaves the councils forking out about £18.07m this quarter in interest repayments -and only taking in about £2.8m in investment income, with the largest returns reported by Waverley £0.9m and Guildford £0.67m.

Surrey County Council has borrowed about £1.87 billion and is forecast to pay £45.1m this year in interest – partially offset by £23.5 million in returns.

The report read: “The Quarter 1 monitoring position highlights a number of emerging financial pressures across the sovereign councils.

“The most significant relate to demand-led services, income shortfalls, inflationary pressures, treasury volatility and the continuing implementation of Local Government Reorganisation.

“West Surrey will operate in a very challenging financial environment, with significant budgetary pressures and limited financial resources from Vesting Day, coupled with increasing demand and costs of services, and reducing government funding.

“West Surrey Council will be increasingly reliant on council tax as the primary source of income and decisions made by the sovereign councils in West Surrey and the West Surrey Shadow Authority will need to consider the ongoing financial impact and ensure that expenditure does not exceed the resources available.

“It is vital that significant importance is placed on effective financial management and medium-term financial sustainability to deliver a balanced budget going forwards and protect service delivery.”

Officers told the meeting: “These are forecasts based on positions at the time it was calculated but I would expect the position to come out more favourable.

“That’s generally the trend.”

Leader of the Council, Councillor Paul Follows added that Q1 figures “need to be taken with a pinch of salt but needs to be monitored.”

He said: “If we were at Q2 the year after that is probably the first set of numbers that I’m going to go ‘that is legitimately West Surrey’s position’.

“I think everything here is an indication, it’s information, I don’t think it’s going to be everything we might need.”

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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East Surrey by-election before it assumes power

14 November 2026

History has been made after the first ever by-election for the newly created East Surrey Council was called – five months before it officially takes over services.

On April 1, 2027, Surrey's existing councils will cease to be – with their functions split between two new bodies – East and West Surrey.

In May this year, people went to the polls to elect those who will serve on the new bodies during a shadow year, before it takes full control of the reins on what is being called Vesting Day.

Residents across the two councils voted large Liberal Democrat majorities that will see the party take control of the highest level of Surrey government for the first time.

Since its inception in 1889 it had either been under Conservative or no-overall control.

Under devolution rules, any councillor who stands down from the outgoing councils will not be replaced within the final six months.

However at East Surrey Dorking Rural Councillor Jo Farrar-Astrop has had to prioritise her health and has decided to step aside, sparking next month's by-election for her vacant seat.

She said: "I would love to have carried on, but I need to put my health first. It has been a privilege to represent Dorking Rural, and I'm grateful to everyone who has supported me."

Cllr Astrop, who also chairs Mole Valley District Council's development management committee will continue in her role until that authority is dissolved next year.

Those wishing to stand in the vacant seat will need to submit their nomination papers by 4pm on Friday November 13.

Details of those candidates standing will be published no later than 4pm on Monday November 16.

The election will take place on Thursday, December 10.

The elected councillor would then sit as a member of the East Surrey Shadow Council before it converts to a full body.

The Liberal Democrats won 40 seats at the May 2026 elections with the Conservatives forming the official opposition after finishing in second with 10.

The remaining seats were won by the Green Party, eight, Reform UK, five, with resident groups and independents taking the remaining nine.

In Dorking Rural the Lib Dems won both seats with Cllr Farrar-Astrop receiving 2,115 votes and Cllr Dineke van den Bogerd picking up 1,969.

Reform UK's candidate's finished third and fifth with the Conservative pair coming in at fourth and sixth.

Voter registration closes at midnight on Tuesday November 24.

Adam Chalmers, returning officer for East Surrey Council, said: "This by-election gives Dorking Rural residents the opportunity to choose who will represent their community on the new East Surrey Council.

"I'd encourage everyone who is eligible to vote to make sure they are registered and know how they plan to vote before the deadlines.

"Whether you vote in person, by post or by proxy, taking a few minutes now to check you are ready will help make sure you can have your say on December 10."

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Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Will Middlesex get in Surrey West's title after all?

14 November 2026

West Surrey should just "crack on" with changing its name to include South Middlesex, the secretary of state for devolution has said. The new authority is set to take over all services from Spelthorne, Runnymede, Guildford, Surrey Heath, Waverley and Woking councils from next April – as well as take on its share from the dissolved county.

In what was one of its first orders of business the authority, which will inherit around £4billion in debt, was to approve a petition to rename itself West Surrey and South Middlesex Council. It argued the new name, better reflected the entire community and recaptured an identity lost since Middlesex, which was featured in the Doomsday book, ceased to be a local authority in 1965.

Spelthorne itself was named after one of the administrative 'hundreds' of Middlesex in 1086 when it was called Speletorne. The campaign to call on the government to resurrect Middlesex was then approved – with a deadline set for October to allow time to rebadge ahead of launch, only to be told it was the council's, not the government's decision, to do so – leaving the whole renaming process in limbo.

Pressing the matter was the MP for Spelthorne Lincoln Jopp who took to the House of Commons floor on Monday, November 2. He said: "West Surrey unitary authority wrote to the Secretary of State asking her to change the name of that authority to West Surrey and South Middlesex, a move that I thoroughly support.

"The local government minister wrote back to them and said, 'It's nothing to do with me; just change your name yourself'. Will the minister confirm what his spokesman said to the BBC, which was that, 'West Surrey Council has the power to change its own name to include Middlesex if it chooses to do so, and we've set this out in a letter to them'?

Jim McMahon, minister for local government, devolution and regional growth replied: "As explained in the letter, it is not for the secretary of state to determine the names of local authorities; local authorities have the legal right and ability to change them themselves. My advice is to crack on with it."

The new council is currently seeking legal advice to best understand government's position. A spokesperson for West Surrey said: "We appreciate there are questions about the name of the new West Surrey council after full council voted for the name change.

"We are seeking legal advice so that we can fully understand the government's position. We will provide a further update as soon as we are able."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Cllr Harry Boparai with fellow councillors (image Harry Boparai) with Middlesex flag

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Bull Hill scheme defended as lifeline for Leatherhead

14 November 2026

A controversial 400 home development, that has faced huge backlash from the community, is the best way to save Leatherhead from ‘dying’, councillors have said.

It came after an opposition motion calling on Mole Valley District Council to seek guarantees on the financial benefits and improvements to the Swan Centre as part of the Bull Hill regeneration scheme was shot down.

First by the large numbers of the ruling Liberal Democrat group who walked out of the debate claiming it could prejudice them against any future planning decisions.

Then by Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (Liberal Democrat: North Leaherhead) who quickly pushed through an amended and softened down motion that called on the council to continue working with developers Keir Partnership to secure the financial benefits and improvements.

The unamended motion was originally been put forward by Cllr Gerry Sevenoaks (Independent: Ashtead Park).

He said: “Bull Hill would literally change Leatherhead as a town. “The question is for better or for worse?

“There is no doubt that this is a controversial project that will impact the town , with increased traffic congestion and building works for the construction of over a number of years. It will look like carnage”.

“Crucially it does not have the full support of residents as demonstrated in the public campaign against the development and negative feedback from the so-called consultation. At its inception the Keir Partnership provided all sorts of wonderful benefits to the residents of Leathehead.”

“Affordable housing, social housing, refurbished Swan centre, cinema, financial profit for investment in the town. Sadly and predictably these financial and community benefits have diminished and materialised. The profit share is down from £22m to £14m, reduced car parking, and no cinema or leisure facilities, and we see there is no social housing.”

“How has this been allowed to happen?

He added: “Having already given up £4million worth of land, Mole Valley council could be left with no profit to invest in community benefits for Leatherhead town centre. The result being that Leatherhead will look like Croydon-on-Sea and with a continued rundown town centre with no investment. What have the people on Leatherhead done to deserve such municipal vandalism?”

Councillors defending the amended softened motion said there was a strong silent majority in favour of the project, and that the redevelopment had not been an issue for residents on doorsteps at the recent May elections.

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Cllr Claire Malcomson (Liberal Democrats: Holmwoods and Beare Green) said: “Whatever happens it will improve Leatherhead because Leatherhead, as mentioned, is a dying town, and it needs improvement.

“It needs more housing to feed the shops, and entertainment, and the theatre, and that is the whole point of it.

“Yes, some things have had to be cut back because the climate has changed, but I do think ultimately Leatherhead will benefit from this.”

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Image: Plans for Bull Hill Leatherhead (image Leret Group_

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“What’s in a name?” Not “Middlesex”

14 November 2026

Middlesex campaigners said they were ‘gutted’ after the government pulled the rug on efforts to bring back the historic county’s name – but critics said the council should have checked the legality first.

In July, the new shadow authority passed a motion to rebrand itself as West Surrey and South Middlesex, in time for October when official branding was due to be released.

Last week, however, the minister for housing communities and local government wrote to the leader of West Surrey saying their request had been denied but said it could take legal advice on whether it was possible to use a more widely accepted name without the formal legal change.

The news was met with dismay by campaigners who said they had hoped the government would have ‘done the right thing for once’.

Critics however said the name change should have been put to residents, while the minister’s decision also raised serious questions over why it was advanced before the legal basis was known.

Middlesex was abolished as a local authority on April 1, 1965, and campaigners, including astrologer Russell Grant, have been fighting for its return ever since.

Councillor Harry Boparai, the Liberal Democrat councillor for Sunbury Common & Ashford Common put forward the original motion.

He said: “It’s really sad. South Middlesex is one sixth of the new authority. We are part of the family, we don’t want to be the dysfunctional cousins on the side.

“We’re not trying to be different, we’re just trying to be who we are. Get on a train to Reigate, get on a train to Guildford, get on a train to Spelthorne and you’ll see the difference, years of neglect.

“Going forward we want a level playing field.”

At the October 12, West Surrey shadow executive, its leader, Councillor Paul Follows, said they would look at ways of bringing the matter back to a future consideration but that the council would carry on as West Surrey in the meantime.

Cllr Boparai added: “We will still get there. I was confident they would just rubber stamp it but they didn’t.

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"In 1972, the government assisted councils to change their names and considering we're now the only unitary going forward, you would think they would have helped us because we have all this debt to deal with. I'm determined to get this over the line."

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group, said: "The Lib Dem Leader may well be relieved by the minister's response, as while we recognise this is an important issue for some residents in the Spelthorne area, many people across the other five boroughs have struggled to understand why the Lib Dem administration was pursuing a name change in the first place – and why this was being prioritised over tackling council debt and ensuring the successful transfer of vital public services.

"The minister's letter raises serious questions about why the proposal was advanced before establishing the legal basis for doing so, and without giving residents a proper opportunity to have their say.

"West Surrey Conservatives maintain that any decision affecting the identity of West Surrey must be based on clear legal advice, proper scrutiny, a full understanding of the costs and meaningful public consultation."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Image: Cllr Harry Boparai with fellow councillors (image Harry Boparai) with Middlesex flag

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Banstead "carbuncle" to give way to care home

14 November 2026

A nearby 'carbuncle' means a 64 bed care home that may only have seven visitor parking spaces has been approved for Banstead – despite widespread criticisms of the plans.

Councillors at Reigate and Banstead Borough Council's latest planning committee spoke out about the site's lack of spaces and the impact this would have on neighbouring roads, as well as the overall density of the project.

However, they felt their hands were tied because its height and depth was in keeping with the recently approved replacement building at Roseland, which was allowed at appeal in February 2026.

If a council loses an appeal against a planning refusal it is liable for significant costs.

The new 64 bed care home will replace the former adults-with-learning-disabilities site which had been disposed of by Surrey County Council.

Officers told the meeting: "There was no objection to the loss of the existing building and its use as a specialist facility.

"The site was disposed of by Surrey County Council in 2024.

"Evidence has been proved by the applicant that demonstrates that the building is no longer fit for purpose.

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“Particularly in view of Surrey County Council moving away from large institutionalised care for people with learning disabilities towards a more supported independent living approach, for which there are a number of facilities locally in Banstead.”

The two-storey Arundel House building in Garratts Lane will be demolished with its replacement set back to not detract from the area or nearby locally listed buildings.

Councillor Sam Walsh (Conservative: Banstead Village) was among those to criticise the plan’s lack of parking and the impact the development will have, but said it would be difficult to reject the application given the recently approved, on appeal of the Roseland site.

He said: “We know there is going to be a problem because on Garratts Lane there is no parking facility there, but we are constrained by these planning matters.

“It is dense, it is much greater than one would have hoped, but because it has been approved for the carbuncle on Garratts Lane, we have not any opportunity (to reject it).

“If I were to propose any reasons for refusals they would be easily challenged because we’ve got this big one coming up.

“This is going to hurt Banstead but it’s already been (decided), its water under the bridge.

“I don’t like it, its over intensification, the bulk scale of massing.”

Cllr Rich Michalowski (Conservative: Redhill West and Wray Common) added: “There are 18 spaces provided and by calculations in the report, it suggests that a maximum of 11 will be used by staff which leaves seven for visitors and deliveries.

“What is the adequacy of that car parking space for visitors, partially at weekends.

“Where will people park when those seven spots are taken? They will attempt to go to the neighbouring streets which are problematic.

“Surely this development is far too cramped.”

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Arundel House, Garratts Lane, Banstead (image Google)

An East Side Story of Surrey’s new Parish Councils

14 November 2026

Major and effectively permanent change that will increase people’s council tax bills at a time when many families are struggling to make ends meet.

Plans to create more new councils across Reigate and Banstead should be paused to stop residents being hit with higher tax bills and more red tape, the MP has said.

Local government in Surrey is changing. Last year it was announced that Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts would be dissolved and merged.

In their place would be two new mega authorities to deliver all services. One to cover the western half of the county, the other for the east.

It was argued at the time that it would make things easier for residents and be cheaper. Critics argued that by creating to huge councils to service around 600,000 residents each, would create too large a disconnect between people and those who represent them.

To combat this some of the out-going councils voted to create new lower-tier parishes that would look after small day-to-day issues such as allotments, or verges – but these would require hundreds of thousands of pounds to set-up, introduce higher tax bills.

Others, including MP for Reigate Rebecca Paul, feel the new councils should be given time to get their feet under the desk.

Three new councils will be created – Redhill Town Council, Reigate Town Council, and Banstead and The Villages Council – and minor changes made to Horley Town Council. There will be no changes to the existing Salfords and Sidlow Parish Council.

She said the new parish councils are now expected to add a further £15 to £30 to the annual council tax bill for a band d

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property, before election and administration costs are taken into account.

The estimated combined budget for the three new councils is just under £1 million for 2026-27, with approximately a quarter of this sum being spent on election costs alone.

Rebecca has written to East Surrey Leader, Councillor Steve Wotton over concerns the new authority should be concentrating on the safe transfer of major services including SEND and adult social care and allow the new unitary arrangements time to bed in.

She said: “Whatever people’s views on local government reorganisation, the whole point of moving to a unitary council was to simplify local government, remove duplication and save money.

Instead, before East Surrey has even opened its doors, its Lib Dem Executive has approved three new councils, dozens more councillors and another precept on residents’ council tax bills.

“There are of course good arguments for smaller and more local councils and I know of many parish councils that do an excellent job.

“But this is a major and effectively permanent change that will increase local people’s council tax bills at a time when many families are struggling to make ends meet.

“This decision should not be rushed or taken lightly – and it certainly shouldn’t be done without the support of residents.”

She said early surveys found only 21 people in favour of the new councils with 94 per cent of the 350 initial respondents rejecting the idea.

Cllr Wotton, leader of East Surrey Council, noted the questions raised about cost and public engagement but said it was important to be clear about how we got here.

He said: “Conservative-led Reigate and Banstead Borough Council initiated and ran the community governance review, held two rounds of consultation, and approved the final proposals in March.

“A majority of its Conservative councillors voted for each of the three new councils.

“Because of local government reorganisation, East Surrey inherited the decision on whether to implement those proposals.

“Our executive could approve or reject the borough council’s recommendations; we could not change them.

“It voted to approve them last week.

“These were not proposals developed by the Liberal Democrats.

“Rebecca encouraged residents to respond to the consultation, saying there were “upsides and downsides” and that their views should be taken into account, via her Facebook page.

“As far as I am aware, she did not publicly raise these objections while the borough council was considering the proposals.

“She is entitled to raise them now, but it would be wrong to leave readers with the impression that this was a new decision dreamed up by a Liberal Democrat-led East Surrey Council.”

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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A West Side Story of Surrey’s new Parish Councils

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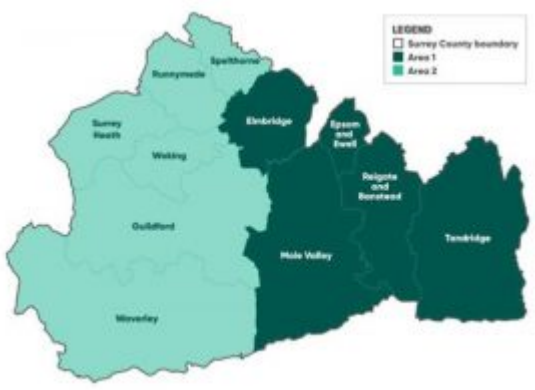
A West Side Story of Surrey’s new Parish Councils

14 November 2026



New lower tier councils will be created in Runnymede, Surrey Heath, Woking, and most controversially Guildford, just

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months after elections were held to simplify local government in Surrey.

In May, residents went to the polls in what was described as a once in a generation vote that would see Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts dissolved and replaced with two new mega authorities covering West and East Surrey.

The argument was it would mean less complexity, better value for money, and improved services.

However, some feared the huge new councils could leave too large a disconnect between residents and their representatives with some areas voting to create new hyperlocal bodies to oversee issues that might get overlooked by the larger bodies – at a cost.

The parish councils will require budgets of several hundred thousand pounds in start-up costs, and will have uncapped powers to charge more tax.

With some areas potentially facing increases in band d council tax bills of up to £100 for the privilege.

In three of the areas residents backed the plans and they were voted through by West Surrey's executive committee with little issue.

However, in Guildford, a public vote found 47 per cent of the people were against the plans compared with just 46 in favour but they were pushed through regardless, leading to calls for West Surrey to reject the bid.

Councillor Jane Austin, leader of the Conservative opposition group, said: "Generally my position is a parish council should go ahead if there is a clear will for it and a clear benefit to residents.

"I think this test has been met looking at the smaller parishes in Surrey Heath and Runnymede but I can't see evidence of this anywhere in the report for the Guildford case

"Given its significant size and budget we need more detail.

"If we are asking for a major part of Guildford to pay an extra estimated £69 per year.

She added: "The tests of whether people want this, whether they are happy with the cost, and whether this represents value and benefits the residents of Guildford have not been met."

Cllr Catherine Young (Horsleys: Residents for Guildford and Villages) said she believed the reason the vote was so close was that many people didn't understand the benefits of being in a parish council.

The expectation is that there will be elections held for the newly created lower councils in May 2027.

It would then be the new parish councils decisions to determine their own budgets.

Leader of West Surrey Council, Paul Follows said: "Do you think that the Western cabinet will be sitting here discussing planters in Guildford Town Centre, or the Christmas lights, or the fireworks, or what we're doing with certain elements of localised green spaces?

"It is ludicrous to think so and the problem is without making sure somebody else is responsible for it, we will be responsible for it, knowing that we don't have the time or capacity to deal with it properly, or with any real local understanding."

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

Surrey East West. (Credit: Elmbridge Borough Council) Permission for use.

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New Surrey Unitary Council CEO salaries to continue to outstrip national leaders

14 November 2026

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The CEO of the newly created West Surrey Council is set to pocket a £236,485 annual salary.

Susan Halliwell, currently oversees Bracknell Forest Council and is expected to take over the top job after beating out nine other applicants.

Her recommendation follows a lengthy national recruitment campaign that was supplemented with an active search by recruiters GatenbySanderson who contacted 147 serving chief executives and those with experience of leading in a unitary or upper tier environments.

A long-list of six candidates were then invited to attend technical interviews led by an experienced unitary council chief executive who had been through Local Government Reorganisation themselves.

Five candidates were then invited to take part in a comprehensive assessment process on September 3 at Millmead House in Guildford.

Epsom and Ewell Times adds to this LDRS report some comparisons:

Office	Annual salary
UK Prime Minister	**£174,039**
First Minister of Scotland	**£190,284**
First Minister of Wales	**£174,600**
Chief Executive, Surrey County Council	**approximately £237,000**

This was to assess their strategic leadership capability, political awareness, stakeholder engagement skills and readiness to lead West Surrey Council through its establishment and beyond Vesting Day, documents read.

In the end Susan’s experience, leadership approach, and values that aligned with the ambitions of West Surrey, led her to be considered a strong fit.

Susan’s chief executive and senior leadership experience has seen her carry the responsibility for a workforce of more than 2,300 staff and a budget of over £400m.

She is said to have a strong track record of organisational transformation, financial stewardship, service reform and delivery of political priorities.

Interim head of paid service Andy Brown has been overseeing the role out of the new council while a permanent appointment is made.. He will remain in post while transition arrangements are finalised.

Councillor Paul Follows, Leader of the West Surrey Shadow Council, said: “I am delighted that Susan Halliwell has been identified as our preferred candidate for chief executive of West Surrey Council.

“Susan is an outstanding and highly respected local government leader with a proven track record of delivering large-scale transformation and improvement. She has successfully led organisations through significant change while maintaining a relentless focus on improving outcomes for residents and creating positive working environments for staff.

“Subject to full council agreement, I am looking forward to working closely with her to create a council that delivers excellent services, supports thriving communities and provides strong local leadership across West Surrey.

“I would also like to thank Andy Brown for his dedication and leadership as Interim Head of Paid Service for the West Surrey Shadow Council. Andy has played a crucial role in helping us prepare for vesting day and establish strong foundations for the new authority. We are grateful for his continued support until Susan takes up her post.”

Prior to joining Bracknell Forest Council, Susan served as executive director of place at West Berkshire Council and held senior leadership roles at Oxfordshire County Council.

The West Surrey Conservative group has also welcomed the recommendation and wished her success in the new role.

Cllr Jane Austin said: “Conservatives have been closely involved throughout the recruitment process, and know the strength of the field from which this appointment has been made.

“The scale of the task of bringing together six existing councils, several of which face significant challenges, should not be underestimated.

“We look forward to working with our new chief executive to build a financially sustainable council which delivers excellent services and represents all our communities.”

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Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Sue Halliwell (image SCC)

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Kingswood “blot on the landscape” development approved

14 November 2026

A Grade II* listed site on the edge of the Surrey Hills where a major Hollywood blockbuster was filmed is to be turned into a £200m housing and leisure complex.

Planning permission has been approved to turn the former Legal and General building and surrounding lands into 299 homes, two swimming pools, and office space – with speculation it could be operated by David Lloyd.

The project, led by City and Country Residential, will be constructed in phases, and includes the refurbishment and conversion of the Legal & General House – where the DC hit Wonder Woman starring Gal Gadot and Pedro Pascal spent eight weeks filming.

The site will be split into 122 later living units and supporting facilities, and up to 177 private homes. Its vast 1,500 capacity car park will be reduced to 709 spaces.

Legal and General House, in St Monicas Road, Kingswood, sits within 19 hectares in the green belt nestled about a kilometre from the boundary of Surrey Hills with the designs following a previously approved 2019 application.

Key changes included more market housing and the leisure facility that will feature playing courts and a sports pavilion available for public use.

The Wednesday September 9 planning committee at Reigate and Banstead Borough Council heard the development was needed to fund the repairs of the grade 2* listed building and ensure its future occupancy.

To the disappointment of the committee, the developers said it was unable to provide on-site affordable housing as it would have made the project unaffordable.

Councillor Sam Walsh (Conservative: Banstead Village) said: “I wouldn’t have listed it, if anything, I’d have demolished it. It’s an absolutely awful building.

“Its a dreadful blot on the landscape but actually the application we have in front of us, notwithstanding the points of the viability, bringing more into use and the standalone leisure facility. I think is important for the community.”

He added that the plans “turned around a pretty revolting design of the excesses of the 80s and 90s to quiet a sophisticated residential development.”

Cllr Michael Blacker (Conservative: Reigate) said: “I think we’ve got to welcome the development and the housing and I’m very pleased to see they were going to put a sports centre in, whether its David Lloyd or not.

“I think that will be a very good feature and I hope it will be well used.”

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Image: Legal and General House, where the DC movie Wonder Woman was filmed, will be turned into housing (image RBBC)

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Secret Legal Advice that leaves Surrey high and dry?

14 November 2026

The legal advice that forced the nationwide cancellation of local government reorganisation, with the single exception of Surrey because it was too far down the track, will be kept private, the secretary of state said.

It has led to fears the county has been 'thrown under the bus' with Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts set to dissolve and be merged into two mega authorities under shadowy legal circumstances.

Last year the county was selected to be fast-tracked to undergo generational reorganising. Councils that had stood for more than half a century would be closed down and their services merged – with residents told it would save money.

It was then to be rolled out across the country but this week came the shock announcement the entire process, save for Surrey where elections had already taken place , would be put on ice.

Those who called to see the legal advice that caused the seismic u-turn were told it wasn't government policy to divulge such information.

West Surrey leader Councillor Paul Follows, writing to Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government, said: "The change in approach to local government reorganisation (LGR) set out in your ministerial statement…has raised several questions about the process undertake in Surrey.

"Your statement referred to legal advice that has informed the position of the present administration of national government, to the effect that the LGR process to date was not sufficiently robust or legally sound."

He said understood Surrey's position, that legislation to create the East and West Surrey Councils had been passed and elections held, but called for the new legal position to be shared so Surrey could best understand its new landscape.

He added: "If that decision making process has been deemed legally faulty or otherwise unsound I would like to ask for the opportunity for my officer to asses the potential impact on West Surrey, and in particular the crucial matters of finance and inherited debt.

"Would it be possible to have a copy of the legal advice on which the government has based its decision to pause the next tranches of LGR.

"I ask this solely to help correct or compensate for any deficiencies now identified by your department and to ensure the residents of West Surrey are not adversely impacted."

Speaking in the House of Commons, Guildford MP Zoe Franklin echoed the call for the legal advice's publication so communities could understand what went wrong with the original process.

She added: "In my own area of Surrey, councils were forced down a reorganisation route that now appears to be

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effectively abandoned by the Government and questionable on a legal basis.

“Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting Surrey MPs and the new authority leaders to discuss how our county can avoid the risks and uncertainty that the Government say have prompted this decision elsewhere?”

MP Monica Harding, said: “My constituents in Esher and Walton, in Surrey, are left wondering whether they have been thrown under the bus by a Government who failed to be secure in the legal advice and the costs from the very beginning.

“This is incompetent.

“Will the Government release the legal advice? What are the legal implications for Surrey?

“What extra support will she give Surrey regarding the cost implications?”

Surrey Heath MP Al Pinkerton said: “One of the potential unintended consequences of today’s announcement is to leave Surrey in the slightly discomfiting position of being in an experimental cohort with a sample size of one, the one county being reorganised under this legislation.

He added: “Do the legal concerns that the Secretary of State has expressed today also relate to Surrey?

“If Surrey is affected by those legal concerns, what faith should my residents have that this experiment is not going to come fully off the rails before April 1, 2027?”

The Secretary of State said she understood the strength of feeling but told the commons: “I considered the legal advice provided as part of the judicial review process, and the decision to withdraw the decision reflected updated legal clarity.

“It is a long-standing principle that the Government do not publish or comment on legal advice.

“I have been clear that I want to be able to review these decisions to ensure, as the new Secretary of State, that they are the right ones.

“We will consider the programme in the round in the light of the Government’s priorities, as set out in “Rewiring the State”, and Ministers will meet with Members of this House and will set out decisions at our earliest opportunity.”

Asked after the debate whether it would publish the advice, the department reiterated the ministerial statements raised in the commons.

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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The shake up of Epsom and Ewell’s local government: was it all a waste of time as Rayner puts pause on LGR elsewhere?

Government to pay a chunk of Woking’s record debt

14 November 2026

Crushing debt set to be inherited by hundreds of thousands of West Surrey residents will have a big chunk taken out of it after the Government officially began the process paying down £500,000,000 of Woking Borough Council’s financial failings.

The new council will take over in April 2027 following the dissolution of Surrey County Council and its 11 boroughs and districts.

West Surrey was forecast to start life with a £4billion black hole as a legacy of failed investment strategies, the largest being Woking Borough Council £2billion shortfall.

This will now be significantly reduced after the government started paying Woking Borough Council’s historic debt, built on the back of a failed investment strategy that bankrupted the borough in 2023.

The first repayment was completed on September 1 with the settlement of an £8 million loan – with a further £492 million of loans expected to be repaid by the end of March 2027.

In effect the Government is paying itself as the money owed was from its own Public Works Loans Board but its decision to begin the financial relief has been described by Woking Borough Council as a significant milestone its recovery.

Cllr Ann-Marie Barker, leader of Woking Borough Council, said: “The start of this financial support marks a significant step towards addressing the council’s historic debt burden and reducing the costs associated with it.

“While this marks important progress, we recognise that Woking’s debt is an ongoing concern for residents across Surrey,

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and that there is still much work to do.

“Our priority remains clear.

“With the continued support of government, commissioners and our future partners in West Surrey, we remain focused on delivering our Improvement and Recovery Plan to enter the new unitary council in the strongest financial position possible.”

The money was first pledged to the council last year when the government said it would provide £500m in financial support 2026/27 to help reduce Woking’s debt burden and borrowing costs – where the interest alone was pushing towards the £100m a year mark.

The council has been under commissioner control since collapsing, with all decisions having to be signed off by government appointed staff.

It says this money is a reflection of the ongoing commitment to reduce debt, which has seen it selling off a host of high-profile buildings in the town centre to help claw back what it can. These include the Victoria Square and its energy companies.

Chris Caulfield Local Democracy Reporter

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Woking Borough Council (Image Chris Caulfiield)

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