



Taxing question for Surrey's private schools

Labour's proposal to add VAT to private school fees has ignited a fierce debate in Surrey, home to numerous prestigious independent schools. The policy, aimed at generating £1.5 billion to improve state education, has drawn both sharp criticism and staunch support from local residents, educators, and politicians

One Surrey grandmother explained that her grandchildren go to private school and says she thought it is a "ridiculous" policy on "hard-working people".

Labour has said that if it wins the general election it plans to remove tax exemptions that private schools enjoy, generating around £1.5 billion. The most significant of these is scrapping VAT exemptions on private school fees.

Critics say taxing private schools does not hit the super rich but hurts middle-income parents. Cllr Kate Fairhurst (Conservative/Reigate) said: "I am very concerned that Labour's plans will punish families striving and investing for a better future for their children."

Private schools could make cuts to absorb the added VAT cost, Labour Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves has said, so it is not passed on to parents.

Profoundly objecting, Roger Jones, a previous Conservative candidate for Dorking, said: "Private schools would have to axe a third of its [departments]", causing the most affluent of pupils to move to other fee paying schools" or in the public sector. He added the suggestion of cuts as an option is rooted in the Labour's envy of the privately educated.

With the money raised, Labour said it will improve standards in state schools by employing 6,500 teachers, improving schools and careers advice, as well as helping pay for mental health support staff in every secondary school.

Surrey has around 140 private schools: including primary, secondary and special schools. Fees vary between schools, but the cost of independent education in Surrey is above the national average.

They range from £18,975-£38,367 per year for day pupils and from £25,290-£47,535 per year for boarding. With an addition of 20% tax, this would hike the figures to £22,770- £46,040 annually for day pupils and £30,348- £57,042 for students at boarding schools. To those who can just about squeeze £18k for a year of schooling, the added VAT may make the private sector unaffordable.

"It would be a huge backward step for the county," added Roger Jones He said: "Should Labour find themselves in government, then this policy will disadvantage every single child of school age and those yet to come." He argued that taxing private schools would cost the state more than it is projected to generate as more children would move to the public school system.

One woman, who wished to remain anonymous, expressed concerns that the influx of previously private schooled children in the state sector could put strain on already struggling public schools. "Walloping private schools isn't going to make the state schools better and the money raised will be a drop in the ocean compared to the financial needs of the sector," she added.

Concerns were raised about the tax not affecting prestigious schools, like Eton, where the woman claimed the pupils are from very wealthy families. She said: "The imposition of 20% VAT won't even begin to affect the attitude of [those] who are brought up by such schools to believe that they are superior to everyone else."

Twenty-three-year-old Grace, who went to a comprehensive school in leafy Esher, said raising fees could increase elitism in private schools, making bullying and student dynamics worse. She said: "It's no secret that private schools have a self-proclaimed elitist culture, and increasing VAT will mean the super rich will be more prolific in these schools."

The vast majority of independent schools are classed as charities or non-profit making trusts. For-profit schools are not allowed in the UK so funds go towards running and improving schools.

Speaking to people on the doorstep, Guildford's Lib Dem candidate Zoe Franklin told the LDRS how a woman in Stoughton made "very careful and conscious spending decisions" to pay for a private school. She said the woman did not have foreign holidays and lived in a modest house to afford private schooling as they were unable to get into the local school of their choice that they felt would best support their child with special needs.

Labour's policy would exempt private SEND schools Ms Franklin said: "It's especially hard to hear people who say they feel they have to pay for private education for a child with SEND, because the right support just isn't there in the state sector."

Labour first announced this policy in its 2019 manifesto, under Jeremy Corbyn, but was brought back into the news limelight in 2023 by Keir Starmer. Worried parents started a Change.org petition against plans, attracting 145,446 signatures at the time of writing.



Starting in Berkshire, the petition argues parents who currently pay school fees on top of taxes used for school funding will be “adding to the state’s burden rather than opting to relieve it” by choosing an independent school. Critics have argued it is “reasonable” for a service provided by a business, like private schools, to be taxed in the same way as other goods and services. One person commented: “Both are voluntary choices when the state provides a free alternative.”

IPSOS polling, published November 2023, showed the majority of the public (57 per cent) support the Labour party’s proposal, with just under one in five (18 per cent) opposing the policy. Research found that even among 2019 Conservative voters, nearly half (47 per cent) support it, compared to a third (32 per cent) who oppose it.

Speaking on behalf of the party, Labour candidate for Reigate Stuart Brady said: “Introducing VAT on school fees is a tough choice being made against the backdrop of a very difficult economic and fiscal position Labour would inherit from the Tories. Labour wants to drive high and rising standards in all our schools, so that we can break down barriers to opportunity across our country.

“I’ve listened to stories from Reigate Constituents and am aware of the variety of economic and educational positions of those paying privately for education, including parents of children with additional needs. I know that most are not the super-rich. [But] Labour in government will spread opportunity to all parts of the country at every age and every stage.”

Guildford cathedral appeal dismissed

Plans to build 124 new homes around Guildford Cathedral have been thrown out by an inspector as the proposal would cause a negative impact on the distinct character and history of the building. Developers Vivid appealed after Guildford Borough Council refused the application in March 2023.

The government’s planning inspectorate has dismissed the plans, which was said would financially support the cathedral. Tom Bristow, the inspector, concluded the proposal would result in a “clear adverse effect” to the historical and natural setting and significance of the Cathedral’s “lofty, dominance” and “imposing” character.

Concerns were raised that of the 124 new homes, including 94 flats, Vivid intended to build, they “would have little affinity with the prevailing characteristics of the area”.

Mr Bristow gave great benefit to the community value of the Grade II listed grounds as locals said it was a “well-used public space”. He added that the “semi-natural and rugged state” of the cathedral grounds was “distinct and rare” in comparison with more formally landscaped, maintained land in the area.

Tristen Samuels, Group Development and New Business Director at Vivid Homes, said: “We remain proud of the proposals we put forward to deliver highly-sustainable new homes in Guildford – including 40% affordable which is so desperately needed. We will consider the findings of the Inspector’s report in the coming days.”

The inspector also found the money generated from the development would bring in just over a third of the £3,570,000 the cathedral needs for building repairs. Mr Bristow said: “Irrespective of the outcome of the scheme, the Cathedral will continue to be predominantly reliant on other sources of funding for upkeep.”

Interim Dean, the Venerable Stuart Beake, said the way forward is “challenging” and cast doubt on if the cathedral would be able to “operate in the same way”. He said an additional £150,000 was needed each year to cover the shortfall in day-to-day costs at the cathedral.

Mr Beake added: “Whilst naturally disappointed by the outcome, the cathedral chapter is determined to carry on delivering the mission of the cathedral in the community.”

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



Surrey seats to watch in the election

The BBC's Local Democracy reporter Emily Dalton analyses prospects for Conservative candidates in some Surrey constituencies:

There is a chance of a seismic shift in the Surrey political landscape at the upcoming General Election. Multiple long-standing MPs are standing down, and there have been reports looking into alleged severe misconduct all with the backdrop of heavy Local Election losses for the Conservatives in the county in May.

With a General Election on the cards for July 4, Rishi Sunak will be hoping to remain Prime Minister to show 'the plan is working' for economic growth. With many of these hoped for economic benefits not yet reaching people's pockets, it's too soon to say if the public will be persuaded.

Epsom and Ewell Times will be staging a local HUSTINGS for the Epsom and Ewell Parliamentary Candidates at the Adrian Mann Theatre, NESCOL, Reigate Road in Ewell at 7pm on Wednesday 26th June. All welcome.

Will Labour leader Keir Starmer (born and raised in Surrey's Oxshott) be able to break into the traditional Conservative Surrey heartlands and turn some blue seats red? Ed Davey's Liberal Democrats have been eying up Surrey seats for years and hope to play their part in removing the Conservatives from office.

Surrey has been a Tory stronghold for decades, at borough, county and parliamentary level. But recent local election results showed all parties benefiting from a fall in Conservative support. The results meant that none of Surrey's 11 boroughs and districts now has a Tory majority. Although there is a narrow Conservative majority on the county council

Six Surrey MPs have announced they won't be standing for reelection, Conservative MPs Michael Gove (Surrey Heath), Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton), Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne), **Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell)**, and Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) are not seeking reelection alongside Reigate MP Crispin Blunt, who was elected as a Conservative but now sits as an independent.

With familiar faces gone and a raft of boundary changes meaning new constituencies in the county there is much uncertainty. Below are five seats to keep an eye on in the upcoming election.

1: Godalming and Ash

Contesting MP: **Jeremy Hunt** - Conservative (53.3% votes in 2019).

While many of his cabinet colleagues have fallen away, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is clearly not ready to leave his position or constituents. An MP since 2010, Mr Hunt won an 8,827 majority in the 2019 elections. A prominent figure in the cabinet, Mr Hunt has held numerous positions and is well-known.

Due to constituency boundary changes, Mr Hunt's West Surrey constituency no longer exists with the seats of Godalming and Ash and Farnham and Borden being created to replace it.

Running as the Lib Dem candidate in Godalming and Ash is Cllr Paul Follows. He is leader of Waverley Borough Council, leader of Godalming Town Council and a Surrey County councillor. Safe to say Mr Follows knows the depths of local government, can he make it to the national level?

Polls from The New Statesman and on Election Maps UK predict a Lib Dem victory, with between 36%-41% of the vote, and Conservatives at 30-33% - perhaps depending on how many votes Reform UK secures. This looks like a close race and surely one to watch- the Chancellor of the Exchequer could be about to have his own Portillo moment.

2: Guildford

Contesting MP: **Angela Richardson** - Conservative (44.9% votes in 2019).

Deputy chair of the Conservative Party, Angela Richardson won a narrow victory last election with only a 3,000 vote majority. She voted against PM Boris Johnson in the 2022 no confidence vote, arguing he had lost the public's trust.

Hot on her heels is Zoe Franklin, for the Liberal Democrats, who came second in 2019 with 39.2% of the vote. Hoping for third time lucky, Ms Franklin's votes have jumped from around 13,000 in 2017, to nearly 23,000 in 2019.

The Lib Dems have controlled the council since May 2019, with just 10 Conservative councillors



Water is likely to be a main talking point, with the Lib Dems' national campaign to stop sewage dumping and tackle water reform. Meanwhile, Ms Richardson is campaigning to reduce flooding in Guildford and the surrounds.

3: Esher and Walton

Previous MP: **Dominic Raab** - Conservative (49.4% of votes in 2019).

Dominic Raab has been the MP for Esher and Walton since 2010, but after bullying allegations emerged and a subsequent report found him "unreasonably aggressive" in 2022 he decided to step down at the next election. Mr Raab denied all wrongdoing.

Campaigning in a 'Remain' constituency, Brexiteer Mr Raab secured a narrow 3,000 majority ahead of his Lib Dem opponent, Monica Harding in the 2019 election. Tactical voting may have played a heavy hand as locals sent a message to the Conservatives. With Brexit less of a core issue this time round will the vote be as close again?

Opposition leader for Elmbridge Council, Cllr John Cope is running as the Conservative candidate. He narrowly kept his ward seat in the May council elections with just 129 votes more than his Lib Dem rival. Will this be replicated in the wider constituency?

Contesting the seat for the second time, Ms Harding is hoping to make it. Running her campaign in 2019 based on no political experience, Ms Harding decided to stop 'shouting at the tv' and went on to achieve 28,389 votes.

4: Runnymede and Weybridge

Contesting MP: **Ben Spencer** - Conservative (54.9% of votes in 2019).

Securing a strong majority of 18,270 votes in the 2019 elections, Dr Ben Spencer achieved a similar percentage to his predecessor Philip Hammond. Dr Spencer might not be so lucky this time. Recent polling from The New Statesman and Election Maps UK show a close race forecast between the Conservatives and Labour, taking around 30% of the vote each.

After being a Conservative stronghold seat since its creation in 1997, Runnymede and Weybridge could be the first brick of the Surrey wall to turn red for Labour. The Reform Party, although unlikely to win a seat here, could take important votes away from the Conservatives as it is predicted to absorb 11.7% of the vote.

Giving it a second chance, Robert King (Labour) is running again. Leader of the Labour Party in the Runnymede council, he had a successful May local elections as his party won four seats. The Conservatives lost seven seats, including the deputy council leader.

5: Reigate

Previous MP: **Crispin Blunt** - Independent (53.9% of votes in 2019 as a Conservative).

After over 25 years of public service as an MP (1997), Mr Blunt announced he would step down at the next election in May 2022. In October 2023, he was arrested on suspicion of rape and possession of controlled substances, and had the Conservative Party whip removed. Mr Blunt was released under investigation in April 2024 and denies any wrongdoing.

After Mr Blunt won a massive majority of 18,310 in 2019, can the Conservatives inherit his popularity? Labour and Lib Dems came neck and neck at the 2019 election with around 10,000 votes each, showing a strong sense of feeling between the two. Current polling suggests either a close run between Conservatives and Lib Dems (New Statesman) or Conservatives and Labour (Election Maps UK).

With new candidates standing from the three main parties, it could be a toss up between them. Rebecca Paul (Conservative), Mark Johnston (Lib Dem) and Stuart Brady (Labour) all seem to stick to the representative party policies, rather than designing a unique promise to Reigate.

May local elections saw all other parties gain from Conservative losses, with Labour gaining another councillor in Redhill.

Image: Scout outside a polling station Molesey (image: Chris Caulfield)

Every dog must have their day care centre

A dog day care centre 'vital for the community' has been approved for retrospective planning permission despite officers recommending it for refusal. The application was judged by officers as inappropriate development as it would fail to preserve the openness of the Green Belt which prevents urban sprawl.



Duncan's Doggy Daycare, on Pointers Road in Cobham, was granted retrospective planning permission by a unanimous vote from Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC) on Wednesday night (May 22). Cheers erupted from the gallery from Duncan's family, friends and customers as the decision was confirmed, marking the end of an almost five year battle and three planning permission attempts.

Operating on the site since 2012, the centre is a family-run business which caters for approximately 120 dogs daily (licensed for up to 150 dogs). Employing 20 full and part time members of staff, the centre runs 24 hours a day and 360 days a year. Rather than renting a field like other dog day care centres, Duncan owns the land and facilities his business is built upon.

In a supporting statement to EBC, owner of the centre, Duncan MacBryde said planning approval is "critical". He added his family's "entire livelihoods are hinged on this planning decision" as they would be left without a home or income.

In the recommendation for denial, planning officials determined that fencing, exercise pens and the activity at the day care from dogs, staff and vehicles amounted to harm to the open Green Belt.

Chairing the meeting, Cllr Andrew Burley (Conservative/ Oxshott and Stoke D'Abernon) said there were a "raft of special circumstances" which could outweigh harm to the Green Belt. He commented on the economic benefit the business provided as well as the social service the popular day care was providing.

Speaking to the committee, the applicant's representative Hugh Sowerby, said that Duncan had "done everything possible whilst maintaining a viable business" since the 2019 application. This included halving the size of the site, taking away two exercise pens, removing five unlawful buildings, removing all dog paraphernalia, and reprofiling and replanting part of the site.

Cllr Alistair Mann (Conservative/Cobham) said he was "struggling to find a better location" than on the site. He reasoned: "if this [business] does not exist here it will exist somewhere else [...] if it doesn't exist on Green Belt, it will exist on Brownfield." Moving the dog centre to Brownfield sites would prevent building "needed" houses.

The application marks the company's third attempt for retrospective planning approval. Differences between the 2024 application and the 2023 refusal are that two containers, wooden pen structures and associated waste have all now been removed from the site.

The company has also reduced the site from 1.32 hectares to 0.6, as well as decreasing the number of pens from three to two. Officers acknowledged the impact had been reduced since the last proposal but it would still cause harm and restrict openness

Over 90 letters of support have been submitted to Elmbridge Borough Council (EBC), detailing why it should support a local business which is an "asset to the community". No objections were received from the public, Surrey Wildlife Trust or Natural England.

Faithful customers of up to 10 years have praised the professionalism and care the company provides for their pets. Ms Tsvetanova said the dog daycare centre has "changed her [daily] life" and her dogs are so excited to come back to the centre.

Mrs Crosse said it would be "absolutely devastating" to her and her family if Duncan's doggy daycare was no longer allowed to operate. Others commented that they may have to give up their pets if they could not find care for them.

One small business owner said the centre enables her to generate local income for Elmbridge. Another resident, Mrs Sheehan, said: "Duncans Dog Co provides a vital service to local working people to enable us to combine a hybrid working and dog ownership lifestyle...enabling [her] to go back to work and contribute to a wider society."

Not only local residents, but patrons from South West London have also commented to support the application. Some expressed they "cannot do their job" without the daycare centre as it allows them to work full-time in central London.

Banstead Fire Station to close?

The Fire Brigade Union (FBU) has vehemently opposed the closure of Banstead Fire Station, claiming potential increases in response times could be "detrimental" to public safety.

Banstead Fire Station could move into Godstone under new proposals by Surrey Fire and Rescue Service.

"We emphasise that the closure of Banstead Fire Station could have severe consequences, as a typical house fire can double in intensity every minute," said Karl Jones, FBU Secretary in a letter to Chief Fire Officer Dan Quin. Karl called on the service to seek an alternative location as the public should "not be exposed to potential greater response times"



The average response time to critical incidents in Reigate and Banstead is seven minutes and 23 seconds. It would increase to eight minutes and three seconds if the move goes ahead, the draft plan said.

Across England and Wales, the average response time to primary fires was 9 minutes and 13 seconds, according to the most recent Home Office data. This was an increase from the previous year – with the largest component was drive time,

Moving Banstead Fire Station nine miles down the road would mean the average response time would still be under the service's 10 minute response standard for critical emergencies.

Under the reforms, the response time could put Banstead from 9th 'place' in terms of response times in Surrey, to joint 17th according to 2023 data from a Freedom of Information (FOI) request.

"I'm not convinced of the average response times with the geography of the area," said Mark Johnston, Lib Dem parliamentary candidate for Reigate and Banstead. He said the response times are only averaged across the borough as a whole and did not take into account new developments in the area.

Moving the crew and equipment from Banstead to Godstone will provide better positioning of cover for the whole of the county, according to the Service. Response times for Tandridge is currently eight minutes and 42 seconds, which would be cut by 10 seconds under the plans.

Specialist software is used to calculate response times by using 'normal road speeds', which is equal to or slightly below the speed limit to reflect traffic and other impacts. Surrey Fire and Rescue Service said: "We are confident that when our crews are driving to an incident, also on blue lights, that our estimated response times accurate."

Surrey Fire and Rescue Service said it is made aware of new developments in Surrey and is consulted on them in relation to access and hydrants. The service also said it reviews any current, new or emerging risks on an annual basis.

A Service spokesperson said: "We will still ensure that we can respond to emergencies in the Banstead area swiftly and with the appropriate resources and equipment when needed. We will also ensure that we continue to work with communities in Banstead to prevent these emergencies in the first place."

Housed in the former police house, Banstead fire station is 'not fit for purpose', the service said. Crews cannot train on the site and have to visit other fire stations instead. Owned by Surrey Police, the lease on the station also ends in 2025. Surrey Police said the site has been "decommissioned" and has been on the disposal list since 2015.

Despite some members of the public labelling the proposals as a 'cost-cutting' exercise, the service added it will invest around £800,000 to ensure Godstone Fire Station is fit for this increase in people and equipment.

After extensive work, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service claim that there is no other appropriate location in Banstead. The new ambulance site at the Horseshoe in Banstead was ruled out due to emergency response times as the site is closer to Epsom, which already has sufficient fire and rescue cover and low response times.

Other sites included: The former Dormers Care Home, the former depot at Beech Grove and the detached playing field adjacent to Marden Lodge School in Caterham. However, these options were rejected due to unsuitable leases and access issues.

Taking a staged approach, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service hope to implement the accepted changes gradually throughout 2025-2030. and review them throughout the process.

Related reports:

Auto fire alarms need a 999 before fire service respond in Surrey

Not such a rosy report on Surrey Fire Service

Image - Banstead Fire Station - credit Google street view

Cyclist death prompts A217 review

The death of a "fit and active" cyclist has prompted a coroner to raise concerns over paths near a main road in Tadworth.

A man named John Bass died after falling from his bike following an incident involving a van on the A217 at Tadworth in December 2022.

Encroaching mud, twigs and grass more than halved the width of the popular cycle path which poses a risk of further fatalities, a



coroner said at Mr Bass's inquest.

The 80-year-old was considered a "fit and active cyclist". While the footpath from which Mr Bass fell was 1.4 metres wide, due to encroaching mud, grass, twigs and acorns on the pavement space, the space where he was able to cycle was reduced to only 0.6 metres wide.

Weeks before his death, a highways inspector visited the path and did not consider the narrowing of pathway as a safety concern.

Assistant Coroner Krestina Hayes found in a Prevention of Future Death Report: "There is a risk to future pavement users if clear guidance is not provided to inspectors to identify safety concerns regarding vegetation growth on footpaths."

The report, published May 14, 2024, also expressed concerns that the frequency of the yearly road inspections should be reviewed.

Speaking at the inquest, Mr Bass' family advised the footpath by the Tadworth Road is used regularly by cyclists to avoid the vehicles on the busy road, where the speed limit is up to 40mph.

As the highway authority, Surrey County Council (SCC) is responsible for maintaining public highways. Although there is reference to trees and vegetation in SCC, there is no clear guidance on encroachment on pavements.

Inspected yearly, the stretch of highway was examined by car on November 14, and on foot on 22 November. No safety defects were found to meet intervention level by SCC. The family said the pavement was cleared shortly after the accident.

A spokesperson for SCC said: "Our deepest sympathies remain with John's family and friends, and we will respond to the Coroner's report following careful consideration of the concerns raised."

SCC has been given until 3 July to respond to the report.

Image: A217 Road, Near Tadworth, Banstead. (Photo Google)

Redrawing Surrey's political map - literally

Major boundary changes could see some Surrey residents change wards for the next local elections in a redrawing of the political map of the county.

Council wards in Surrey are to increase by over 1,000 residents per councillor by 2029 in new county boundaries which have been drawn up.

Around 70% of ward boundaries will change as the Local Government Boundary Commission estimates an increase of nearly 90,000 people who are registered to vote.

The commission says the new layout - which would retain the 81 elected councillors we have today - would help the council to carry out its functions more effectively as it would even out the populations within each division.

The commission is the independent body which draws these boundaries based on community ties, similar electorate numbers and which facilities (e.g parks, leisure centres) it makes sense for people to share.

Varying levels of public consultation on draft proposals took place between February 2023 and March 2024.

Professor Colin Mellors, Chair of the Commission, said: "We are very grateful to people in Surrey. We looked at all the views they gave us. They helped us improve our earlier proposals. We believe the new arrangements will deliver electoral fairness while maintaining local ties."

Recommendations from the Commission cannot affect the Surrey county's external boundaries, or result in changes to postcodes. It does not have an effect on local taxes, house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. However, it may affect which ward someone is in.

The Commission is required by law to consider not the number of households, but the number of electors within each division. For instance, residents suggested East and West Molesey should be combined in a single council ward division. However, such a division covering the two borough wards of Molesey West and Molesey East would have 36% more electors than average. It was therefore not accepted because it would have a disproportionate number of eligible voters compared to other wards.

County councils elect its members once every four years. Surrey's next election is taking place in 2025. Currently, the Conservatives are the largest group with 49 councillors out of a total 81 seats. There are also 16 Liberal Democrats, two Green



Party, two Labour (and Co-operative) councillors, four Independents, and 13 from different resident associations and groups.

Changes to ward boundaries will be made so each councillor represents roughly the same number of electors. Recommendations are based on how many electors (ie people registered to vote) there are “likely” to be in five years after the publication of the Committee’s proposal.

Approximately 876,454 eligible voters lived in the county in 2022, averaging at 10,820 electors per councillor. The Commission estimates this number will increase by nearly 90,000 by 2029: Around 964,825 Surrey electors will be divided up to roughly 11,911 residents for each councillor. Just 24 ward boundaries out of 81 will stay the same.

Over 900 comments were made by people and organisations to help decide the new divisions. Changes in response to what local people said include altering the divisions in rural areas of Guildford, in response to fresh evidence on the ‘community identity’.

For example, the village and civil parish of Ash was seen as more urban than rural, consequently moving out of the Worplesdon division and into Shalford. Additionally, Jacobs Well village was reviewed as having stronger community identity and rural connections with Worplesdon parish rather than neighbouring areas of Guildford.”

The Commission opted against having two councillors representing one ward in the Elmbridge borough as SCC argued that larger divisions had the potential to “dilute democratic accountability”. The Molesey Residents’ Association said locals would find a two-member division confusing and that councillors might have difficulty representing a division on this scale.”

The changes become law once Parliament has approved them. Staff at the council will ensure that the arrangements are in place for the 2025 elections.

Review and report: <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/surrey>

Image: Proposed Surrey County boundaries (Credit contains Ordnance Survey data Crown copyright and database rights 2024)

Bed pressures rushing doctors

Pressure to free up hospital beds can “rush” clinicians to make under-informed decisions and discharge plans, a coroner has found.

A man who tragically died from hypothermia and chronic alcoholism in **Epsom General Hospital** prompted a coroner to raise concerns that demands on beds can put patient safety at risk.

A local man was admitted to hospital three times from October 22 to December 5, 2022. Each time, the underlying cause of his condition was not diagnosed and he was soon after found to be medically fit for discharge. He died on December 12 2022, after being found profoundly hypothermic the previous day.

Coroner **Caroline Topping** found: “Pressure on staff to vacate hospital bed spaces led to inadequate discharge planning and more than minimally contributed to the death.”

It was accepted by the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust that pressure to vacate hospital bed spaces contributed to the inadequacy of discharge planning. The coroner ruled the need to free up a bed space led to the patient’s rushed release on December 5, 2022 without an adequate care plan being in place.

Nationally, the NHS faces significant pressures to use beds as efficiently as possible. The Trust said it will never willingly compromise a person’s safety by discharging them sooner than it should.

Clinicians and staff discharged the patient without knowing what underlay his deterioration and how his ability to self-care was impacted.

His expressed wish to go home alone was “erroneously” relied on to justify an “unsafe” discharge on the basis he had capacity to make a decision, according to the coroner’s prevention of future death report.

An inquest on March 12 2024, heard how the man was suffering from alcohol related brain damage, impacting his mobility and fluctuating confusion. Malnourished, as a result of his chronic alcohol use, his health had declined and he lost a significant amount of weight over the summer.

Continuing to “abuse alcohol”, he was self neglecting and his ability to live alone was reduced. He developed hypothermia in an inadequately heated flat and had not been eating properly.



Contrary to NHS policy, the man was not identified as a vulnerable patient. Any adult unable to take care of themselves (e.g. alcohol as a risk factor) is defined as a vulnerable adult.

The coroner found there was a lack of information sharing and investigation in relation to the discharge planning for the patient.

Reportedly unaware of the discharge planning policy, staff made decisions in a vacuum. There was no understanding of the man's recent history of frequent admissions, his diagnosis or sufficient investigation of his home circumstances.

The man's family was not involved in the discharge planning. Concerns were raised by the family on a number of occasions about his ability to look after himself. No heed was paid to these worries and the man was discharged on December 5 to live at his own flat without an adequate care plan in place. He died a week later.

The coroner's report states the Trust has already put in place a number of improvements around effective information sharing and recognition of safeguarding issues, including self-neglect.

However, she "remained concerned" that the hospital's discharge policy remains under review, including how families are involved, meaning it has not been possible to access how effective it is.

The coroner wrote to St George's Epsom and St Helier Hospital Group and NHS England to raise her concerns, which also included pressure to vacate beds leading to rushed under informed decision making and ability to prepare 'properly considered' discharge plans, urging them to take action to reduce the risk of future deaths.

A Trust spokesperson said: "We are deeply sorry that we didn't give [the man] the care that he and his family were entitled to expect, and our heartfelt apology and condolences go out to [his] family.

"We took immediate steps to review our discharge process, adding in additional checks, greater contact with families of vulnerable patients and we have also improved safeguarding training for our staff."

Epsom and St Helier Hospital added they will respond fully to the coroner's concerns within the set timeframe, by June 12, 2024.

Rated as 'good' in an inspection in 2019, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) said it has received the coroner's report on the hospital. The CQC said, as always, it will utilise the information during its forthcoming engagement meetings with the Trust.

Meat-free Mondays coming to all Surrey schools?

Meat-free and plant-based options could be mandated across Surrey schools every Monday according to new council guidance. Only some Surrey schools currently participate in a form of 'meat-free Monday' so the new food strategy would expand its remit.

The new policy forms part of the so-called Surrey Healthy Schools initiative. The initiative aims to address food insecurity, reduce climate impact of the local food system and support the local population to keep a healthy weight by improving the accessibility and affordability of nutritious food.

Speaking at a Surrey County Council (SCC) meeting on April 29, Officer Marisa Heath said: "I don't think meat-free Mondays is too much to ask for one day a week. We're still giving six days a week for people to make other choices so I don't think it is draconian or heavy handed."

Council officers said the preferred menu would prioritise fruit, vegetables and legumes- rather than processed, plant-based meat alternatives. Only schools signed up to the Surrey Healthy Schools will be part of the initiative, including all SCC public schools and some private schools.

Framing the programme as being to "educate and not dictate", Cllr Mark Nuti (Conservative/ Chertsey) said the policy is empowering individuals and families to make informed and healthy food choices.

The committee discussed the importance of sustainable and locally sourced farming, as well as cutting meat to decrease carbon emissions and environmental resources. It was noted that 'plant-based' food was not always "nutritional", but that children needed fibre from fruit and vegetables.

The new strategy aims to increase children's nutrition and combat obesity, as well as increasing sustainability and environmentally conscious eating. Around 1,210 of 9,355 Year 6 pupils measured in Surrey were classed as obese or severely obese in 2022-23, NHS figures show.

Healthy food, such as fruit and vegetables, are often out of reach for many parents on low incomes who prioritise affordability



over nutrition. The amount of vegetables being purchased in the UK has fallen to its lowest level in 50 years, according to The Food Foundation.

"Levelling up is not just about buildings, it's about people," Officer Marisa said. "It's about their wellbeing, mental and physical, and allowing them to reach their [potential]."

Councillors argued the strategy must be adaptable to children who may suffer with eating disorders, have neurodiversity requirements or medical issues, and not be able to eat (or do not want to eat) plant-based food.

In a heated debate, concerns were raised about the policy going 'too far'. Cllr Trefor Hogg (Conservative/ Camberley East) said an extension to adults and elderly people with dementia could mean "being confronted with things they just can't cope with".

He added: "My particular concern of those who are in any form of social care have had their liberties and freedom restricted to some degree. It's very very important that they have a full choice. This is particularly important where there are neurodiverse and mental health issues as well. I think we should be very explicit on the subject. I would be very concerned about the adults and the elderly being confronted with things they just can't cope with."

Meeting documents stated the eating environment should be inclusive and social as restricting to plant based only options may make some feel excluded.

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Job insecurity upsetting collegiate life

Nearly 92 per cent of voters in a Surrey University College Union (UCU) indicative survey supported holding a vote of no confidence in the Vice Chancellor, with a further 96 per in favour of a vote for the executive board.

Surrey UCU has been campaigning against 'compulsory' redundancies and financial severance elicited by the University of Surrey in an all-staff emergency meeting on March 6. Vice Chancellor Professor Max Lu (VC) announced the university would have to cut staff and assets as part of cost-saving exercises.

A UCU open letter dated April 11 alleged the university was trying to turn a "£10m deficit" into a "£10m surplus". A spokesperson claimed staff feel they have been "coerced" into redundancy, or "feeling that their hand has been forced".

An academic, who wished to remain anonymous, said: "It's extremely distracting and upsetting [...] Commitment to the university falls and commitment to your work falls. You invest a lot of time into your institution and when your institution doesn't value you back, you question why."

Speaking about her department, she said: "It's horrible. Morale is very low" and people feel "very insecure about their jobs".

High inflation, soaring energy bills and overall cost of living pressures were cited by the VC as reasons why the university needed to reduce its expenditure. Sector-wide problems within Higher Education such as "devaluing domestic tuition fees" and declining numbers of international students "due to external factors" were also highlighted in a letter by the VC

However, the UCU argued that poor financial management in "historical borrowing and significant spending on multi-million-pound projects" undermined the VC's claim. Recent developments include the Surrey Institute for People-Centred AI (opened in 2021) and launching a new medical school with an intake for 2024.

Over 90 per cent of the university's income was borrowed externally, coming second in the UK in 2021/22. Gross debt increased by £16.6m in 2022/23 to £296.5m compared to 2021/22, as the University entered into a new £20m term loan used to support the purchase of a building on campus, this was partially offset as a result of scheduled repayments.

Soaring from 0.1 per cent interest rates in December 2021, to 5.25 in 2023, the university now has to pay back around 4.5 per cent interest in its loans (2024).

"It's a reckless [...] way of living," the academic said, "to borrow, borrow, borrow with the hope that you will make that money back."

Rather than trying to "play with the big boys" and be a Russell Group university or UCL, the academic said, "Surrey needs to play to its strengths" as a small, safe university in Guildford which looks after its students.

Fewer Surrey UCU members voted to start formal industrial action (75.3%) than those in favour of a no confidence motion.



Academic staff explained striking would mean taking teaching away from university students, who were not at fault.

The union is meeting on April 22 to discuss the next steps and has invited MP Angela Ricardson and parliamentary candidates to attend.

A spokesperson from the University of Surrey said: "Our University is not immune to the unprecedented financial pressures facing the UK's higher education sector - including high inflation, high energy costs, the sustained devaluation of tuition fees and the recent decline in international student numbers. We're taking a focused and nuanced approach to tackling these sector-wide challenges at Surrey, with our approach designed to minimise the impact on our people and our core mission. We are looking at a variety of measures to increase income and save on costs including offering voluntary severance to some colleagues. We are hoping to avoid compulsory redundancies."