

Could you put Surrey Council's empty buildings or land to good use?

7 March 2026



Surrey residents could soon have the chance to take over unused council buildings and land under a new policy designed to put more local assets into community hands.

Surrey County Council is drawing up a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy, which would set out how community groups can lease council-owned buildings or land if they can prove it will benefit local people. The draft policy was backed by councillors this week and will be sent to the county's cabinet for approval in April 2026. Officers told councillors: "The community asset transfer policy has been intentionally designed to enable community participation in its simplicity."

Essentially, the policy would allow local organisations - such as charities, sports clubs or community groups - to take on council properties that are underused or no longer needed for services. Instead of selling them off or leaving them empty, the council could lease the assets to community groups, sometimes at below market value, if the social benefit outweighs the financial return. Council officers said the policy would give communities the opportunity to "reimagine, repurpose and reinvigorate" local spaces, meaning disused buildings could become youth centres, community hubs, sports facilities or spaces for local projects.

Under the proposed system, groups interested in taking over a building would first submit an expression of interest and, if the idea appears viable, they would then be asked to produce a business case showing they can run and maintain the asset long-term. Applications would be assessed against several criteria including the level of community benefit, the financial stability of the organisation and how the plans fit with the council's wider priorities. If approved, transfers would generally happen through leases rather than outright sales, with community groups responsible for maintaining the building.

Council officers stressed the policy is intended to make the process clearer and fairer because, although transfers can already take place, there is currently no single framework guiding decisions. During the meeting councillors broadly welcomed the proposal but raised concerns about volunteer-run organisations taking on complex legal responsibilities and the potential financial risks of maintaining buildings or signing long leases.

Cllr Edward Hawkins said: "I still feel that we are exposing residents to a liability which some will understand, but some will not." Another councillor suggested community groups should seek legal advice before committing to such arrangements. Officers responded that the council already provides hands-on support during the application process, including meetings and guidance, and would continue to help groups develop proposals. They added that every application would be carefully assessed to ensure organisations are capable of managing the asset before any transfer is agreed.

The CAT policy follows the approval of a motion by Cllr **Eber Kington** (RA Ewell Court, Auriol & Cuddington) to council on March 18, 2025.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Image: Grafton "Stables"

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Ewell's Looe Set for Flush of New Industrial Investment

7 March 2026



An ageing industrial site in Ewell is set for a major overhaul after councillors backed plans to knock it down and rebuild it with bigger, more modern units.

The scheme at The Looe, off Reigate Road in Nonsuch, will see 17 tired single-storey units demolished and replaced with a new part one, part two-storey building containing nine industrial and business units. Councillors green-lit the plans at an Epsom and Ewell Borough Council planning committee on February 26.

Cllr **Phil Neale** (RA Cuddington) said: "I think it is going to be a vast improvement. I have had a look at the current site and it's not one of our most attractive industrial units at the moment."

There will be fewer units overall (nine instead of 17) but they will be larger, creating more workspace. The total floorspace will jump from 732sqm to just over 1,200sqm.

The new building will mainly cater for industrial and storage businesses. Plans include:

- One commercial unit (such as a shop or service business)
- Four general industrial units
- Four storage and distribution units
- 16 car parking spaces
- 18 cycle spaces
- Solar panels on the roof
- A small security and plant hut

There will also be a new pedestrian refuge crossing on Reigate Road and a segregated footpath along the access road to improve safety for people walking to and from the site.

Planning officers said the land counted as previously developed 'grey belt' land, meaning the redevelopment is not considered inappropriate under national planning rules. The developers have also promised a new planting and habitat improvements to the site, over and above the council's requirement.

Less office space, more industry

The plans will reduce the amount of office space on the site. But council officers said there is enough office capacity elsewhere in the borough, particularly in Epsom town centre and East Street, to absorb the loss. At the same time, the borough has a shortage of industrial and storage space so the new scheme could help meet demand.

Traffic worries raised

Three neighbours objected, raising concerns about large lorries struggling to access the narrow entrance road, vehicles blocking Reigate Road while waiting to enter, sewage capacity and asbestos removal. Concerns about shared boundary walls were deemed a civil matter, and asbestos removal would be handled under separate legislation.

Highways officers said the development would generate slightly more traffic than the current site, but not enough to cause a "severe" impact on the local road network. The new footpath and crossing were described as public benefits.

Emily Dalton LDRS

The Looe, Reigate Road, Ewell. (Credit: Google Street View)

Horses beat cars in Epsom's Langley Vale housing development application

7 March 2026



Plans to build up to 110 homes on agricultural fields in Epsom have been thrown out with fears of a horse vs car 'collision corridor'. The Langley Vale scheme has been rejected following fierce objections from councillors, local campaigners, and the Jockey Club.

The proposed site, just a stone's throw from the world-famous Epsom Downs Racecourse, was described as "unsustainable" and a threat to both local wildlife and the town's horse racing heritage.

After a heated debate at Epsom and Ewell Borough Council's planning committee on February 26, councillors shot down the application. Reasons for refusal included the site's poor transport links, reliance on private cars, harm to the openness of the green belt, risks to horses and riders, and adverse effects on the landscape.

Cllr **Jan Mason** (RA Ruxley) did not mince her words. "It's not just a few extra cars," she said. "Have we actually raised the issue of the Jockey Club? The most famous race in the world is held in Epsom in June and has gone on for probably 300 years. This company is only after money."

She also highlighted the practical issues for new residents: "If there's no school nearby, no shops, no bus service, then sticking families up on the downs isn't giving them a home. It's dumping them where nothing exists."

Highways and transport were another huge concern. Cllr **Steven McCormick** (RA Woodcote and Langley), who represents the area, called the application "fundamentally and legally unsafe," citing the risk to both residents and the racing industry. "Records reveal a terrifying reality when a horse spooks, its instinct is to bolt for home, often forcing these 500 kg animals onto the public road network" he warned. "By placing 110 homes and hundreds of daily car movements at the mouth of the Warren, a known site for unseated riders, we are creating a collision corridor."

Local campaigners echoed those concerns. John Mumford, speaking for the Langley Vale Action Group, noted the overwhelming public opposition of 374 letters of objection and a petition with 2,232 signatures. He said: "For every reason put forward to justify the scheme, there are more compelling policy and environmental reasons as to why this scheme should be refused."

Bernice Froud (RA Woodcote and Langley), another councillor, painted a vivid picture of the community at risk. "You cannot mitigate the destruction of a community's soul." She pointed to horses being part of Epsom's heritage amongst other wildlife. "The rare and beautiful plant, the night flowering catchfly, has chosen our village as its home. Once we pour concrete over it, we will destroy this site of nature conservation importance forever."

The Jockey Club added weight to the case, stressing that Epsom's horse racing industry generates over £63m a year and that the development would "have a significant adverse impact" on operations and equestrian safety, including routes used by racehorses to reach training grounds.

While councillors agreed homes, especially affordable ones, are sorely needed, it does not come at any cost.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Image: View of proposed Langley Vale development. (Credit: Fairfax Aspire Ltd/ Epsom and Ewell Borough Council planning documents)

Party Leader visits Epsom to launch East Surrey election campaign

7 March 2026



The Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey visited Epsom yesterday to officially launch the start of the East Surrey election campaign, promising a “fresh start” to the county after years of Conservative rule.

Visiting Epsom alongside local MP Helen Maguire, Dorking & Horley MP Chris Coghlan and Esher & Walton MP Monica Harding, Mr Davey met local party members and called for a “fresh start” for East Surrey.

The Lib Dem leader also called the local campaign a “moral responsibility to win and a historic opportunity for the party”. He told members: “Reform is a threat to our country [...] The Conservative Party has run out of road here, and Nigel Farage’s Reform offers no solutions to the problems people face.”

East Surrey Council is being created as a result of a major shakeup of local government in the county, with Surrey County Council and the county’s borough and district councils being abolished. Moving from a two-tier to a unitary model, East Surrey Council will oversee all local services in the area. People can look forward to casting their ballot on May 7.

“After years of Conservative failure here in Surrey, it is time for a fresh start,” Ed Davey said. ““Liberal Democrats will deliver the real change people are crying out for with our bold plan to fix the NHS, cut energy bills and tackle the sewage crisis in our rivers.”

When asked about the possibility of raising council tax to fund services, Mr Davey made no promises: “I think you’ve got to look at the books.”. He told the local democracy reporting service (LDRS): It will be challenging initially because of the financial situation we have inherited but over time, people will notice real differences: parks and local services improve, investments continue and cuts are avoided.”

Local MPs stressed the urgency of change and importance of local engagement. Helen Maguire said: “Voters want to know that the people they elect will make a real difference in their day-to-day lives- whether that is improving schools, clearing bins, or securing social care they need. When politics delivers for them, they will be motivated to vote.”

The Lib Dem MPs drilled the three most important issues in Surrey, issues they will no doubt be campaigning on, as: finance budget, potholes and special educational needs provision (SEND).

Monica Harding pointed out some tangible results already being delivered by Lib Dem Surrey MPs like moving the derelict boats away on the River Thames. She said: “People want a fresh start and they want change. They want to stop having to fight the system and get things more easily and things they deserve.”

Chris Coghlan criticised the Tories’ record, saying: “Surrey’s Conservative Council has appallingly managed local services and traumatised SEND families. They must go.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Liberal Democrats launch East Surrey election campaign, with leader Ed Davey. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

Surrey’s declining birth rate means fewer school classes

7 March 2026



Surrey’s falling birth rate has led to nearly 50 fewer classes of school children in less than a decade. That is according to a new strategy report aimed at protecting the future of local schools.

Cabinet members agreed to publish an updated Sustainability Strategy for Schools on February 24. The strategy sets out how Surrey County Council will work with headteachers, academy trusts and dioceses to respond to declining pupil rolls and growing financial pressure.

The figures behind the decision are sobering. Births in Surrey have dropped by 21 per cent since 2012, from 14,237 to 11,244 in 2024. Reception numbers have fallen by 11 per cent since 2016, equivalent to around 47 classes across the county.

Presenting the report, Cllr Helyn Clack, cabinet member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said schools remain “at the heart of our communities” but are facing significant strain from lower birth rates, shifting parental preference for schools and tighter budgets.

“These pressures affect schools of every size and type,” members were told. “Many leaders and governing bodies are having to make difficult decisions to sustain high-quality provision.”

Schools are funded largely on a per-pupil basis, meaning fewer children directly translates into less money. While some parts of Surrey, particularly areas with new housing, are still seeing demand for places, others are experiencing sharp falls in numbers.

The county council leader, Tim Oliver, described the statistics as “quite stark”, pointing out that although Surrey saw families move in during and after the pandemic, the longer-term birth rate decline mirrors the national picture.

Councillors agreed the cost-of-living poses a challenge to the county as it can be quite difficult for families to afford to move to Surrey. On the other hand, Surrey hosts a lot of private schools which are very popular so there is less overall demand for state schools.

Cllr Sinead Mooney warned that decisions about school organisation are among the most sensitive the council makes. “This isn’t about a strategy document,” she said. “It’s about people’s local school, their children, and often the heart of their community.”

Cllr Mooney urged the council to ensure there is proper engagement with communities at an early stage as “too often there is a perception that options are being shaped before the conversation begins”. She said: “Once a school is lost, the impact is often lasting and irreversible.”

Cabinet members stressed that closures would only ever be considered as a last resort. Other options the council would explore included partnerships, shared leadership models, federations or reducing admission numbers

Particular concern was raised about small village schools, with councillors urging that decisions must not be driven “solely by financial metrics” but by a full understanding of community impact.

Cllr Clack raised concerns about a local village school in her area: “What was a thriving village school down to 13 pupils and is no longer finding it easier to maintain themselves.” She added: “We have to understand that schools are paid per pupil, and if they don’t have pupils in their schools then they don’t get the funding.”

The updated strategy commits the council to early engagement, transparent sharing of data and closer collaboration with schools and trusts. Officers will prioritise maintained schools considered most at risk and work with leaders on tailored solutions.

The council also acknowledged the wider context, including ongoing SEND pressures and looming local government reorganisation, which could reshape Surrey’s governance structure in coming years.

Despite the challenges, members emphasised their support for maintaining a broad and varied school offer across urban, suburban and rural areas. The cabinet unanimously endorsed the updated strategy and approved its publication.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Image - entirely imagined.

Surrey to create 220 SEND places

7 March 2026



Surrey will press ahead with two long-planned specialist free schools but councillors have admitted the plans will still leave “significant” gaps in provision.

The scheme will unlock £16.14m of government cash to create at least 220 new SEND places.

Cabinet members agreed to move forward with the Department for Education-funded delivery of Betchwood Vale Academy (180 places) and Frimley Oak Academy (170 places), rather than take a combined £18.9m cash alternative to build provision themselves.

At the same time the Surrey County Council will accept £8.1m, in place of a third planned SEMH free school, and use the money to create 150 places through other local projects.

The decisions are aimed at tackling mounting pressure on Surrey’s specialist system, where public special schools are

running at 103 per cent capacity.

Cllr Helyn Clack, cabinet member for Children, Families and Lifelong Learning, said the move would “accelerate projects that directly benefit Surrey families within months, not years”.

She told the meeting: “We know families can face long delays, longer journeys and too many children placed in independent settings, often far from home, simply because we do not yet have the places available locally.”

Scrutiny members warned that the expansion will not fully solve the problem. Cllr Catherine Powell, chair of the children’s select committee, told cabinet there is a current shortfall of more than 120 autism (ASD) places in West Surrey alone.

She urged the authority to publish clearer mapping of unmet need, including where children are still waiting for placements and where non-maintained independent (NMI) schools are being used.

“There is a clear shortage of special school places and SEND units today in Surrey,” she said, adding that the new projects “do not address all of the current unmet need which is still significantly higher in the West”.

Councillors acknowledged that even with the additional 220 places funded through the High Needs Provision Capital Allocation, plus the 350 places from the two free schools, “significant numbers” of children will still be without local specialist provision.

Council leader Tim Oliver said while the SEND expansion would not “fill all our gaps”, it was vital to proceed with deliverable projects now.

“We absolutely need to get on with as many of these projects as we possibly can, to create 350 new places is desperately needed, and even that will leave a significant number of children without a place,” he said.

The 220 places are expected to come forward through a mix of expanded special schools, new units in mainstream settings and alternative provision projects. The council says priority has been given to schemes that can open for September 2026.

The backdrop is sustained growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and heavy reliance on independent placements, which are typically more expensive and often outside the county. Expanding state-maintained provision is seen as key to reducing those costs and meeting Surrey’s “safety valve” agreement with the DfE to contain its SEND deficit.

Geography remains a sticking point. While overall provision is broadly aligned with population split between East and West Surrey, members accepted that unmet need, particularly for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is currently greater in the West. Leaders said the £8.1m accepted in lieu of the cancelled Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) free school would be ring-fenced while further site work is carried out.

The council must formally notify the Department for Education of its decision on the free schools by the end of the week.

Emily Dalton LDRS

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Image Surrey County Council HQ, Woodhatch Place on Cockshot Hill, Reigate. Credit Surrey County Council

The Ripley effect of rural development in Surrey

7 March 2026



Surrey villagers say they fear their semi-rural community will be “overwhelmed” by development.

Ripley is frequently named one of the prettiest and best places to live in Surrey. But locals are worried it could soon lose the charming character that drew them there as plans for up to 540 homes on farmland edge closer to submission.

The proposed development of Grove Heath North, between Ripley and Send, would see hundreds of two- and three-storey houses built on farmland off Portsmouth Road. While the scheme is still at the environmental scoping stage, locals say the scale alone is enough to change the face of the historic village for good.

‘Completely out of character’

Brian Crosby, chairman of the Grove Heath North Residents’ Association, moved to Ripley 33 years ago from Twickenham for what he calls its “semi-rural character”.

Brian said: “We want to maintain the identity of villages at the edge of the countryside. This [development] just doesn’t sit comfortably behind the existing houses. It would virtually join Ripley to Send Marsh creating more urban sprawl.”

He described the proposal as a major speculative development that is not currently identified as a potential development site in the Local Plan and is a complete shock to our residents who are in disbelief, adding: “The developers do not care what happens to the village afterwards.”

To add insult to injury, the scheme also borrows the very name of Brian’s road, Grove Heath North, which is almost opposite the site. He said he has raised the issue with the developer, arguing it will be confusing for emergency vehicles or delivery drivers in future.

Residents are particularly concerned about three-storey homes, which they say would be “completely out of character” in a village proud of its heritage and historic High Street, once known as the first stop on the coaching route to Portsmouth from the 16th century. The Allium Park Development a mile up the road has 3 storey building being built and these are completely out of character.

While Brian accepts more homes are needed, he argues they should not be built on greenbelt farmland. “This is the easy option,” he said. “The land is used for agriculture. Don’t we need more farmers and people producing food for our country?”

Plans include a new village green, a nature trail and suggests a new local shop. However, the application does not clarify if the developers would build it and the new store would be located next to an existing farm shop.

But Brian said it felt like it was part of a tick-box exercise. “Ripley has one of the largest village greens in the country,” he said. “Giving us effectively what we have already got isn’t adding anything. Sally added the proposed site already had public right of way footpaths running across it.

The developer response

A Green Kite Homes spokesperson said: “This site presents an opportunity to deliver a landscape-led development of new homes and community uses in a highly sustainable location. Our proposals would address identified local housing needs, delivering homes in a range of sizes and tenures.

“We have also listened carefully to feedback received during the public consultation and, as a result, have decided to change the name previously used for the site. We will be engaging further with the local parish councils on this.”

Fears over traffic, schools and sewage

Brian and fellow resident Sally pointed to other large schemes in the wider area, including Wisley Airfield (around 2,000 homes), Gosden Hill (1800 homes), Send Marsh (140 homes) and Allium Park (around 620). They argued there is no “joined-up thinking” about the cumulative impact on roads, schools, doctors and drainage.

Sewage capacity has sparked particular anger. Brian claimed the local works are already struggling and have discharged into the River Wey during heavy rainfall in the last few weeks. They pointed to comments from Thames Water indicating major upgrades are not due to be completed until 2030 and Ripley Sewage plant would not be able to meet Government targets for storm overflows until 2045-2050, and questions whether new homes should be occupied before then.

They questioned the pressure on already stretched services. Brian and Sally warned there is only one GP surgery in neighbouring Send which serves both Ripley and Send and one private dentist in Ripley. “The surgery has already had to increase patient numbers and cannot physically increase further,” they said. “Where are all these people going to go?”

There are also claims the local primary school is oversubscribed and there are no local secondary schools nearby, and fears that hundreds of additional commuters would pile a “burden of traffic”. They said roads are already busy, with effectively one main route running through the village, which is often used as a cut-through despite the A3 bypass since there aren’t on and off connections to the A3 at each end of the village.”

A Green Kite Homes spokesperson said: “As part of the planning process, we will continue to work closely with the council and statutory consultees to ensure that local infrastructure can appropriately support development of this scale. This will also include financial contributions towards infrastructure upgrades as part of any future planning consent for the site.”

The current submission is only about setting the scope of environmental studies, not approving the homes themselves. Guildford Borough Council’s decision on the EIA will determine what issues must be examined in detail before any full planning application is considered.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Ripley village sign. (Credit: Emily Dalton/LDRS)

Surrey armed officers in fatal shooting to remain

anonymous?

7 March 2026



A coroner will soon decide whether armed police officers involved in a fatal shooting in Surrey will have their names kept out of the public eye.

At a pre-inquest review today (February 23), Surrey's senior coroner Richard Travers said he would take "a couple of weeks" to rule on a Surrey Police application for anonymity for the firearms officers who shot 29-year-old Joel Stenning.

Mr Stenning died after being shot in the early hours of August 11, 2024, in Nursery Road, Knaphill, near Woking.

He had reportedly pointed an air rifle at officers who were called to his home following reports of a man with a gun. Mr Stenning died shortly after 7.30am on August 15 in a London hospital from "complications of a gunshot wound to the abdomen".

Mr Stenning was born in Chertsey, lived in Woking and worked as a roofer. He was remembered by the coroner, who opened proceedings by offering condolences to his parents, who were present in court.

Surrey Police, backed by the Chief Constable, applied for nine firearms officers to remain unnamed. Chief Superintendent (CSI) Justin Berkenshaw told the court that firearms officers are highly trained, voluntary specialists who deal with the "most dangerous and lethal criminals".

Naming them, he argued, could put them and their families at risk from organised crime groups and damage future careers.

"If someone gets named it cannot be undone," he said, adding that officers have faced threats and harassment in other cases nationally. He said anonymity would help officers give their "best evidence" without fear of becoming headlines.

BBC Surrey said that giving evidence is stressful for everyone in court and, given the circumstances, would expect police officers to give the best evidence possible.

CSI Berkenshaw said, due to the specialist and technical nature of highly-trained armed police officers, they are not easily replaced. He raised concerns that if the officers' names were put into the public domain, not only could it undermine their role as armed officers, it could discourage new recruits from going into armed operations and persuade current officers to give up their weapons.

CSI Berkenshaw said: "My team works extremely hard with my firearms officers to prevent knowledge of their role...this is because of the risk to the officers and their families..and to maintain an effective firearms unit."

He said he was worried naming the officers could risk Surrey Police's capability for an armed officer unit.

But lawyers for the Stenning family and BBC Surrey (on behalf of the media) opposed the move. The family's representative said there was no evidence of any threat linked to Mr Stenning's relatives or associates and warned against a "blanket" approach simply because officers were armed.

They argued open justice should not be side-lined by general policy concerns.

The family's legal representative said: "It sets an entirely new precedent setting approach in which the mere fact of the status of a firearms officer should give rise to anonymity across the board without assessment of conditions of the case."

Mr Travers noted the force's arguments were not specific to this case but could apply to any firearms incident. He will now weigh privacy and safety concerns against the principle of open justice before deciding whether the officers will be named when the full inquest begins.

The inquest, expected to be heard over four weeks in early 2027, will examine the circumstances surrounding Mr Stenning's death.

Emily Dalton LDRS

Image - purely illustration and not related in any way to this incident.